

## CHAPTER 1

*Sammlers are magic collectors who abide by a strict set of codes. As children possess a much greater sensitivity for magic than adults, many Sammlers use them to steal magical objects.*

*These children are known as Lærling.*

*The Encyclopaedia of Northern Magic*

### **The Britannia Music Hall, Glasgow, 1869**

Adults rarely paid attention to William and Kern, but that suited them just fine. It was much easier to rob people when they were ignoring you. For that evening's job however, the attention of the ticket-man was very much required. Unfortunately, he seemed more interested in his newspaper and so William was forced to clamber up and lean across the counter.

‘Two please,’ he said slamming his coins onto the pages of the man's Glasgow Herald.

The ticket-man gave an irritated grunt as he finally looked up at them. ‘No weans at the late show.’

‘We're thirteen!’ protested William.

‘Congratulations,’ came the reply. ‘You're still not getting in.’

Not ready to accept defeat, William attempted to charm the man with his sunniest smile. Looming beside him, Kern did her best to make her pale, solemn face look friendly. The ticket-man was not impressed.

‘The pair of you get out of here before you get a skelp.’

Ignoring the man's threat of low-level violence, William rolled up his coat sleeve.

‘No!’ hissed Kern.

He pretended not to hear her as he pulled back his shirt to reveal the black, horse-shaped tattoo on his arm. The ticket-man's eyes widened in horror.

‘I didn’t realise. Is he here?’ He pushed a bunch of tickets across the counter.

‘Compliments of the establishment.’

William took the tickets and swaggered past the booth to cross the foyer. Marching after him, Kern grabbed his arm as they reached the stairs.

‘What if he gets the police?’ she whispered.

‘Did you see his face? He wouldn’t dare.’

They soon reached the first floor where a cheery song drifted out through the large wooden door that led into the theatre.

‘I love this one,’ sighed William.

He stared at the door and for a moment wished he could step through it into a normal life. The kind where you went to music halls to see shows, not steal cursed maps. Theirs, of course, was a far from normal life and so they crept past the door then ducked under a ‘no entry’ sign to continue their climb to the upper floors.

Upon arrival at the top, they found the way to the attic was locked but that was hardly a problem. The pair of them picked locks with the same ease other children picked their noses. They had it open in no time.

William led the way up into the dark attic where he pulled a handful of glaar from his pouch. Able to concentrate the magic held in water, this mud was often used to ignite spells. He whispered his request and the familiar thrum pulsed through his hand as the glaar sparked to life. Soon, a soft golden glow blossomed to light up the space.

They were in a large, cobweb-filled storage room packed with boxes, but it was on the far side that he saw what they’d come for. Laid out on a long table were twelve stone heads. Carved in the image of powerful men from the city, these heads had hung outside the nearby

Tontine Hotel until it'd closed earlier that month. They had been bought for an excellent price by the Britannia's owner, but he clearly had no idea of their true value. If their information was correct, then hidden inside one of them was an object sought after by Sammlers for centuries.

Beside him, Kern unrolled her toolbelt and with a jolt, William realised he'd left his tools on the ship. Well-practised at hiding his carelessness, he decided on a different approach for the search. While Kern carefully assessed which hammer and chisel to use, he walked to the top of the table and slapped his hands onto one of the stone faces.

'You won't sense anything,' she told him. 'The magic will be too concealed.'

'For you perhaps,' he said with a grin. Sensing magic was one of the few areas where he was better than Kern. On top of that, he was pretty sure her sense had begun to fade. Not that she'd ever admit it.

He continued to place his hands on one face after another while Kern chipped away at the head in front of her. It didn't take long before he got distracted by a head with a fancy hair style.

'Look at him, bet he was stinking rich!' He tilted up the head and adopted a posh drawl. 'Let me make it very clear. I may just be a head, but I've more money than the rest of you peasants put together.'

The next one was even better. William contorted his face to match its grumpy, scrunched-up expression. 'I haven't pooped for years,' he snarled. 'And now I'm really angry!'

'Shh,' spluttered Kern between snorts of laughter.

'Come on then,' he said. 'Your turn.'

She screwed up her face in thought as she looked at the head beside her.

'I,' she finally said. 'Am very...stony!'

William guffawed. He always laughed at Kern's jokes even though they were rubbish.

Laughing together was one of the few highlights in their rather dark lives.

Moving along the heads, he stopped in surprise when he felt a faint hint of magic coming from one of them. He was about to call Kern then decided against it. Even with her lesser sense for magic, everyone knew she was the better Lærling. If he could be the one who found the Sea Lord's Map, it might show Gallowglass what he was worth.

