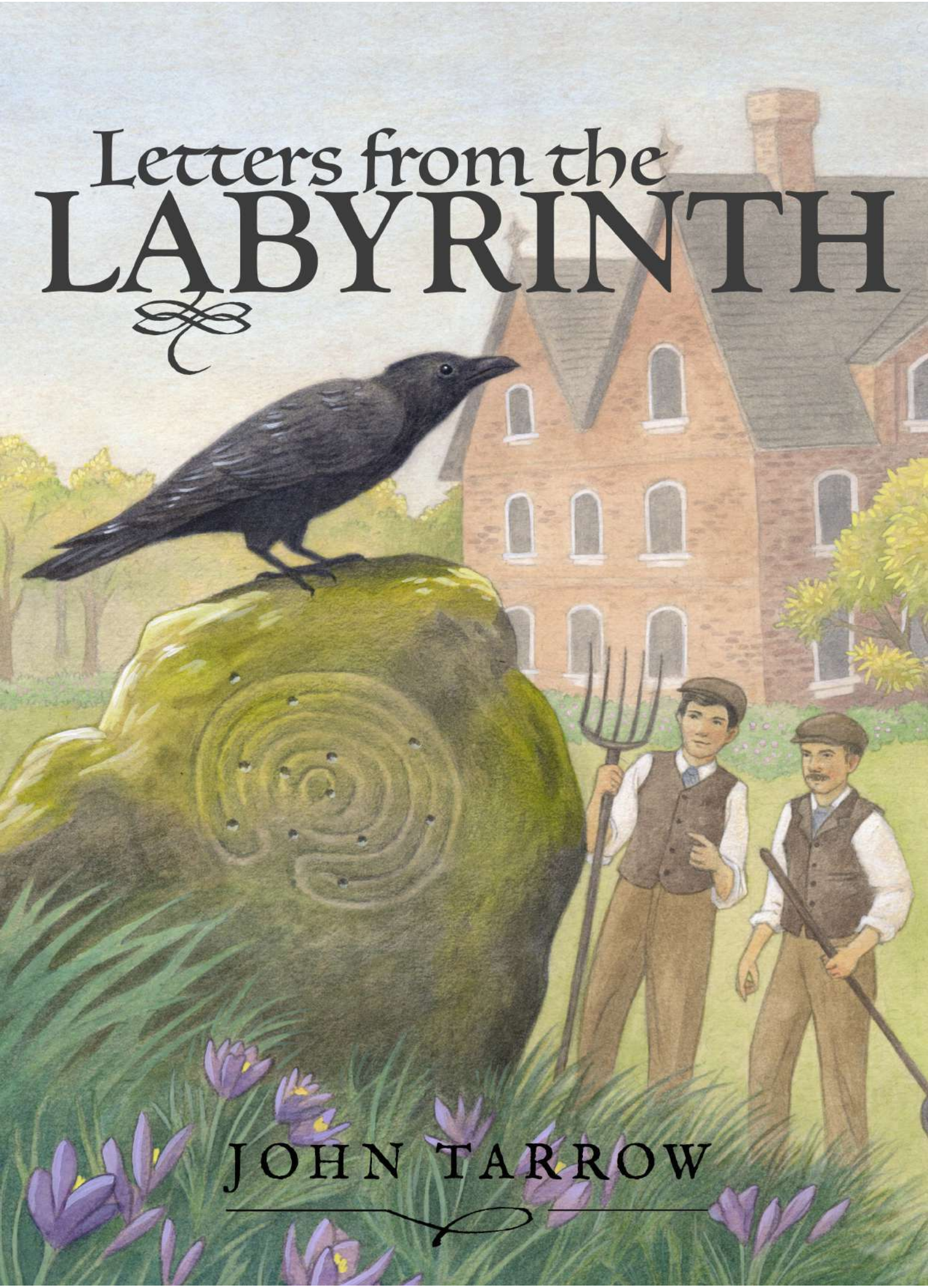
Letters from the LABYRINTH



JOHN TARROW

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Story JOHN TARROW
Artwork REBECCA SOLOW

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The Battle For Witchcross
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DEAD OF THE MOON (MIDNIGHT)
THE WEREHOUSE
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
NOW

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE just a game. A bit of scary fun. A lark. Every kid in the town knew the place as The Werehouse. They also knew the terrifying double dare linked to it; if you entered on the night of the dark of the moon and placed your hand upon the cursed stone; if you spoke the rhyme and walked into the empty house; if you did all these things, then you would never be seen again. The rhyme had a sinister name. It was called The Malison. In the playgrounds children sang its words while skipping, or shouted them as warnings. But this was OK. This was outside. The words had no power there. But within the shadow of that dark, derelict house, within those dangerous, desolate gardens, that was another thing altogether. Every kid knew The Malison. It went like this:

Stone! Stone! The Devil's Stone
Will You Touch The Devil's Stone?
Enter This House Those Who Dare
When The Moon Is Dark: But, Ware!
Speak The Curse And Enter Within–
Then All Your Nightmares Will Begin.

And it wasn't as if there was no proof. Around here children went missing all the time. Kids with names like Scott and Lakelyn and Joseph. Every one of them vanished without a trace, and, if the backstreet gossip was to be believed, every one of them had disappeared inside that house.

You're not sure why you were picked as the next kid to go, but there it was. The next Dead Moon you would face the terrifying task. Most kids didn't have the guts to complete the dare. Most weren't even brave enough to get as far as touching the stone. So all you had to do was enter the garden and speak the rhyme; you didn't have to actually go inside the house. Nobody *ever* did that.

At the time of the dark of the moon, all the kids gathered at the thatched pub. When you'd arrived with your friends from school, the night was cold and full with the threat of rainstorms. As midnight approached, everyone made their way to the derelict and deserted house. It stood on an ordinary street in a wide circle of semi-detached houses centred by a green. The road was a dead end. You couldn't help but notice that. The front garden was surrounded by an immense hedge, so wild that nothing could be seen of the building beyond. Almost invisible in the dense foliage was a low iron gate, twisted with brambles.

Hanging upon the gate was a big, rusted sign that read DANGEROUS BUILDING. KEEP OUT. The warning made what was going to happen very real. Real real. But everyone was there and it would mean a lifetime of jibes and jeers to back out now.

Ducking under the sign, you had braved the thorns and brambles, pushed open the rusted gate and scrambled down weed-strangled steps and into the jungle of the garden. Ahead the boarded and broken house loomed. Ivy crawled over every patch of brickwork and everything smelled rotten and diseased. It looked exactly like a crouching, waiting monster; a monster that swallowed children as easy as Jelly Babies. Summoning all your courage you had waded forwards through the undergrowth until your foot kicked something hard. Crouching down you clawed at the soil around the fallen standing stone, brushing aside the grime and dirt to reveal part of an engraved spiral design.

Glancing at your phone, you waited for the stroke of midnight and when it was time, you reached out gingerly and placed your palm flat against the rock. At your back darkness gathered like a great pair of carrion crow's wings folding around the world. Wings that swallowed up the street, the town and everything in it. The air had turned as black as ink. It was like staring into moth's eyes. Through chattering teeth, you started to speak the words:

"Stone! Stone! O Devil's Stone!
I Dare To Touch The Devil's Stone–!"

But, at that exact moment, something broke. It was a sound like the night cracking open, splintering into fragments as sharp as shark's teeth. Terrified, you shouted out, scrabbling backwards in alarm. What you saw through that awful crack in the night had sent you running in fear for the gate. As you reached the hedge, you'd tried to claw for the way back onto the street but could find no way through that impenetrable hedge. Panicking, you'd thrashed at the foliage, ripping your hands and arms to ribbons, but still you could not find the way out.

Just before you were going to start screaming in terror, hands appeared out of the darkness. It was Sam, your best friend, reaching through the hedge to save you. As everyone drew back, he had stepped forwards, and hauled you to safety. Yet in doing so he'd fallen forwards into that impossible, unnatural darkness like the infinite nothingness between the stars. As you had stood, bursting with relief that you were free of that dreadful place, all the other kids were mocking, calling you names, laughing like loons. But the laughing all stopped when they looked back to the house. For Sam was gone.

The house had swallowed him whole.

In the days afterwards, no one could explain where Sam had gone. The boarded-up house was opened, the gardens cleared and combed, but there was no trace, no clue as to what had happened or where they had vanished. It was a complete and utter mystery.

That was until the next Dead Moon, when the raven arrived at your window with the first letter clutched in its ebony claws...

I

FIRST MOON: HUNTER'S MOON (OF MAN)
THE OLD RECTORY
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER 1852 | 00:01:37

WHEN THE GREAT BLACK BIRD first came rap-tapping at your window in the dead of the night, you were locked inside a horrific nightmare. Just as the rhyme has warned. But it wasn't about you. It was about Sam. About what had happened to him in the terrible moment when he was swallowed by that dark and dangerous house. The bad dreams had plagued you for weeks, but this night, the night of the next Dead Moon, this was the worst yet. The nightmare was the same as always. It always showed what you had seen through that ragged crack between worlds, but this time it showed you more. It revealed what lay on the other side of that slit of a doorway – and what your friend had gone to face by falling through it.

What you saw was the same location, but now the ruined house, the weeds and rubble were all gone. In their place was a grand brick building, standing alone amid a wide expanse of formal garden on two levels, packed with flowers and vegetables. Everything was surrounded by a tall, neatly clipped hedge, the fallen stone now standing pride of place at the centre of a sea of beds and borders. Sam stood on a red brick path near the gate, your view was if perched on his shoulder.

This time the garden was not empty. The place was a chaos of flames and figures. The brick paths and vegetable beds burned with fallen torches, sending smoke into the air as dense as morning fog. Gaunt men, their faces distorted by some terrible disease, swarmed everywhere. And something weird was happening to the building's entrance. At first it looked like a set of arched double doors flanked by stone columns, then it melted, diminishing in size into a black porch, its door set with a stained glass oval. A teenager with a cropped head in a dark hoodie was hammering at the shifting doors, shouting to be let inside. He was still shouting when a tide of bodies set upon him, dragging him into their dark midst.

Unable to stomach that horrible scene, you looked back to the steps between the upper and lower gardens. There two figures stood. The first was a grotesque sight, a pale and stick-thin man with a fanged mouth, lank hair and pointed horns. At his heels two great hounds with flame-red eyes were baring their fangs and growling menacingly. The second man was much older, his hair shock white. He was dressed in a patterned robe and appeared to be sick. Something that resembled porridge dripped from his mouth and down his chin.

"In the name of the Ghûl," the horned man was shouting, "I, Damfino, master of the Wild Hunt, claim this sacred place. Here we shall build our new lair."
"You… cannot." The older man's voice was hoarse and very weak.
"Cannot? 'Tis a job already done," Damfino replied. "For we possess all but one of the gemstones of the ancient Staradhelm used to create your pitiful labyrinth. Its power is bound up within them, and we control that power now." Around his neck a yellow necklace glowed. "And now, begins the hunt for the

fifth and final stone." Horror-stricken, the reverend clutched his throat and sank to his knees. "You have lost your precious shadowstone, Reverend Nathaniel Grey, and now you shall lose your life!"

"Never!" came a cry from the rectory. "Not while I am drawing breath!" Now in the porch way stood a man dressed in waistcoat and cap, and in his hand he held a vicious wooden pitchfork. All around him the figures snarled and clawed, but they did not approach him.

"Aha! Tobias Crowe. The rectory gardener," Damfino exclaimed. "How we tremble in our bloodied boots."
"I will not let this sacred place fall into your foul hands," said Tobias.
"How so?" asked Damfino. "When we are so many and you but one." Then to his servants: "Hold him!" With a wave of a hand, the gaunt man signalled his men forwards. Within moments, the gardener was disarmed and held immobile. "Little Crowe, do you really think you can dare defy me?"
"Not I. The labyrinth has sent us one who will be set that task."

Damfino shrugged, as if these last words were of no consequence whatsoever. Instead of replying, he pulled from his coat a slender length of polished wood tipped with a crystal bound by copper wire.
It's a wand, you realised.

Seeing this, everyone drew away from him.

"This place in ancient times was known as Witchcross Mede," Damfino said. "This place's magic is rooted in rock. But while the Maje are forbidden to use its power, I am not so sworn." Spinning on his heels, he stabbed out with the wand and pointed it straight at the young man.
"Stranger!" Tobias shouted right at you and Sam. "Find the guardian of the labyrinth and save the shadowstone!"

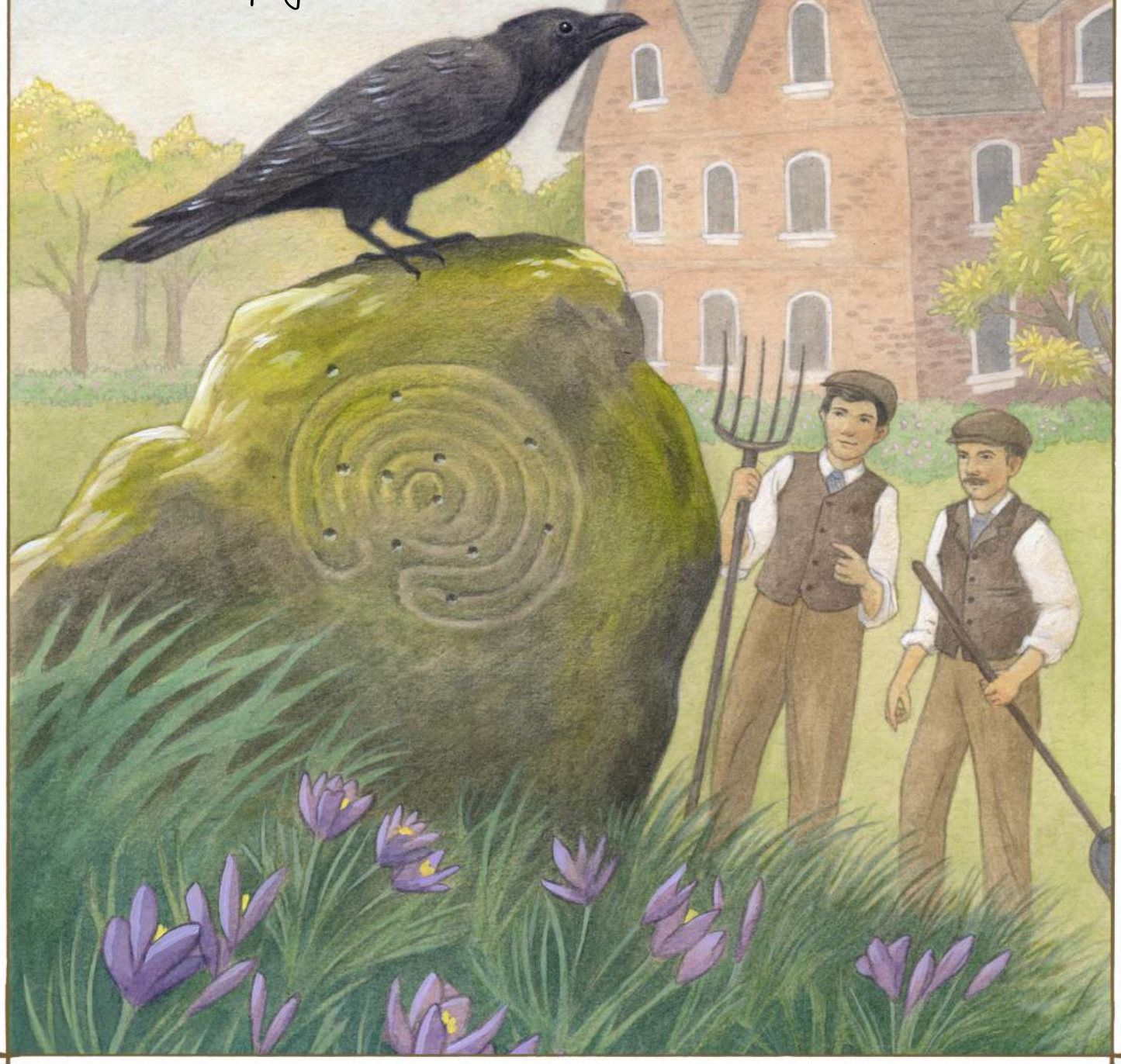
From the wand's crystal tip a shaft of light erupted. The blaze of wildfire hit Sam in the centre of the chest, surrounding him with a burst of brilliant silver light. So bright that it blinded. So bright that it snapped you awake…

Tap-tap-tappety tap.

Sitting up in bed, you stared straight at the dark bedroom window. And there through it, its great shadow silhouetted against the crimson dawn, you saw the raven perched upon your sill. In its eyes was the wisdom of all worlds. In its beak, a pale envelope…

FRIDAY 27 OCTOBER 1848

I AM WRITING THIS BY the light of a lantern in a room above the butcher's shop in Great Dunmow. This is the home of Tobias Crowe, who is head gardener at The Old Rectory. I am now about five years before the events with Damfino and his terrifying huntsmen.



I

When I arrived here, I stepped into a terrible storm. No one answered the rectory door, so I headed into town. Great Dunmow is just like it is now, only smaller and there are no cars, just cart tracks and hoof prints. And everything smells of old smoke. The flooded streets were empty (obviously) so I started knocking on doors, and once I mentioned the rectory they sent me here. The Crowe's took me in, gave me dry clothes, and I've been trying to keep from under everyone's feet ever since.

MONDAY 30 OCTOBER 1848

OK, so two weird things happened today. The first was I met a boy who says he's a friend of the man who owns the rectory; Reverend Nathaniel Grey. Grey hasn't been living there for years and when I asked why, he replied, "The good reverend is off doing God's good work. Some very important mission in Peru."

The boy's name is Tom Darkin and he visits regularly to watch progress on the gardens. He spent ages scribbling in a leather book while the workmen came and went. He says he's interested in the history of the town and the rectory, but I don't believe him. He was trying too hard to be super-friendly. All "How do you do?" and a bright "Good day!" when he went. I tried to sneak a look at what he was writing, but he was careful not to show me.

The second weird thing was that I discovered the Devil's Stone! Well, that's not entirely true. It was the raven, really. The bird's been harassing the labourers all day, first the carpenters who were measuring for an arched oak gate, then flapping about the heads of the men who are

firing the red bricks for the pathways. Tobias was busy pacing out the boundary hedge and finishing the plans for the underground irrigation channels, and got quite annoyed to be forever chasing off the creature. Plainly he didn't like the bird being around. The gardener kept mumbling, "I think there's something dark at work here."

The raven kept squawking and flying back to this one grassy mound. I went to investigate and there found a mouse keyring that is obviously not from around here. When the labourers dug down beneath it they found the buried earth-fast stone. That's the name they call it. Guess it's better than 'big, old rock'. Tobias says it's an obelisk marking this land as an ancient sacred space and the site of historical significance. "And what's doubly peculiar," he said, "is that the village children sing a nursery rhyme about a stone." I asked to hear it and almost wet myself when I did. Here it is and you'll see why:

STONE! STONE! THE TALLIS STONE
STAND BEFORE THE TALLIS STONE
ENTER THIS HOUSE THOSE WHO DARE
WHEN THE MOON IS DARK BEWARE!
DON'T LET THE JIGGERS FIND YOU THERE.
RING AROUND THE TALLIS STONE.

See! It's almost the exact same words as The Malison. And there I was thinking some kids from our school had made it up! Looks like children have been daring each other to enter The Old Rectory for a long time.

I

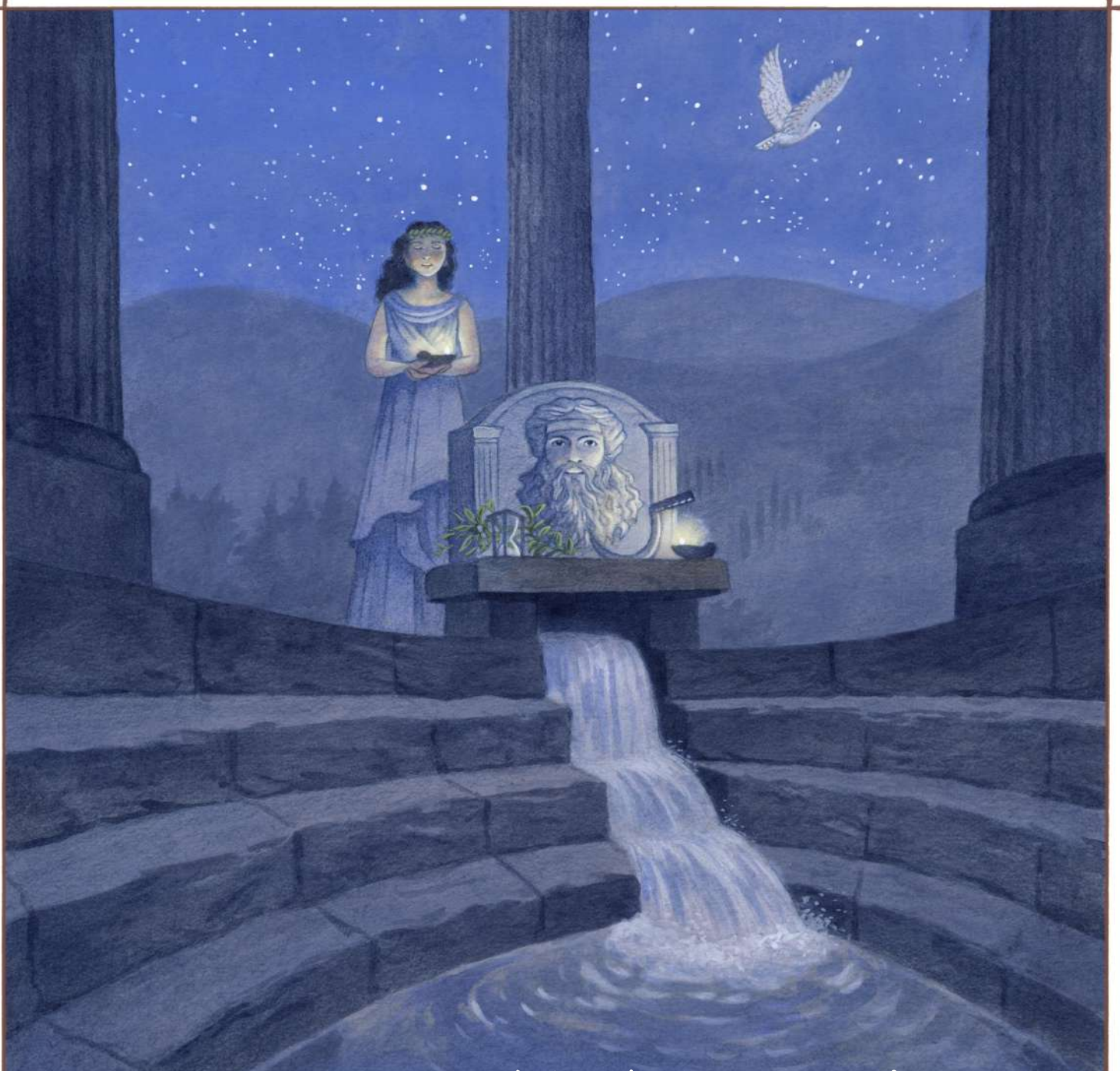
TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER 1848

The mysterious Tom returned today and started asking questions. It's All Hallow's Eve tonight, so everyone's talking about children stolen by fairies, or grisly ghouls appearing in mirrors. He wasn't. He was asking about where I came from and about the stone and the poem. Whether an actual labyrinth stood here in times past or not. No one can decide, but Tom thinks the rectory was built on top of a Neolithic stone circle (which nobody else believes in as this makes it before the time of the Bible).

SATURDAY 25 NOVEMBER 1848

Tonight it's the next Dead Moon and I'm going with Tom Darkin to the next location on the labyrinth. "Be wary," Tom said before we set off. "Take one too many steps from the path and you will be lost not just for hours or for days, but forevermore." He also said we probably won't go to the same place and time, as that seems to be different for everyone.

I am sending this letter with the raven before we set out. But it's obvious that the rhyme, the legends, everything was set in place to keep everyone away when the gate between worlds opens... And tonight we go to do just that!