'Did you sense something?' asked Kern.

'No...' said William, and he was sure she would spot him blushing. He was normally a skilful liar, but he could never manage it with her.

Putting down her tools, Kern peered across the table. 'He looks like Hexenmester.'

The bald, moustachioed head lying before him did indeed resemble the gang's magic master. William couldn't resist. He heaved up the head and adopted a German accent.

'I do not like children. They are as bad as witches! I will blow them up. I will make them all go boom!'

He swung the head forward, only for it to slip through his hands. It hit the table then toppled off to smash onto the floor. As it cracked open, a blinding flash of light filled the room and when it finally faded, William could see twelve golden faces floating above them. They did not look happy.

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Kern kept a close eye on the shimmering faces as she dragged William back to a safe distance. From what she could see, each of them was a match for one of the stone heads on the table. As if that wasn't eerie enough, their mouths were all moving as though shouting in rage, but there was not a sound to be heard.

Eventually, the ghostly images came to rest in a protective dome around the broken head

and it was then that she spotted an item in amongst the smashed stone. She couldn't be sure it was the map, but it was clearly something worth protecting. The find had been typical William of course. All luck and no work. Still, she wasn't going to complain. They'd already been in the city longer than was safe. The sooner they got back to the ship the better.

'It could be a simple illusion to scare us off,' she said. 'But it could also be a trap. I'll make a list of spells that might have been used and come up with a test for each.'

She'd hardly begun to consider the possibilities when William marched back to the table.

'What are you doing?' she gasped.

'Speeding things up!'

He leaned in towards the smashed head and the second his hand touched one of the ghostly faces, a light sparked out. He howled as he was flung away with such force that he landed on his back halfway across the room.

Kern's heart thumped as she sprinted towards her friend. He looked even smaller than normal as he lay there, limp on the floor.

'William!'

He gave a loud groan in reply and her fear promptly morphed into annoyance. She was about to give him a lecture on the importance of caution when dealing with unidentified magic, when she noticed his hair. His dark auburn waves were now a wild, spiky mess.

'How did that feel?' she asked.

'Sore, obviously!'

'Yes, I could hear that, but what kind of sore? Was it magic?'

'No, I don't think so.'

Kern gave a satisfied nod. 'It's concentrated static electricity. You need magic to achieve

the concentration, but it gets used up in the process so you wouldn't have noticed any. I'll cast a mist. The moisture should disperse the charge.'

She opened her pouch, scooped out a handful of glaar and whispered her request. Gold light sparkled from the mud as its magic came to life and in no time, it had created a gentle mist. Once this mist had surrounded the faces, a shimmer sparked out and flew down into the ground.

With its magic used up, the glaar in Kern's hand had turned to dust. She brushed it away as she spoke. 'It should be safe now.'

William took a deep breath then cautiously poked a finger into one of the faces. When no shock occurred he bent down towards the smashed head.

'Got it!' he called as he lifted out a rune-covered tube.

The ghostly faces were now absolutely livid. Edging away from the angry apparitions, William tugged at the tube's lid.

'Wait!' Kern warned. 'Remember the curse.'

'Can you get cursed just from touching it?'

'Probably not,' she said. 'But maybe use your hanky.'

'You think my snot's going to protect me from an ancient curse?'

'It would certainly frighten me off.'

William chortled. 'See, you *can* be funny!'

Kern stared at him. 'There's nothing funny about bad hygiene.'

In the end, they decided it would be better to leave the map inside the tube and William stored it in his coat pocket. Leaving the faces raging silently into the darkness, they crept out of the attic and headed downstairs.

Kern allowed herself a little bit of optimism as they ran. If they really had found the Sea

Lord's Map, then perhaps Gallowglass would ignore Sammler code and keep both of them after their apprenticeship ended. She didn't let her hopes get too high of course. You learned to expect the worst when you'd grown up on a ship full of thieves and murderers.

Music and laughter echoed out from the theatre as they bounded down the stairs. Skidding round the final corner to the foyer, they came to an abrupt halt as they saw a group of men standing by the booth.

The ticket-man had summoned the police.

## CHAPTER 2

*Lærling begin training at a very young age and always work in pairs. In most cases, their sense for magic starts to fade around the age of thirteen. At this point, only one of them will be chosen to stay and become a Sammler. The fate of the unsuccessful Lærling is rarely pleasant.*

*The Encyclopaedia of Northern Magic*

The clatter of police rattles sounded out behind them as they burst through the front door onto the foggy streets of the Trongate. It used to be no problem coming into Glasgow, the police had always been easy to bribe. But not now. Not since Chief Constable McCall had taken over. Still, it was unusual for this many police to turn up quite so quickly.

As they ran, William double-checked his coat pocket to confirm that the tube was still there. There'd been plenty of false sightings of the Sea Lord's Map over the years, but something about this time made him feel hopeful. The faint hint of magic he'd sensed from the tube was old and dark, quite different from anything else they'd stolen for Gallowglass.

They bolted along the Trongate until they were able to turn south down Jamaica Street towards the river. William felt a rush of exhilaration. He loved the thrill of a chase, though Kern was less of a fan. Certainly, she looked pretty annoyed as she thumped along beside him.

'Sorry about the police!' he called.

'You will be,' came her out-of-breath reply.

William groaned. It was fair to say his actions sometimes caused their jobs to take unexpected turns. Whenever that happened, Kern would always get him back with a crafty bit of revenge. He tried not to think about what she might do this time.

They turned onto Clyde Street and could barely see more than a few yards through the

thick yellow fog as they bounded onto the dockside and raced towards the *Dark Horse*. Behind them, McCall's men remained in pursuit, rattles still clattering. The ship's look-outs soon heard this familiar sound and bellowed a warning. In no time, clanking noises rang out from the engines and before they could reach it, the gangplank was heaved up.

'There!' shouted William pointing to the rope ladder hanging down the starboard side.

Together they sprang over to grab the rungs just before the ship's magical mechanics sent it hurtling off down the river. The wind blasted against them, swinging the ladder across the side of the ship as they hung on for dear life. Along the riverside, flames from the nearby ironworks glowed an eerie red through the fog, as the sounds of the docks vanished behind them.

On they went, and it wasn't long before the rocking motion had a familiar effect on William. Sea sickness was not an ideal trait for someone who spent half their life on a ship.

'Here,' said Kern, who was never sick, but always carried clean handkerchiefs.

Once they were well clear of Glasgow's boundaries, the ship slowed and they were at last able to edge their way up. When they neared the top, the mighty figure of Muckle leaned over to help. He gave a sniff as he heaved William up.

'Belly trouble?' he whispered.

William nodded and Muckle gave him a sympathetic pat.

In addition to being absolutely massive, Muckle was known for his heightened senses. It was this combination that got him the job as Gallowglass's bodyguard. No man got past his bulky form and no poison deceived his super-sensitive nose.

Despite his queasiness, William still managed to spring onto the deck with considerable aplomb. Seconds after, Kern tumbled down beside him, wide-eyed and windswept, her mousy brown hair plastered across her face. Hexenmester shook his head as he pointed at her.

‘Alte Schwede!’ called the magic master. ‘We have caught for ourselves a great big fish!’

‘I’d throw it back,’ said another of the crew. ‘Looks more trouble than it’s worth.’

William knew Kern was used to insults from the men, but he hated how they picked on her. A bit of distraction was usually the best way to stop them.

‘Good evening gentlemen!’ he called as he sprang up onto a barrel. ‘Did I ever tell you about the time we sailed to Kinsale to steal Brusnahan’s Ball and almost ended up in a Spanish prison?’

‘Get down.’

The deep voice that spoke was quiet but filled with such authority that even passing seagulls fell silent as the dark figure of Gallowglass stepped out onto the deck.

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Kern shared a worried glance with William as he jumped off the barrel to land beside her. Their chief did not look happy. Not that the man was ever a picture of joy, but when a dark mood hit him, you could be sure someone was going to pay.

Gallowglass said nothing as he thumped his way up the stairs to the forecastle but in his hands, he carried what appeared to be a blood-stained sack. The crew held their breaths as he reached the top and turned to glare down at them. With a resigned sigh, he reached into the sack and heaved out the source of his discontent.

‘What exactly is this meant to be?’

Kern could clearly see that her boss was holding up a severed leg. She also knew a rhetorical question when she heard one. Alas, the same could not be said for some of her co-workers. Gallowglass stood in stoic silence as he waited for the shouts of ‘It’s a leg Chief!’ to come to an end. Observing her boss perched up high before them, Kern thought he looked more

like a pastor than a notorious criminal. She snorted to herself at the idea of it. Gallowglass worshipped no one but himself.

‘I gave the order that a debtor be brought in to explain his lack of payment,’ said Gallowglass once the answers finally stopped. ‘And yet we appear to be missing a substantial portion of the man. Where is Gudgie?’