FRIDAY 3 NOVEMBER 64BC

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF the door to this place, I stepped through a pure white archway. It was night, all cold and clear under a million stars. I was alone, standing beside a small temple on a hill looking down at a tiny town that was straight from those Roman adventure films about Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius. It was right then that I knew I was back in ancient times.

slowly I crept up to the top of the hill. The circular temple was supported by a ring of columns, and there at the centre, water gushed from the ground and collected into a deep pool. At its edge stood the face of an old man with a wild beard, and set out before him was an hourglass, a sickle and a sprig of mistletoe – so you can see why at first I thought this was old Father Time. Sneaking forwards to get a better look, I was startled by a bright light that flared in the darkness. And there was a woman all in white, holding a small oil lamp. Upon her shoulder sat a white owl.

I was going to run, but she told me not to be afraid, that she was the White Sibyl, a healer and prophetess, and this was the oracle of Saturnus, God of Time. So I stayed and learned how these spring waters well up from the buried land of the Underworld, bringing wisdom and secrets to the mortal world.

"Many come from all across the Roman Empire to ask questions of the oracle and hear its answers," the White Sibyl said. "Do you have such a question?" I did, but before I could ask it, there was a loud noise from further down the hill that made me jump out of my skin.

Looking towards the sound, I saw a figure stepping through the stone arch at the edge of the grove. It was Damfino! Yet as soon as he appeared, he changed. One moment he was just like I saw him in the garden of the old Rectory. The next he transformed into a fearsome one-eyed monster, part giant and part beast with a mane of dark hair and vicious

tusks. Immediately I hid myself in the bushes at the edge of the grove – and as the huntsman passed, I saw that under his arm he carried a bleating ram and down his spine ran a writhing line of poisonous snakes.

Reaching the temple, the hideous thing spoke. "I savour the meat of human flesh and my merest glances turn all to stone, so don't dare refuse me, prophet." The cyclops' black tongue was too big for his mouth, and lolled from side to side as he spoke. The White sibyl closed her eyes and spoke her welcome, saying none were ever dismissed as long as they obeyed the rules of this sacred place.
"And what are they?" Damfino asked.
"The doing is simple. One, offer up your sacrifice. Two, speak your question." Without a second's hesitation, the monster wrenched the ram's head and broke its neck, then threw it on the stone steps and gutted it with his ferocious claws. "I seek the shadowstone and the fiend that stole it. My question is: Where are they in the Labyrinth?"

The woman knelt and pressed her ear to Saturn's lips. For the longest time she listened, then she said, "Saturnus has spoken! The stone that you seek is at Tigh Samhraidh, the cottage of Mrs MacGeraghty."
"More. I need more. The place? The time?"
"The dwelling is in the Boyne Valley in Ireland. The date is Sunday 26 March 1933, just after a quarter to midday."
"Then, I shall be there first!" the thing cried out in glee. His shout was so loud it startled the owl, who flew away into the starry night sky. It also

startled me and I fell back into the bushes. Instantly Damfino looked around and right at me. I leapt up and tried to flee, but the monster was upon me at once and lifted me up by my leg. Screwing my eyes tightly shut, I started squirming and screaming, but it was no use. Damfino's grip was as tight and strong as iron manacles. "Look at me, whelp! I have had enough of the meddling of children for an entire eternity." And with his other hand he began to try to prise open my eyes.
"Wait!" shouted the White Sibyl. "It is customary for supplicants to leave a gift for the oracle."
"So?"
"I ask for the child's life as my offering for your true telling."

Well, she had him there. Damfino fussed and whined, but apparently he couldn't refuse her request. Just as she couldn't refuse to answer his question. Utterly thwarted, the creature strode off, leaving through the same arch he had entered and we were alone again. Phew! I thought I was dead for sure! Then, when I opened my hand I found I had pulled some of the huntsman's hair from his head.

The prophetess asked if I had a question, but I answered as to how I didn't have a sacrifice and so she said that I should sleep there on the travertine marble and, if the Gods were good, I may receive a meaningful dream. So I did. And, she was right! I dreamed of the door to the next room. It was there at the bottom of the pool, hiding in plain sight. And the very next dark of the moon, I'm heading through it...

MONDAY 25 DECEMBER 1848

I AM CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IN the stone cottage of Rose Meirion in Wales after escaping from a ruined watchtower in a wolf-infested forest. Dark and terrible things are going on back there and I am so glad to be here in nearby Llanberis, safe from Lord D'Ante and his creepy henchmen.

In this time, Queen Victoria is ruler of the British Empire – and Mrs. Meirion is head of the local boarding house, a job that she shares with her eldest daughter, Lily. She has two other daughters – Poppy and Violet. They all have the names of flowers. Well, except for Rose's husband. I don't know what his first name is as no one ever uses it. He is always addressed as Mr. Meirion. Christmas is very different here. When they brought out the food and it was red meat. I commented on that and Rose replied: "No turkey? What manor were you born in! What's wrong with roast beef? You'll be asking for snipe or swan next!"

Rose is very wise and knows everything there is to know about plants and herbs and the stars and lunar cycles. She saved me from drowning in a lake called Blackmirror Tarn that sits at the base of the tower. She was there collecting medicinal berries when I came careening down the hill, ran off the bank and fell into the water. I would have frozen to death, but she fished me out and built a fire to dry me. All I can say is if Rose hadn't been there, I would not be sitting here writing this to you.

I arrived at night in a vast stone room. It was built by a Welsh prince in the Middle Ages upon the cliffs guarding a pass into his mountainous kingdom. Now it's little more than a ruin. In the light from a dozen or so candles, I could see I stood beside a huge brick fireplace while above me all the floors had rotted away leaving just a big empty space. Far above birds – maybe bats? – could be heard shuffling around near the roof. Immediately

I could hear voices from below and peeking down into the cellars, I saw a group of shadowy figures with guns and knives who had rounded up prisoners and were locking them in a barred cell. They very much reminded me of Damfino's men back at The Old Rectory. Their leader was a tall, thin man with silver hair and a beard. They called him Jonathan D'Ante. In his gloved hands he held an ivory-headed cane the head of which was smeared with blood. If that wasn't an obvious sign that they had seized the tower by force, D'Ante's next words spoke volumes: "Now I," he shouted like a madman. "I am king of the forest!"

Then one of his rogues looked up and they saw me. So, I ran.

Fleeing back through the door I had just entered, I found myself in a narrow hall that led to a great arched doorway. Through this was a covered porch and steps leading down into a walled courtyard. You could see how the castle once looked, but it was now mostly rubble. Beyond the walls stretched a vast forest and I could see this because the entire tower was ringed with burning torches. Already I could hear my pursuers right behind me so I pelted down the steps and ran towards the safety of the trees. Well, I thought they'd be safe, but as I ran through the torches I heard movement in the darkness – and then the howling of wolves!

I almost cried out in panic. What was I to do? Turn back and be captured or run on and be eaten! But just then fate made the decision as the ground under my feet turned into a steep slope and I tumbled forwards

into blackness. And at the bottom I fell off the sheer bank and into freezing cold water. That's when Rose Meirion saved me.

This tarn, Rose told me later, is a source of strong magic – and explained that Jonathan D'Ante and his men had attacked and seized the castle to capture its power. They had brought the wolves to guard the watchtower here in Snowdonia from Europe's last primeval forest, a place called Białowieża in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Its deepest woods have remained untouched by humans since the ice age and was once a hunting ground for Polish and Lithuanian kings.

But right then the tarn was just an unexpected icy bath! As I said, if Rose hadn't heard me fall into the lake I would have frozen to death. But thinking about it, why was she out in the dark of night in a wolf-infested wood? Still, whatever the reason, she did give me a bracelet of protection made of hag stones threaded onto a leather thong. Through the holes in the stones she told me I can see other worlds! As I left, Rose said, "Remember, a sheep does not fear the shepherd. It fears the wolf. But it is the shepherd that kills it." Guess she was meaning I have to be wary of everyone I meet on this quest.

So now I am off to face both types of wolves at the tower – those hungry monsters outside, but also those with beasts within...

SATURDAY 17 JANUARY 1874

THE ROOM I'D ARRIVED INSIDE WAS a kitchen, but from a time long before electricity or fridges. Pots boiled in a blazing hearth beside which was set a long wooden table covered with bowls and jugs. IN a rocking chair tending the food on the fire sat a beautiful woman in a dark dress who calmly introduced herself as Maledicéreux.

she did not seem surprised or scared at my appearance – it was almost as if she were expecting me. It was very late and the sounds of crickets and night creatures were loud outside the shuttered windows. At her feet sat two brooms and a circle drawn in what looked like flour on the tiled floor. Once I said who I was and why I'd come, she introduced herself as the governess employed by Louis and Emilia L'Estrange to act as teacher to their twin daughters, Cora and Corvina. She had seen my arrival in her rootworking – which is a kind of folk magic called hoodoo. I'd heard of voodoo, but Maledicéreux said they were as different as frogs and chickens. I asked if she could help me find the next door, and she replied, "If the good Lord's willing and Hell don't rise."

Then we heard the approach of feet and the governess said, "I have promised to take the little ones here..." And she handed me a poster announcing that at midnight there was to be a gathering to see an infamous voodoo priestess called Marie Laveau conjure up a spirit called Baron Saturday at The Wishing Tree in the bayou. "Best we don't get those girls frighted by no strangers. Y'all hide until we're done." So I climbed behind a cupboard and watched as two twin girls ran into the kitchen. They were maybe five or six and the only way to tell them apart was that Cora's hair was blonde and Corvina's was black.

It was Corvina who was obviously fascinated with the ceremony; Cora hardly spoke and looked like she just wanted to be tucked up in bed. It was also clear that the dark-haired girl was blackmailing her governess

into taking them to the gathering. "Remember," Corvina warned at one point, "If you defy me, I'll have a mind to spread the word you suck the lives out of the children and brew it with bat's blood for a beauty potion." Then they were leaving, and I followed, hiding on the back ledge of the horse-drawn carriage that waited outside.

As we pulled away I saw that the manse was set apart from other houses and surrounded by trees hung with moss. It had a columned porch and white picket fence, but still looked spooky in the darkness. The L'Estrange's home was located in Bayou Saint-Jean just north of the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. It had been built beside the wide canal that linked Lake Pontchartrain to the bustling French Quarter, a vital waterway for merchants and travellers.

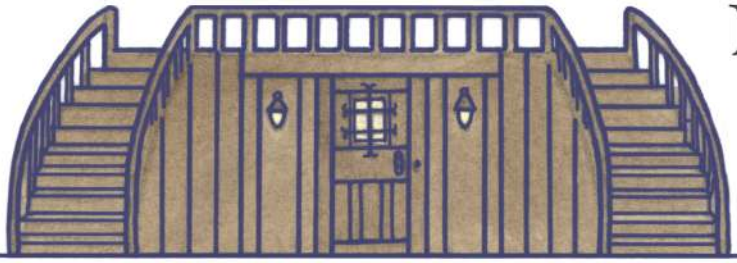
Arriving at the gathering, the governess and the two children disembarked from the carriage upon the edge of the bayou. Thousands of people had turned out to witness the ceremony. Marie Laveau stood beneath an ancient tree hung with offerings and circled by candles. Here she summoned spirits, performed rituals and miracles, and generally went berserk to wild music and chanting. Then, as the church bells struck midnight, the priestess appeared in a top hat, her face painted bone white – and began to summon Baron Samedi (the French for Saturday). He is master of life and death and stops dead people rising as zombies. All scary stuff! Especially when you're wandering about alone at a voodoo ceremony in the middle of nowhere!