‘Here Chief!’ called Gudgie as he shoved his way to the front. ‘I’m afraid that was all that was left of him.’

Stuck just behind Gudgie, Kern winced at the stench. The man smelt like a disreputable butcher’s shop. Beside her, William pulled a face and pretended to gag at the smell. She tried not to snigger, but he could always make her laugh. Of course he could. He was her best friend. Her only friend.

‘I told you to be discreet,’ said Gallowglass. ‘Yet I received multiple reports of extra police on the street this evening. Something clearly alerted McCall to our presence and I strongly suspect it was you.’

‘It wasn’t my fault! He made a run for it, tried to hide over at the woodworks,’ protested Gudgie. ‘He put up a fight and the place was full of saws.’

Gallowglass showed no reaction to this information as he returned the leg to the sack. He was always in control. With his neatly clipped black hair and beard, and his carefully pressed clothes, he was a perfect picture of order. Taking a moment to wipe his hands, he then retrieved something from his coat.

‘I have tolerated your reckless violence for too long,’ he said and held up the carved stone ball they all knew and feared.

‘Not that, Chief!’ cried Gudgie. ‘Please, it won’t happen again.’

‘Correct!’ said Gallowglass and with that he whispered to the stone.

Gudgie howled in horror and grabbed at the spot on his arm where he bore the Black Kelpie tattoo. The magic began its work and soon the glittering golden trail of his life-force floated up out of his arm to be sucked into the ball. His howls lasted no more than a few seconds before he slumped onto the deck. Then, with one final burst of light, the magic that had been his life, sparkled in his fading eyes and disappeared forever.

Kern saw William had covered his eyes and gave him a little pat to tell him it was over. This could happen to any of them as long as they bore the mark of the Black Kelpie. Gallowglass returned the ball to his pocket before turning his gaze to her and William.

‘Did you get the map?’

‘Yes Chief!’ said William. His hands moved to retrieve the item but he searched pocket after pocket with no success. A look of panic formed and his hands began to shake as the awful truth dawned. His dark brown eyes were wide with fear as he turned to face their chief.

‘It’s gone.’

‘Gone?’ said Gallowglass. ‘Are you telling me you lost it?’

‘That depends on how you define lost,’ replied William.

‘Do not test my patience boy. Do you know where it is or must I remind you about the consequences of failure?’

Under normal circumstances Kern might have let William suffer a little longer, but it was not the day to anger Gallowglass.

‘Oh wait, I’m sorry,’ she called as she pulled out the tube. ‘Did you mean *this* map?’

A mix of relief and annoyance crossed William’s face as she passed the tube up to Gallowglass.

‘I knew you’d nicked it from me!’ he whispered.

She snorted in disbelief before adding. ‘Consider that my revenge.’

Hexenmester joined Gallowglass and together they examined the object. Staring at the markings that covered the tube, Kern wondered if it really did contain the infamous map made by the creator goddess Clota. Not that anyone ever called it Clota’s map. Instead, it had been named after the one who stole it from her. Mannan, better known as The Sea Lord.

Eventually, after several minutes of examination followed by a heated discussion with Hexenmester, Gallowglass turned to address the crew.

‘The markings appear to be accurate but it could easily be another well-made fake. It will have to be tested.’ He gestured to her and William. ‘You two come with me. I did not appreciate having half of Glasgow’s police brought to my doorstep. For both your sakes you had better hope this really is the Sea Lord’s Map.’

### CHAPTER 3

*If a Sammler chief is unable to decide between two Lærling at the end of their apprenticeship, then the pair must face each other in a Trial. These are always to the death.*

*The Encyclopaedia of Northern Magic*

Gallowglass's cabin was a testament to the obsession that drove the man, with almost every bit of wall space covered in drawings of magical objects. William and Kern had spent their lives stealing them for him, but there were still a great many left to find.

Amongst all these drawings, a small blackboard hung on the wall behind Gallowglass's desk. The numbers scrawled across it were of more importance to William than any of the magic on display. Even though he and Kern worked as a team, they were also in competition.

Gallowglass had been keeping score since their first theft and with the end of their apprenticeship drawing near, Kern was one point ahead.

The cabin door slammed open and Hexenmester stomped into the room. The magic master's bald head glistened in the lamplight as he deposited a bucket of sea water beside Gallowglass. While most of the gang wore grey shirts and trousers under their black coats, the masters chose their own clothes. As was typical for magic masters, Hexenmester wore black with a trim of gold, the two colours of magic.