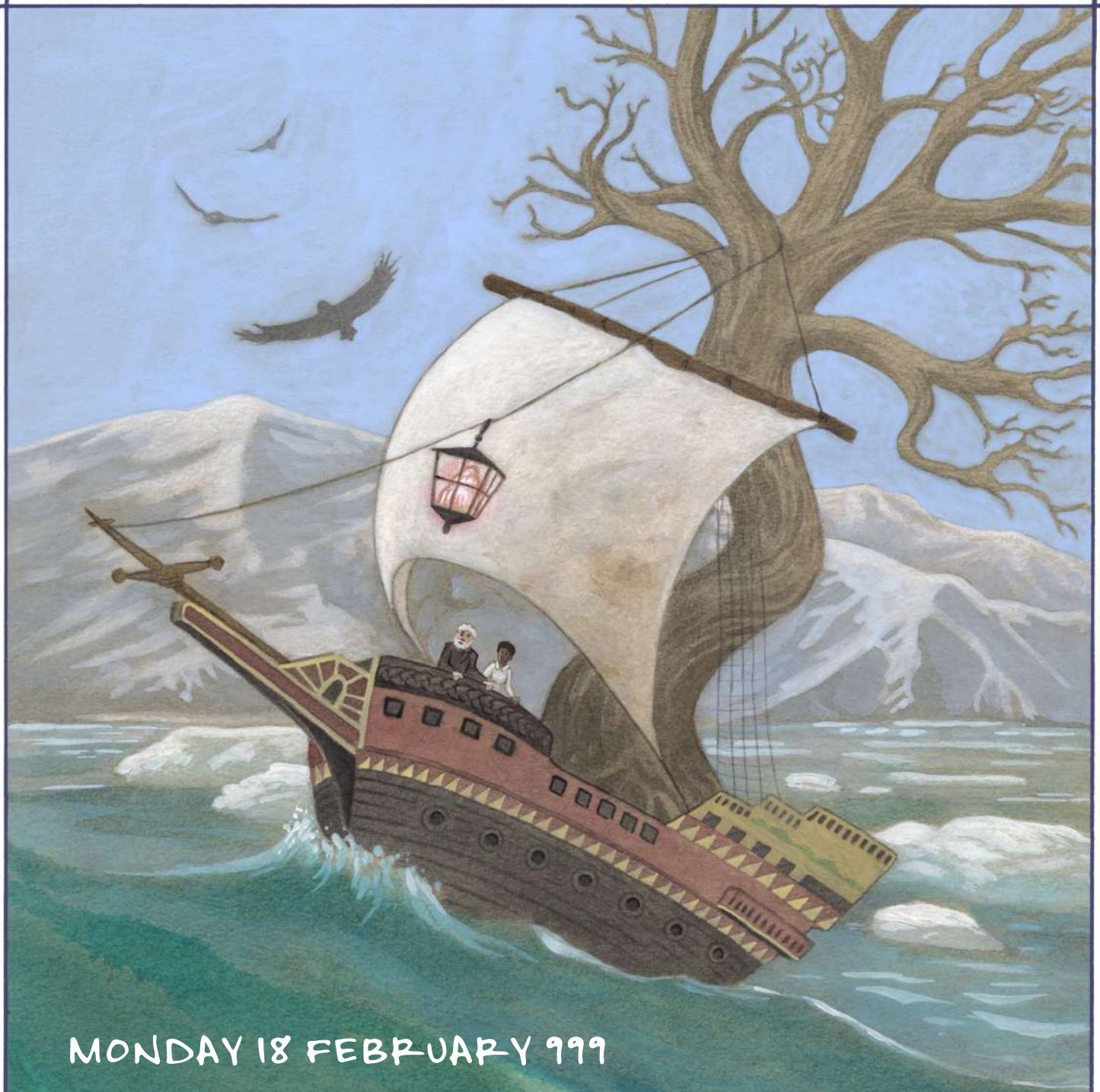
As the ritual reached a frenzied finalé that sent Cora retreating into Maledicéreux's skirts , I saw Corvina slip away and, with a mix of fear and curiosity, I followed her. I think she just wanted to explore on her own, but when she was only a short way away from the Wishing Tree, three men accosted her and dragged her off into the night. I followed and saw they took her to an old shack down in a mosquito-infested hollow nearby.

There they locked her in a chest, then sat back drinking and smoking cigars, saying how much they would be rewarded by the Sanderson sisters who wanted little girls to boil for a potion that would allow the drinker to remain young forever. They spoke of a doorway up at Manse L'Estrange and how on the next dark of the moon someone would came through and pay them handsomely for such a rare elixir!

Well, I had found where the next door was – but I couldn't just leave Corvina to such a horrible fate (even if she was a spoiled brat!) so I waited until the three men were drunk, slipped inside the shack and freed the girl. Then we fled back to the crowds and found the governess and her sister.

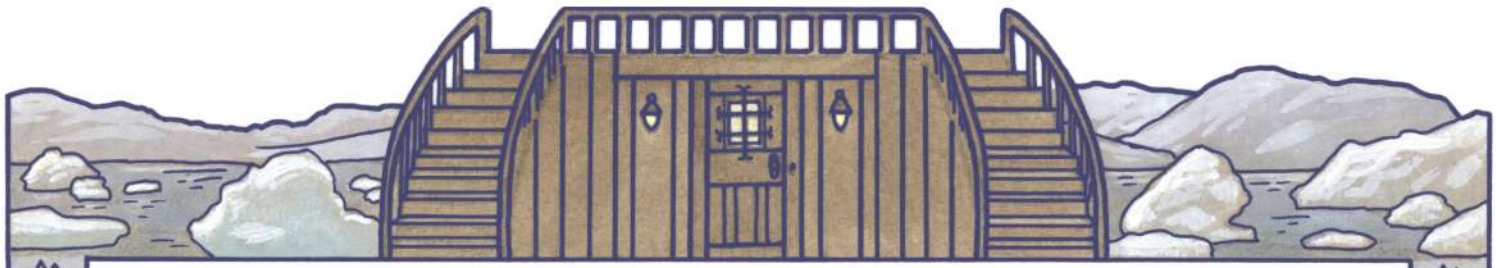
And for this deed, Maledicéreux prayed to Grann Brigitte – and the next doorway from Manse L'Estrange was shown to me...





MONDAY 18 FEBRUARY 999

I APPEARED IN THE CROW'S NEST of the most extraordinary ship I could have ever imagined. The doorway led into the boughs of a giant leafless tree that formed the mast of the vessel and from its great branches hung a billowing white sail. The space I'd arrived in was filled with bowls of coins, chalk symbols and candles – while below its roots wound into the deck of a medieval galley.



Immediately I was hit by the freezing cold. The boat was moored in a rocky bay surrounded by snow-covered mountains. My arrival had disturbed three giant eagles that were now flying off towards the ragged coast – and they in turn had alerted me to the ship's occupants. At the back of the ship on a raised deck, stood a white-bearded man. At the front, a young black woman. Both were wrapped in big fur cloaks, and were readying for going ashore.

"Looks like we have a stowaway, captain," shouted the woman across the decks. "What say you we feed him to those sharks!" she pointed off to where giant grey creatures crowded the shoreline.
"Ah, min huldra," replied the man. "Those are not sharks. Those are harbour seals."
"Then we'll feed him to those!"
"Apologies for my quartermaster," the man said to me. "she is a little kill crazy with strangers." Both were smiling now, which was a relief as I thought they were pirates and ready to slit my throat.

climbing down, they introduced themselves as captain Lars Thorstad and Evangeline, travellers from a lighthouse in Norway on their way to the United states of America. "This ship is called Leiðarstjarna. In your tongue this is named The Lodestar, a star used to navigate."

Evangeline pointed up to a shining lantern hanging over the front of the ship. "This is the Lanthorn. Odin's Eye. It is the light that guides our way." I asked to where exactly and the captain showed me sea charts of how he was tracing the route of his ancestors. The route was taken by the great

Viking Erik Thorvaldsson – Erik the Red of Rogaland – on his journey to Iceland, Greenland and finally to the Americas. "We have just lost a very good houseswain," Thorstad explained. "So happy for you to earn your keep." When I said I had to find the way to the next gateway, the captain gave me a wry smile and said, "The tree was your door in and that will be your door out. But what say we make some adventure first?"

He went on the tell me that this was Tunulliarfik Fjord. In ages past it was Eystribyggð, a settlement at the edge of the known world and long-time home of Erik The Red.
"I would love to seen it with these eyes," he mused.
"We can!" said Evangeline, then to the captain's puzzled look, she added, "Well, if was a snake, it'd a bit you!" Again she pointed up to the pulsing crystal. "Just use the lantern dohickey. To go back to meet your ancestors!"
"Ja, that is possible, but it will diminish its power."
"It's a big, old piece." The girl's face was a maze of mischief. "Just this once?" Her eyes were big as saucers. "Please!"

And so, that is what happened. "Nine hundred and ninety-nine," Thorstad commanded. "Tunulliarfik Fjord." Immediately, the entire boat thrummed with the crystal's energy, there was a sudden sensation of falling, like in an out-of-control elevator. Every single plank of the ship creaked and groaned and then we were transported back to the viking age. Now on the shore a large settlement of houses sat before us and we took a small rowboat and when off to meet the captain's ancestors. It didn't go well.

Turns out that Erik the Red and his people were in open war with each other – as well as with the Inuits of the North. The feud started like this: Erik had four children – Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein and daughter Freydis – and Leif had an infant son whom he treasured beyond all things. His wife had died of some plague or other, leaving him to raise the child on his own. His younger brother Thorstein was recently wed, so they took to caring for the child in the elder's absence.

Then one fateful day at the start of winter, Leif returning from hunting with his father and found his hall ransacked. Rushing to his son's cradle he discovered it empty and sprayed with blood. Wolves lay dead all around and beside them his brother lay as bloodied as the hall. At first Leif thought him dead, but as he watched Thorstein stirred. "You who I entrusted has let harm befall my only son," he cried. In his despair he slew this brother – only to discover the man's wife & the babe safe hiding nearby. This split the family and started the war. Obviously the idea of 'innocent until proven guilty' has yet to catch on here.

Luckily, upon our arrival we were treated like wizards, and a council was called. In this we all spoke about justice and honour – and Evangeline managed to patch things up. For my part in this the lord gave me a golden ring with a ship and kraken design. A Viking treasure for my journeying...

TUESDAY 8 MARCH 433

ANCIENT IRELAND AND BATTLE AWAITED me upon the other side of the doorway. As I stepped through I was surrounded by swordsmen fighting serpent-like creatures upon a torch-lit hillside. Dodging flashing blades and slashing claws, I ducked into a hollow between two standing stones and watched as warriors fought the fearsome monsters.

High above on the hillside the two leaders duelled: a loathsome half-man, half-beast, his head crowned with ram's horns battled a lord on a bone-white horse. At his neck gleamed a golden torc – a twisted necklace marking him (I discovered later) as their High King. This was Lóegaire, son of Niall of the Nine Hostages. Then the great horned beast ripped the King from his saddle and, grabbing him by the throat, basically threw up into his face. Beyond gross!

"You were once a great King," the monster howled, "Fierce and pagan. An emperor of the barbarians. You have dishonoured your ancestors. You have dishonoured this sacred place." I looked the thing right in the eye and realised it was Damfino! He was changed again – now the master of the snake creatures in this ancient place. Then he left the King to die.

Then suddenly a hooded figure loomed over me and shouted something in a foreign tongue. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I helped retrieve the white horse, and went to a thatched roundhouse not far away. There the figure revealed herself to be a woman named Keyrah O'Keylinn (though when she wrote it down it was Ciara O'Caoilfhoinn!). She was not old, but her hair was silver. The most amazing thing was she spoke English. "I come from an Ireland far in the future," she said. "I found my way here through a deserted cottage called Tea Sow-Ra (this was spelled Tigh Samhraidh). I do not know how or why I travelled, but I have found my vocation here." Ciara explained she used to be a nurse in Our Lady's Hospital, Navan (a town that doesn't even exist back in this time), but now she lives here and helps the people as a healer and wise woman.

"Why is everyone fighting?" I asked, so she told me this story: "There is a man here named Maewyn Succat, who we know as St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland. He brings the message of Christianity to these lands, and converted Lóegaire and his family to his faith. The king ordered the building of a church upon the Hill of Tara, the hallowed hill where Irish kings are crowned. This place is half as old as time and the magic that dwells here exists in but a handful of places on the Earth."

"And what were those monsters?"

"Those were the tainted *sídhe*, dark faeriefolk who are displeased at this attack upon the old ways. Their horned lord's poison will gain control of the high king and sacred Tara both."

"Is there no cure?"

"If there is I do not know it, but the druid Baelthan has been training me in the ways of the woods. He may know of a remedy."

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH 433

So the next day we went to see Baelthan, who told us that High King Lóegaire had sworn on Lia Fáil, the Stone of Destiny no less, that he would never renounce his pagan faith – and now the forces of nature on which he swore had rose to kill him. "The wind will leave his lungs," the druid said, "The sun will scorch his skin. And the earth will entomb him." Again I asked if there was a cure. "There is a holy place far older than the chapel. It is Ráith Sídhe and beneath it lies the Well of Destiny, an entrance to the Otherworld. With its waters, he may be cured." So we took the body of the high king deep underground beneath a place called the Mound of Hostages into a domed chamber centred by the sacred well. The

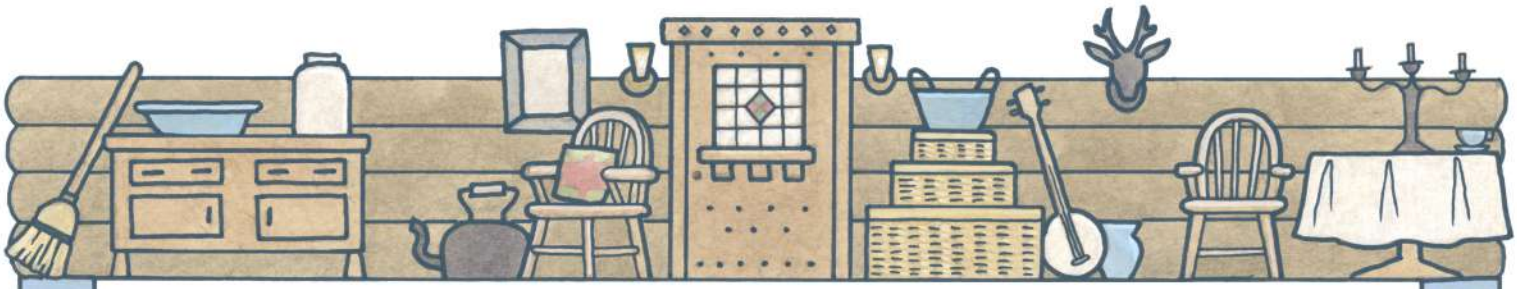
only problem was that the well looked completely dry. Baelthan did not seemed at all worried, explaining that to save a life the ancient powers required that a life be given in its place.
"Whose life?" I asked, but no one answered.
"Our king dies," the druid called out, his voice echoing in the tiny chamber. "Who will come to save him? You?" he pointed to Ciara, then to me. Both of us bowed our heads. Then there was a rustling and from everywhere beetles, ants and insects came scuttling forwards and began to leap into the well. Mice came, too. And spiders. All the smallest, humblest things of the hills and forests. Each gave their life, so that the right-wise ruler should live. Suddenly red liquid burst from the well, flowing across the stone and splashing onto the floor and roots. The druid took up a silver cup of the well water and High King Lóegaire drank. After three choking mouthfuls, he opened his eyes. He was cured.

WEDNESDAY 6 APRIL 433

I stayed with Ciara until the next Dead Moon, when we returned to the gateway beside the half-constructed chapel. "I have seen the church they build here will one day be just ruined pieces in a witch's overgrown garden," Ciara O'Caoilfhoinn said. "This is what time has taught me: that nothing lasts forever. In our world, St Patrick is famed for ridding the snakes from Ireland. Only we shall know the true story." Then the nurse passed me a four-leaf shamrock to take with me on my journeying. "For luck," she said as I disappeared through the next doorway.

FRIDAY 13 APRIL 1934

AN ICY SNOWSTORM AWAITED ME on the other side of the doorway. That and the canadian wilds of saskatchewan in a sacred circle of tents of a tribe of woodland cree. I had also stepped into the middle of a battle between a giant white bear and a young woman armed only with a knife, defending the motionless body of a huntsman lying in the snow.



Defiantly she faced the towering beast, but it was clear that just one slash of its ferocious claws would strike her dead. The woman had piercing eyes, but her most striking feature was a pattern of dark red tattooed lines that ran from her mouth around her chin. "Back, Torngarsuk spirit!" the woman shouted. "I, Kaliska Daystar, forbid your entrance here." Mysteriously the bear could not enter the ring made by the three tipis. "You are far from your hunting grounds. Return to your dark caves in the Inuit North." In answer, the white bear threw back its head and gave out a roar that shook the snow from the trees.

While the woman stood her ground, the awful yell struck me with terror and I ran. At once the monster was after me. Skidding between two of the painted tents, I saw before me a massive lake surrounded by trees. I was trapped! I would also have been eaten right then and there if Kaliska had not leapt between us, shouting incantations. At her words the bear howled in frustration and vanished into thin air. But as it went it reached out one massive paw and ripped something ghostly from her chest.

As we rested, I tried to thank the brave woman, but Kaliska just waved me away, and said in broken English, "Must I save everyone this day?" Stooping down she dragged the man's body into one of the tipis and started a fire. I joined her and heard more of the hunter and this place. I had arrived at the winter camp called Bear-Blade-Bone, named after a magical spear owned by the chieftain of the Cree. Kaliska was a shaman – a healer and guide who walked between worlds and spoke to the spirits. These tents were sacred lodges to the folk heroes of the tribe: Chahkabesh Lodge dedicated to the

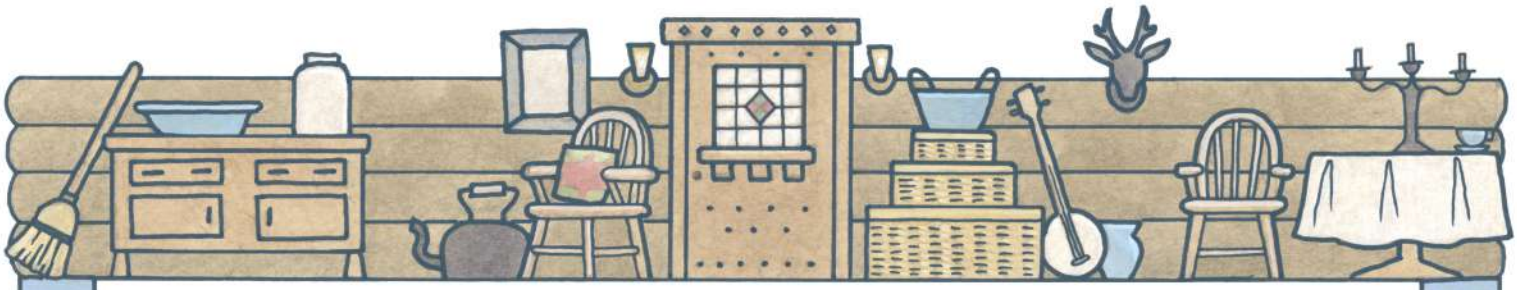
dwarf man in the moon; Ayasi, the monster-slayer and keeper of the world fire; and Wisakedjak, the trickster god. His was the tent I had appeared from. The huntsman's name was William Henry Megquier and he was an Englishman from Cornwall who had travelled to Canada to be a fur trapper, guide and woodsman. He was tall, lean and dressed head to toe in buckskins and furs, though he had lost his horse, equipment and weapons in a blizzard. The spirit bear had been attacking the village – and Megquier had stumbled into the middle of the fight. It took an entire day to nurse the man back to some kind of health.

SUNDAY 15 APRIL 1934

Once Megquier was fit enough to walk, Kaliska took us both to a gathering of the tribe. This was held in a domed tent in the centre of their village by the shore of the giant lake. We sat on skins beside a big fire. Here we met the chieftain, Atahkakohp Starblanket. The hunter knew some Cree so translated as Kaliska told of the attack of Torngarsuk, the spirit bear of the Inuit. "He comes far south to steal the magic of this place," she said. "I have banished him for now, but not without cost. The bear stole my spirit. It is my mana and I will wither away without it. Soon I will be too weak to stand. If the beast returns, I cannot fight him a second time."

Chief Starblanket was angered by this and our trespass on their sacred land. I think he was going to kill us, but Megquier stood up and said that he would go into the Inuit North, rid them of its evil presence and return Kaliska's magic. "I am only of man, not of nature, but I owe a life debt to your shaman and in this way I will repay it."

VII



SUNDAY 13 MAY 1934

So today is the day decided for Megquier to travel into the frozen North, find this white beast's cave and bring back part of its spirit to use to ward these lands from its wrath. But as the chieftain said: "You will do more than that. Bring back a bear's ribcage from the beast's lair. This shall be my throne of protection in this winter camp."

"I will do this," the hunter agreed.

"By Grandmother Fox, you must return... to me," Kaliska said. "And you shall build us a cabin lodge and we will defend this place, these people."

Behind us a sled made of poles stood waiting. It was pulled by dogs (the Cree don't have horses) and was already packed high with provisions. Atop the bundles and furs a spear was strapped, its shaft intricately carved and hung with ribbons and feathers. At one end a bear's head was carved, at the other was a fearsomely sharp bone blade. Megquier said his goodbyes and then we watched him go, pulled out across the icy ground by the dogs – and once he was just a speck on the horizon, Starblanket said, "*If* he returns, if he does this deed and Torngarsuk does not rip out his heart, he will be William Henry Megquier no longer. He will be Tipiskisiw, He Who Walks By Night. He will be Anguekkok, a shaman, too." Kaliska Daystar turned to me. "This night is the dark of the moon," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "What say we work on opening the next doorway for you, little cub?"

MONDAY 8 MAY 2282

I HAVE APPEARED IN JAPAN more than two hundred and fifty years into the future. It is May and there are blossoms everywhere. Blossoms, and ominous black towers that rise from the ocean protecting a cliff-top temple from being overrun by hordes of creatures.

The gateway here was through a bronze arched door, illuminated in orange, that looked like a cross between a submarine hatch and a spaceship airlock. This was one of four, each exactly the same, set around a black honeycomb tiled floor. Spiral stairs went down through a set of floors emerging in a hall of what looked half Japanese tea house and half ocean liner. Beneath the branches of an ancient tree was a black man dressed in robes. Luckily he was asleep or meditating and had his eyes closed or else I would have been spotted. Creeping through the room I went outside into an immaculate garden. But as I stepped through a pair of dog-like stone statues a bell sounded, ringing out a single note. A few seconds later it rang again. It was the slowest, most inoffensive alarm ever! But alarm it <u>was</u> because then I heard the sound of approaching people.

I ran, down the steps, between the plants and flowers, and through a tunnel of orange bamboo arches – and didn't stop until I was far away from the place. Looking back I saw I had arrived inside a black and red temple that sat upon the cliffs. I also saw two other things that were very freaky! Out to sea rising from grey-green ocean rose immense black towers. Each was crested with domed platforms, while above the cloudless sky was filled with at least a dozen moons. If I had any doubt I had travelled to the future, this was shattered when I heard this buzzing sound like a crazy metal heartbeat and out of the sky flew two armoured figures on air-bikes. Running scared I headed along the cliffs but it was clear I couldn't outrun them. Ahead I saw another domed skyscraper – this one on dry land – and many more surrounding the temple in a massive

circle. Outside the perimeter, kept at bay by some giant invisible wall, were thousands of people or creatures or rabid animals – it was hard to tell at that distance. The one thing that was clear as crystal is that they were outside and they were clawing to get in! I was trapped. There was nowhere to go. And at that moment the hova-boards swept down and grabbed me in a metal net. Then they flew straight out to sea towards another of those huge black towers.

We landed inside this warehouse-sized hangar in the great dome at the top of the tower. Here the guards led me into what could only be a prison cell. The room was roughly shaped like a fuselage – again more submarine interior than holding room. There I was questioned by the faceless guards. Where did I come from? How did I get through the perimeter shield? Where was my nightflier? Through the faceplate masks their voices sounded weird, like their suit was translating. I knew all this would not end well, so as soon as they turned to go, I grabbed a pistol from one guard's shoulder holster and blew a hole in the wall to escape.