Gallowglass dipped his hands into the sea water then held them over the blank parchment rolled out on the table. 'Any two-bit magic-master can fake an enchanted map. Let us see if it can find Rán's Net.'

William and Kern had stolen the magical net for Gallowglass the previous month. No one else knew about the theft and it was now hidden with many other treasures on their island base.

If this was the real Sea Lord's Map, it would be able to tell them the location of any magic.

Water dripped off Gallowglass's hands as they hovered over the parchment and William saw what looked like fear flicker across his chief's face. They'd all heard of the terrible fates of the previous owners of the map. Only a fool would lack concern. Gallowglass caught William's gaze and shook himself free from whatever thoughts plagued him. He took a deep breath then slammed his hands onto the parchment.

Within seconds, the paper turned a black so dark, it looked as though a hole had appeared in front of them. The sparkling gold of a spell at work was what most people associated with magic, but black was the sign of magic at its most powerful. It was only in the depths of true darkness that anything became possible.

The first golden trail shot across the black paper. Then another and another until the map was alive with glittering swirls. In perfect unison, the golden trails twisted together and flew across the parchment into Gallowglass's hands. His body juddered as the magic soared through him, then his head jolted up, and he stared forward with eyes that glowed gold.

They sat in tense silence until, after what seemed like an eternity, Gallowglass exhaled. He lifted his hands from the map and as the gold faded from his eyes they saw him do something he'd never done before. He smiled.

'We have the Sea Lord's Map.'

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Many hours passed as Gallowglass became engrossed in his magical treasure hunt. Slumped on a chair beside Kern, William gave a mighty yawn. He really wanted to go to bed.

Across the table, Gallowglass's eyes glowed gold as he searched for yet another piece of magic. The map had shown him the locations of all manner of wondrous objects but with each

one, he had become increasingly frustrated. Many of them were in unreachable places deep down in the oceans, but even more were to be found in one particular place.

‘The Sammler Club!’ Gallowglass sighed in exasperation as he completed the search.

A highly secretive organisation for only the wealthiest of men, it was famed for the magical security that protected its large riverside building in Glasgow. The reason for this security was now very clear. While it was normal for Sammler organisations to keep magic collections, no one had known the true extent of the Sammler Club’s magical wealth.

‘This is simply not possible,’ said Gallowglass, shaking his head as he flicked through the long list of objects the club possessed.

William rolled his eyes as he whispered to Kern. ‘Maybe we should just rob the club.’

Gallowglass stopped and stared at him. ‘That is exactly what we should do.’

‘I was just joking,’ said William, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

‘But you are correct. Why spend decades finding objects when I can steal a lifetime’s worth in one night?’

‘It’s not possible,’ said Kern. ‘The place is too secure. Even for us.’

‘Typical female lack of ambition,’ snapped Hexenmester. ‘Most things are possible if you have the right magic.’

‘Exactly,’ said Gallowglass, his eyes alive once more with a hungry gleam. ‘And I now have the means to find whatever magic we might need.’

They watched him search through the notes on his table, scanning drawings of objects the map had located. Finally, after much deliberation he placed two pictures in front of them.

‘What are these?’

William peered at the drawings. He had the feeling they’d covered them in their lessons

but had no idea what they were called.

‘The Auroch Key and Shony’s Eye,’ said Kern.

‘Correct. Two long lost magical objects that together will help us rob the Sammler Club.’

He stopped for a moment then pulled out a third picture.

William’s face lit up. He knew that one. ‘Beira’s Apple!’ he blurted.

‘Exactly,’ said Gallowglass. ‘Powerful men can be very dangerous when angry. A wise man would take precautions before robbing them and what better protection is there than immortality?’

Getting up from his desk, he went over to the blackboard. ‘I will consider the quest to find these three objects your final test. I hope it will inspire your best work.’ He picked up a piece of chalk. ‘I must not forget of course, to add a point for bringing me the map.’

William scowled as Gallowglass added a mark below Kern’s name.

‘No!’ she called. ‘It was William who found it.’

‘The successful Sammler is the one who ends up with the object. You gave me the map; you get the point,’ said Gallowglass. ‘You know that well enough by now.’

William stared over at Kern. There would have been plenty of ways for her to get revenge, yet she had chosen to steal the map for herself. Fear gnawed at his stomach as the reality of his position hit him. Their time was running out and Kern was now two points ahead. Perhaps it was time he did more to make sure he wasn’t left the loser.