Racing down low lit corridors, it felt like being inside a plush ocean liner or cargo plane. It was also a maze of interconnected corridors with no rhyme or reason as to which way might lead to an exit. I didn't get far before another alarm sounded – and this one was way louder and more urgent. By complete and utter luck I found a door into the hangar bay where the anti-gravs were stored. Upon the nearest vehicle a large white owl was seated on the windshield, a strange key in its beak. It told me

these towers were sentinels guarding the waystation at Tzu, the place of the last shard of magic in the world. They protected it from the monsters outside. "Why are there so many moons?" I asked, and the owl told me they were starstations where everybody lived. There was no time for more questions as then the guards found me, so I straddled the air-bike, used the key to rev it up – and the chase was on.

skimming out into mid-air the bike dropped like a stone. I had no idea how to operate the flashing controls and could only wail as I plummeted towards the ocean far below. Twisting the handlebars I managed to find the throttle and just before we hit the water, I somehow engaged the anti-gravity function or whatever made this scooter float. The hova picked up speed and soon I was zipping over the waves. Three guards pursued me and it took all my video game skills to dodge and weave to escape. Then the owl was making a great commotion and I saw in the water something green glinting in the sunshine. It was a message in a bottle and it was clear the bird wanted it. But I could not stop. My pursuers were too close! As I sped away the owl glided down and retrieved the bottle and flew off to the temple. But not before telling me of the doorway from this place...

I had to leave behind the temple, the sacred forest and the ominous towers for now. But I would be back to continue on my journey through this tricksy labyrinth soon enough...

TUESDAY 27 JUNE 1995

I'VE ARRIVED AT AN ABANDONED MANSION IN SCOTLAND. It's built high on the cliffs and everywhere echoes the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks far below. This looks like it was once a grand bedroom, but now the carpet and furniture are gone – and what's really scary is that on the bare floorboards is painted a red circle filled with weird, arcane symbols.

Searching around I found the room wasn't entirely empty. There were broken toys, burned-out candles and a school book with the name 'Seathan Macpherson' on the cover. Inside were all kinds of kid's drawings, including one of a child drowning. On the wall was a photograph of a family standing outside the house. At the centre of the group was a young boy (maybe seven or eight). I had just decided this must have been that boy's room when the photograph flew off the wall and smashed on the floorboards. And as I turned I saw the ghostly shadow of something in one of the corners. I panicked and ran!

Outside was a derelict and rotted balcony with a grand staircase into a hallway below. Down I went and out the front door. I didn't stop running until I was well away from the house. The ancient mansion looked even spookier from outside, especially its witch's hat spires. The sun was beginning to set, and dark storm clouds hung overhead, threatening rain. I had no idea what to do next – I certainly didn't want to go back into that haunted house – and that's when I met the photographer Romano Drago. He's from Italy and spends his time travelling all over Europe, taking photographs of what he calls 'dark places'.

"This place is called Ravnsbrae Manor," he told me. "It is a name that is known for many ghost stories." He was here setting up for a test shot, organising the composition of a photograph of the mansion. He knew a little about the place; how the original settlement was destroyed by Viking raiders who massacred everyone. Apparently the witch woman of the

village cursed the warriors and the land, and since that time whoever has lived here have seen sightings of a hideous black beast that roams the grounds. As if that wasn't bad enough, it was about then that the really strange stuff started happening.

As the sun set, Romano took a Polaroid of the house and gave it to me to develop. As the image of the mansion appeared, it looked just as terrifying as in real life, except... in the photograph, one of the top floor windows was illuminated. I showed Romano, but when we both looked up, there was no light in any of the windows visible to the naked eye!

"I bet I know which room that is!" I said, just as it started raining.
"Show me," said Romano.

As the downpour continued, we headed inside, passing into that dark and desolate old house. It didn't look as if anyone had lived here in centuries! Following me, I led Romano as we climbed the stairs and went back into that ghoulish bedroom. Everything was as before – the broken photograph, the book and box – except that there by the window, framed in the last sunlight was the ghost of the boy! Both of us saw him clearly and as we stood not daring to go in, Seathan raised one ethereal hand and pointed out over the grim ocean. Romano immediately took a photo, but I couldn't see anything that he might be pointing out – and then I did! There out to sea was a ghostly ship with a great dragon-headed prow and upon the deck stood a Viking warrior holding a fiery lantern.

But what was the boy trying to tell us? I had no idea, but Romano said, "Some think a photograph captures the soul, so maybe we can help this poor child." Taking the Polaroid we headed outside and down a thin path to a rocky beach. There the photographer put the picture in a little boat and set it on fire. "I do not know what terrible thing fell upon the boy of this house," he said, "but I hope this will set his drowned spirit to rest and end his days in peace."

I said I hoped it would too, but right then there was a terrible howling from the cliff top and looking up we saw the black beast. I couldn't return to the house after that. Instead we went back to Romano's bed and breakfast in nearby Stonehaven, returning only on the dark of the moon to find the next doorway. The boy's spirit may now be at rest, but there is another far older, far darker spirit at the mansion, one set to haunt this place for all eternity. I won't be in any rush to return here. And I still have Romano's menacing Polaroid of Ravnsbrae Manor should I ever feel even a little tempted...

FRIDAY 9 JULY 1526

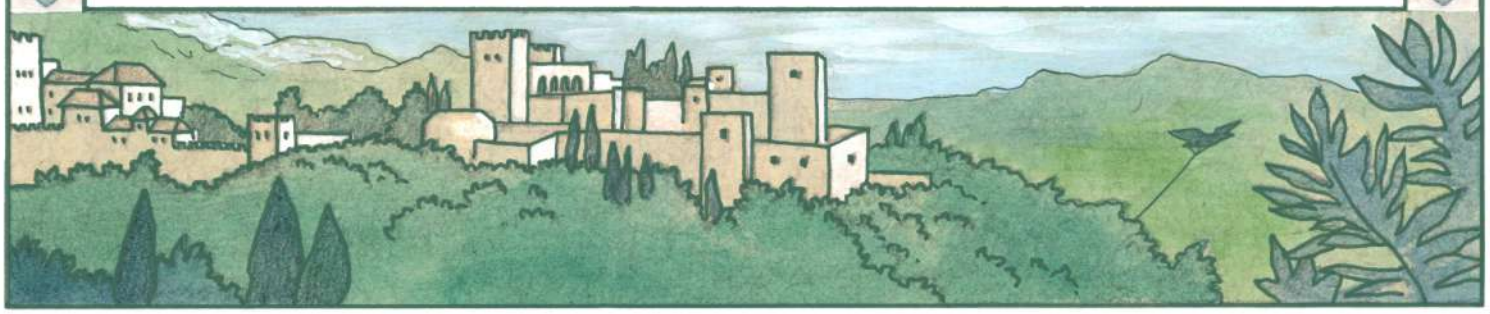
I'VE APPEARED AT THE ALHAMBRA, a Moorish palace in sixteenth century Spain – and it is like stepping into an Arabian adventure! The door led to a courtyard, paved in white stones and centred by a huge pond stocked with golden fish and surrounded by long hedges.

Immediately I was spotted by two sentries wearing turbans and carrying muskets. I fled through an arch into a garden centred by a fountain set on the backs of huge lions. There the guards cornered me and dragged me off to be questioned at gunpoint. No one speaks a word of English, so that wasn't a great success.

Eventually they tired of talking and threw me into a locked room with blue tiled walls and windows sealed with shutters. The roof was cut with star-shaped holes letting in shafts of dusty sunlight. There was no way out. Then I saw I wasn't alone. In the shadows sat a young boy named Jabir al-Zuhayr (I managed to understand that much!), but why he had been imprisoned I couldn't figure out.

That evening we were visited by a bespectacled old woman called Luna Izquierdo who could speak English. She told us all about the Alhambra and that she was a custodian and keyholder. Well, that's not exactly true. What she actually said was: "I am claviger of the Tenth Door, the gateway of Eish al Kamar." She also said that the King of all Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, Carlos Quinto, and his bride, Isabel of Portugal, were staying at the palace for their honeymoon.

"Tomorrow to celebrate the couple's eternal happiness, there is to be a grand circus. The palace will be filled with courtesans and dignitaries – but also those who wish to kill such a foreigner. For he is from the family who have exiled the Moors, financed the voyages of Christopher

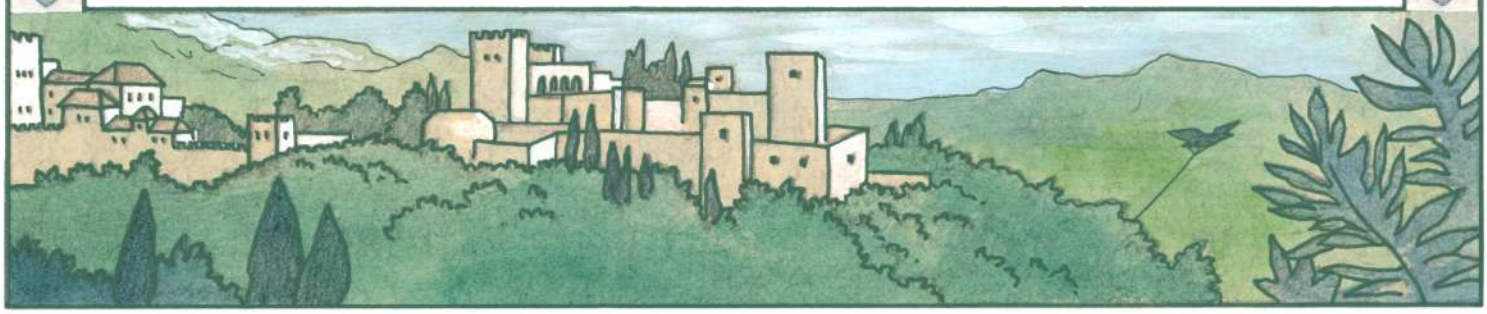


Columbus and masterminded the Spanish Inquisition." It all sounded very grim. She told me Jabir's story, too. How he was son of one of the architects who built this palace centuries ago. How he also fell through to this time and was arrested as a thief. "He says he was seeking, not stealing," Luna said. But seeking for what?

As the keyholder left, she said: "This is the Room of Dreams, so maybe in your sleeping, you will find what you seek."

That night I did indeed dream. I was in a room filled with a great brass bed and many objects. Nearest to me was a golden idol, but when I tried to touch it my fingers passed straight through. Then, I was standing in an amusement park all on fire. An owl was sitting on a fortune teller's tent with flames licking at its white feathers. "Our journeys to dreamland cannot be shared. For to walk within is to walk alone. And remember, the only way out is in."
"How do I escape?" I asked.
"You must learn to fly, stranger," the bird replied, then disappeared into the night.
Which sounded totally unhelpful. Or so I thought...

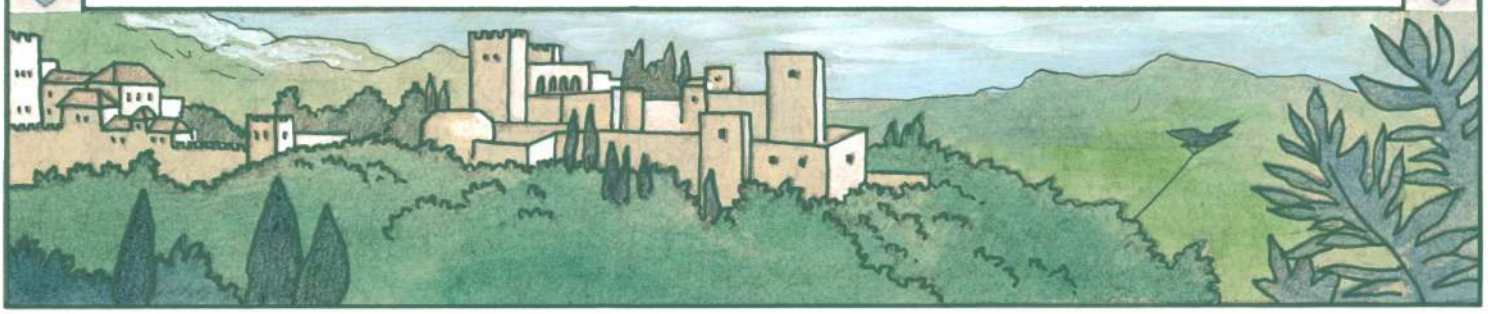
SATURDAY 10 JULY 1526
Very early the guards woke us and dragged us to the throne room of the highest tower. There the commander or whoever he was shouted at us for ages. Judging by the giant axe he waved about, I think he was going to chop



our hands off! Suddenly hundreds of trumpets sounded outside and everyone rushed to the windows to see what was happening. In that moment Jabir shouted "Alfarar!" and I did not need to speak Arabic to know he was telling me to run. Being the architect's son he knew where to go. He led us to a hidden door in the back of the audience chamber, then up a narrow winding staircase and out onto the battlements.

From there the whole panorama of the city and countryside – all the mountains and green valleys, the citadel and domed cathedrals – was stretched out below us. And through the streets of the city a spectacular parade was approaching the palace. Looking up I saw the entire sky was filled with magnificent black and white birds, each one a giant kite flying above the castle. It was the arrival of the circus that Luna had mentioned. But we had no time to admire the procession, for the guards were right behind us. Quick as a flash, Jabir and I leapt off the tower and onto the back of the nearest kites. The owl was right. To escape we did learn how to fly!

And in a month's time, those kites will be the way we return, headed for the next spell-bound doorway.



THURSDAY 24 AUGUST 1911

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I'VE spent the summer travelling America as a magician's assistant! This crazy adventure began months ago in May, and since arriving I have been kidnapped, escaped from a burning amusement park and lived a life on the road in a Gothic hearse!

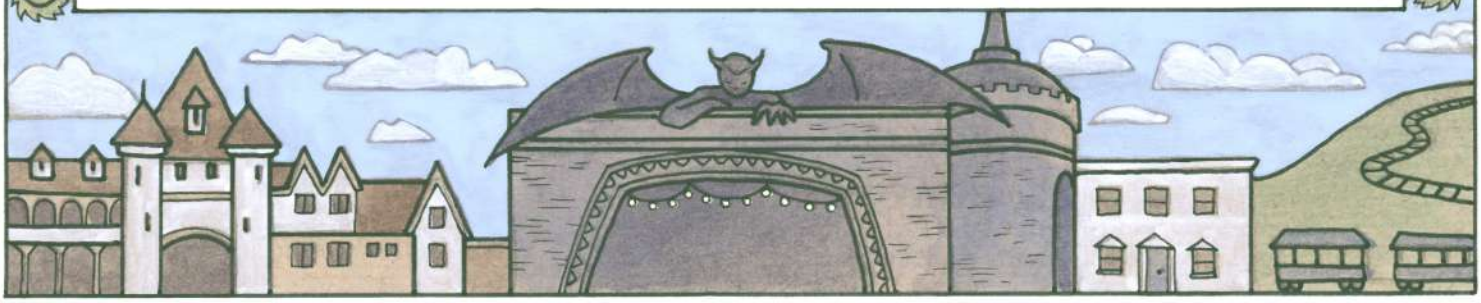
SATURDAY 27 MAY 1911

It all started after I arrived in the small study of a New York city mansion overlooking Central Park. On the desk were letters signed by somebody named Jedediah E. Trevillian. He must be extremely rich to own a big house like this on Fifth Avenue. Then I heard voices and peeked out to see three people approaching. It was a young couple and a very tall man dressed like a ringmaster.

"Well, Betsy... Mister Bambino..." the circus master was saying, "I must say you do live in a quite remarkable building."
"Forget the fancy furnishings, Pandoro," said the young man. "Can you get us inside Dreamland?"
"As head devil on the Hell Gate boat tour – easy as pie!"
"We want a little fire. Nothing nuts. Just enough to scare up our protection money. We don't want to burn the place to the ground or nothing."
"Indeed!" Pandoro said in pantomime shock. "That would be unthinkable."

I was trapped with no way out, except jumping from the second storey windows. They discovered me hiding under the desk, and immediately started saying how I was a witness and there was no time to sort it out. So Bambino dragged me downstairs and threw me in the trunk of his car. Intending to deal with me later, no doubt.

Coney Island's Dreamland was a bumpy hour's ride away, a fantasy land of electric lights, carousels, circus tents and attractions, centred by a white



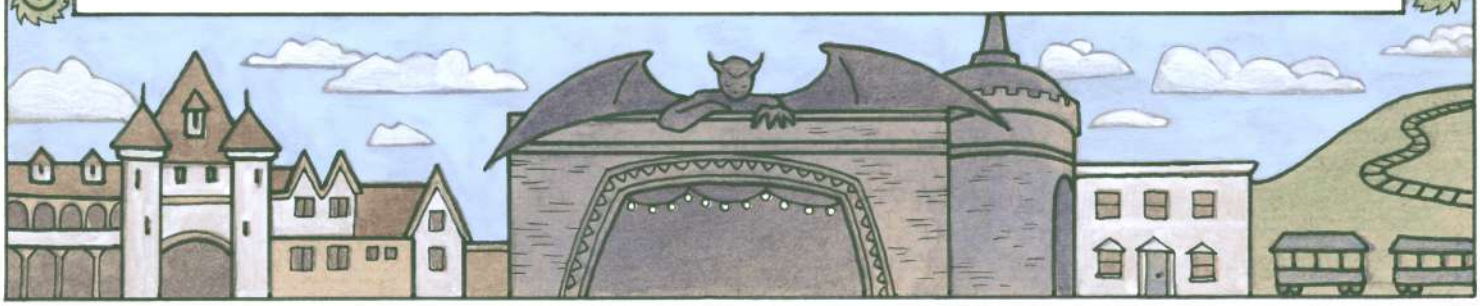
observation tower. There were all kinds of shows that transported visitors to other times and places and exhibitions from the far, far future (well, how they *thought* the future would look).

The car was parked beside an attraction called TRANSPORTATION OF TOMORROW. There were lots of weird vehicles, but none was stranger than a midnight-black funeral car, smothered with carved angels and topped by a big cross. The sign next to it read: "La Llorona." Right next door was the Hell Gate ride, and Bambino, Betsy and Pandoro were trying to get a blaze started. They weren't having much luck.

"Oh, there's never a fire breathing mermaid around when you need one," I heard Pandoro mutter, bitterly.

While they were distracted, I escaped, and the first place I saw to hide was this foreboding sideshow tent. Above the doorway hung a sign covered in red splattered crossbones that read: BLOOD & BONES. From inside came the sounds of applause as two young magicians took to the stage.

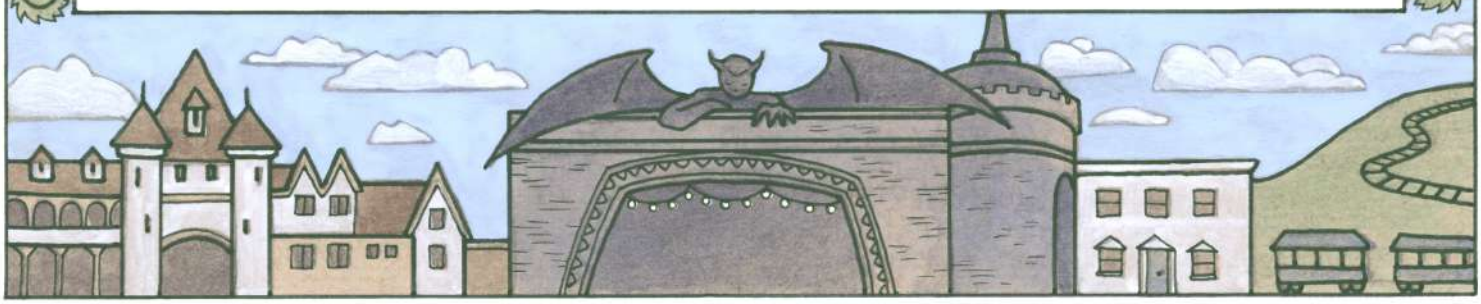
"I am Miss Drusilla Blood, the Mistress of the Macabre," said a ginger-haired woman, then indicating a man with a the velvet jacket and moustache, added, "and this is Mister Claude Bones, the Master of Mystery." On the stage was just a giant suitcase, set on a glass table. "And to open our evening's chilling performance, may we request a volunteer from the–".

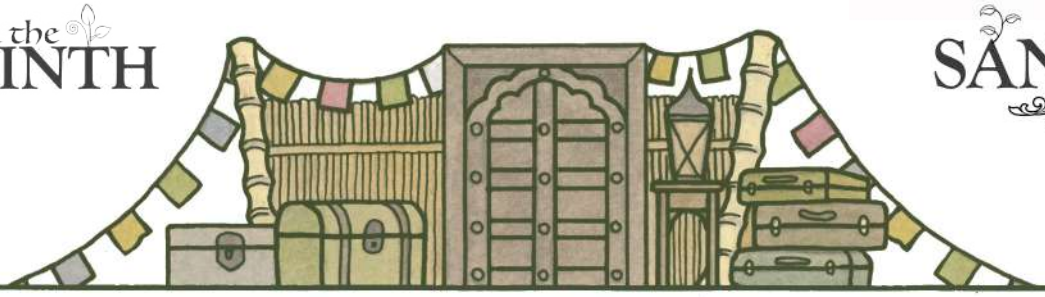


I had only a few moments before being caught so I jumped into the air shouting, "Me! Pick me!" I made such a fuss, they had no choice really. And that's how I escaped, by disappearing into the second trunk of the night. This one had a trapdoor in the bottom and dumped me in a heap under the stage. There, after the show, I tried to warn Blood & Bones about the fire, but by then it was too late. Already the whole of Dreamland was ablaze. Pushing past panicked people and wild animals, we found ourselves trapped by the flames. We couldn't get out! But then Claude saw the black hearse and we used it to escape and race back towards Manhattan.

THURSDAY 24 AUGUST 1911

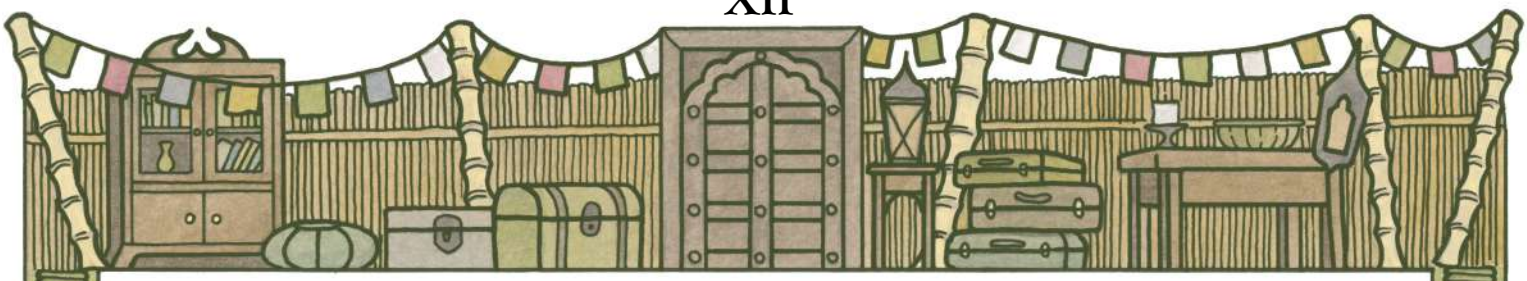
I have returned to New York now after three months on the road with Blood & Bones. At Niagara Falls I saw a stunt pilot doing vertical dives through the mists of the Horseshoe Falls. And in Washington DC we performed for the President at the White House at an event where this aeronaut came sailing over the trees and landed on the lawn in his new flying machine, The Moth. Drew wore a cloak made up of the American flag – but here and now it only has 46 stars on it. I wonder what the missing four are? I am sad to leave Drew & Claude, but it's the Dead Moon, so off again through to more adventures...





WEDNESDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 1959

A JUNGLE ADVENTURE AWAITED ME through the next door of the labyrinth. I emerged into a bamboo treehouse, once a Buddhist sanctuary, but now the leafy lodgings of a Russian from Minsk, here to visit the magnificent Cambodian temples.

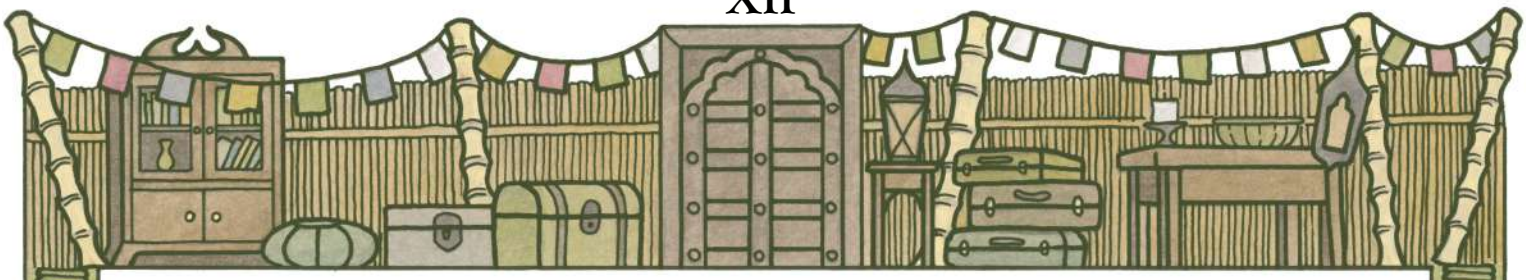


I had arrived at night in the middle of a monsoon. Torrential rain beat upon the iron panelled roof, and the interior was dark, lit by sweet-smelling candles burning in copper bowls. At the far end of the room the carved stone god of this treetop shrine sat atop an altar filled with offerings. In the shadows beneath rows of brightly coloured flags sat this stocky man in a dark greatcoat. His wild hair and beard framed his ruddy face, his eyes piercing blue. He looked quite scary, but he introduced himself as Mr. Sharky (his real name is Ilari Lazarev, but he says that the East Asians have a hard time saying that). Fortunately his English is good, and he seems to know all about why stranger children might just turn up here.

That first night we ate steamed rice and pork, sitting on cushions around the low hexagonal table and talked until midnight. Mr. Sharky came here to visit the fabled Angkor Wat, toured all around the Tonlé Sap Lake, and had now discovered this lost city in the jungles near Kampong Phluk. I have never heard of any of these places, but the way he talks about them they all sounded amazing. And the next morning, I discovered just how fantastic they were for myself.

THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 1959

The treehouse sits in the branches of an ancient Banyan tree and the only way down is a long rope ladder that descends the mighty trunk. The tree itself is enormous, its roots growing right through the walls of the stone ruins. Stepping through into the temple was like discovering a fabled lost world, one that had been completely swallowed by the jungle.

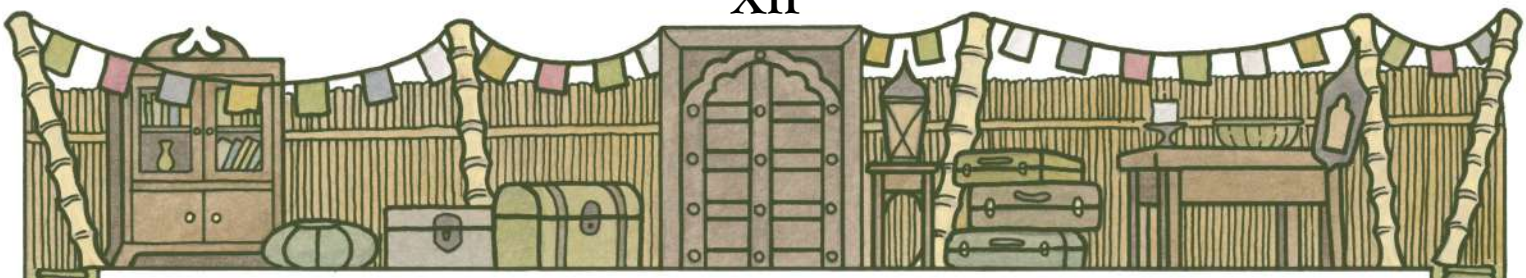


As we went Mr. Sharky explained how he was an archaeologist, tourist, and soldier – and seeker of this hidden temple which he called *Nagara*, the holy city. I asked why anyone would build such a place in the middle of nowhere, and he replied: "This is not nowhere. It is very much somewhere. It is sacred and very special. The entire sanctuary is a masterpiece! But it is one that no one was ever meant to view."

He went on to explain that the vast temple was built in the twelfth century, part of an entire Cambodian empire that is now no more. He showed me a carved image of Bali Maharaja, the king of the demons, churning an ocean of milk. Apparently, all the gods and devils combined forces to create the liquid that would become the elixir of life.

"These inscriptions are filled with prophecies and one of these speaks that there will one day be a gateway from these ruins to a hidden room, so I must wait for that. Guard, protect and wait." I told him I was looking for a doorway too, but he said the way for me and the way for him were different paths. "This is a door to the centre of the labyrinth," he explained. "Yours is a path onwards. Outwards. Mine is a path within."

Mr. Sharky also said that in this time and place, the country was on the brink of a great civil war. He warned me to stay on the paths, saying that the jungle was home to things far more dangerous than wild beasts. My mind conjured all sorts of monsters, but what eventually emerged was beyond even my wild imaginings...

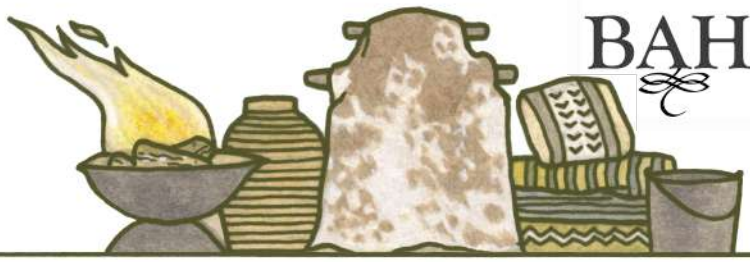


WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 1959

It was on the night of the full moon that the enemy came. I'd been living with Mr. Sharky for a few weeks and every day we went out exploring the ruins. I'd even got used to the rain, snakes and enormous venomous spiders (well, maybe not the spiders!) Then one day soldiers came out of the jungle and took over the temple. They were guerrillas, mercenaries trying to overthrow the king and his government – or so they appeared. In their midst was a face I recognised: it was Damfino, the man from the rectory. He was leading them, but here and now he appeared as a many-armed demon.

We tried to run, to hide deep inside the temples, but they hunted us like dogs and finally we were cornered. Damfino had his terrible wand clutched in one of his four arms. In the struggle the Russian explorer tried to grab it from him shouting that I must get away and escape, that he would hold the huntsmen as long as he could.

But then the master of the Wild Hunt threw him aside and blasted me. And once more I was sent to who-knows-where in this crazy labyrinth...



BAH-HAS-TKIH

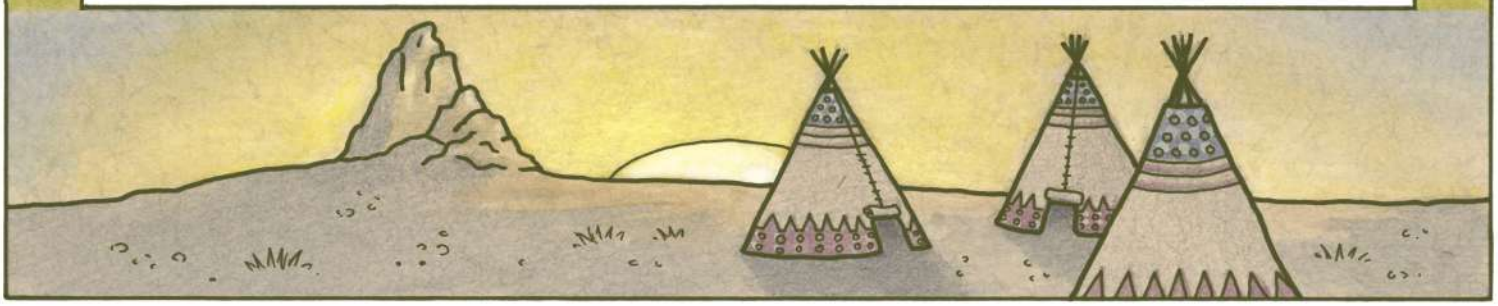
DEAD OF THE MOON: NOW

THE FINAL ROOM IN THE LABYRINTH is the strangest yet; a magical place that can travel in space and time. It's a Navajo tipi occupied by an ancient shape-shifting shaman who says he is going to bring me home.

When I arrived I stepped through a cowskin flap and into a conical space lit by a roaring fire, set within an iron brazier. Its fragrant smoke filled the tent, drifting silently upwards through a hole in the roof. Black poles supported the canvas, while the woven floor covering was strewn with skins and patterned blankets. For a long time there was only the crackle of the logs and the shadows – and then outside came the sound of a flute. I followed the music and found that the tipi was one of three set around a larger fire, dwarfed by a tall mountain. All around was a perfect starry night above a barren desert landscape.

A black haired Native American was seated by the fire. "I am Mágí'łigaii," he said when I approached. The strange name sounded like 'maa-jee-lee-guy". "And I ask you: Why are you here? This was not your journey." I didn't know what to say to that, so instead I asked where I was. "Bah-has-Tkih is a sacred space," the shaman replied, "set here in the heart of the Diné ancestral lands. You know us as Navajo and this place as Monument Valley. This place is Arizona in North America." Then I knew where I was.

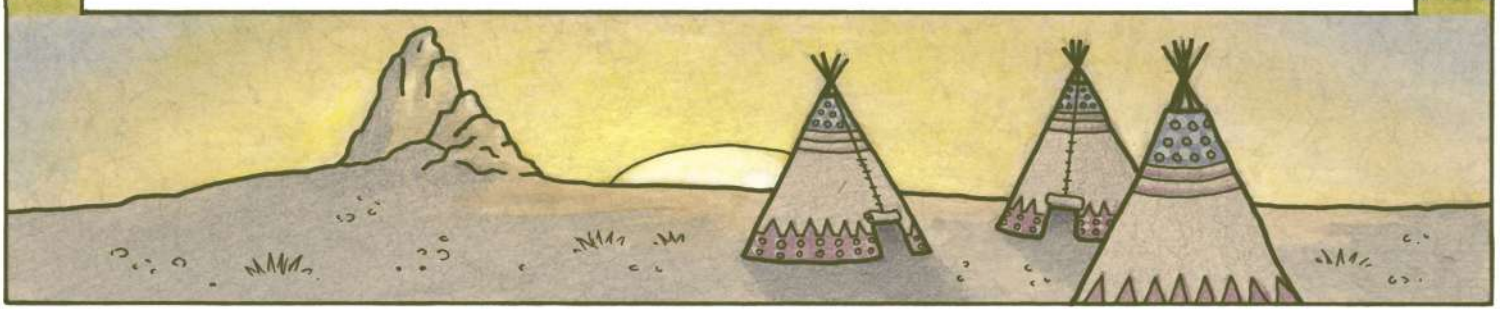
"See the sacred island mountain?" Mágí'łigaii pointed up to the stone sentinel that overshadowed the encampment. "That is Agathla Peak. I and my brothers – Mágí'łizhiní and Mágí'łigaii – watch and guard this place." In the smoke from the fire, hazy against the purple peaks beyond, I saw the swirling shapes of creatures and recognised them as all the animals that helped me along the trail of my journey. I saw birds and beasts, bugs and bunnies – every one a companion on my road leading to the last and final place in the spiralling pathway.



XIII

"Though you are not the one who was meant to enter the labyrinth, your bravery and ingenuity has served you well. For this, I give you a gift." And the shaman handed me a leather pouch decorated with beads and feathers. "This is a sacred medicine bag. You must fill it with the objects you have collected on your journey. In the gardens of The Old Rectory you found a mouse keyring. The hag stone bracelet you retrieved from the Welsh watchtower. The poster came all the way from New Orleans. From the Vikings came the gift of the Kraken ring. From the Cree, the bear paw necklace. This stone statue you have carried from lost Cambodian temples, while luck travelled with you as this Irish four-leaf shamrock. From the future you brought an air-bike ignition key. From the haunted shell of Ravnsbrae Manor, the photographer's Polaroid. This ticket admitted you to the Blood & Bones Magic Show, while this swan's feather is a memory of your escape from the Alhambra Palace."

As he spoke about each object, I placed them into the beaded bag. "But most importantly is this lock of hair, from the head of the monster who bound you into this perilous journey. This will prove the most powerful of all the objects in the final battle to come."
"Battle?" I asked.
"With the magic of these totems you can move moons, open all doors, step into all rooms. But its power can be used but once. And you are not the one who will use it. That is the task for the one who should be standing here."
It was then that I began to understand what I must do. "From the centre, the path leads out," Mági'tigaii continued. "You must unwind the labyrinth's path. You must return. It is time."

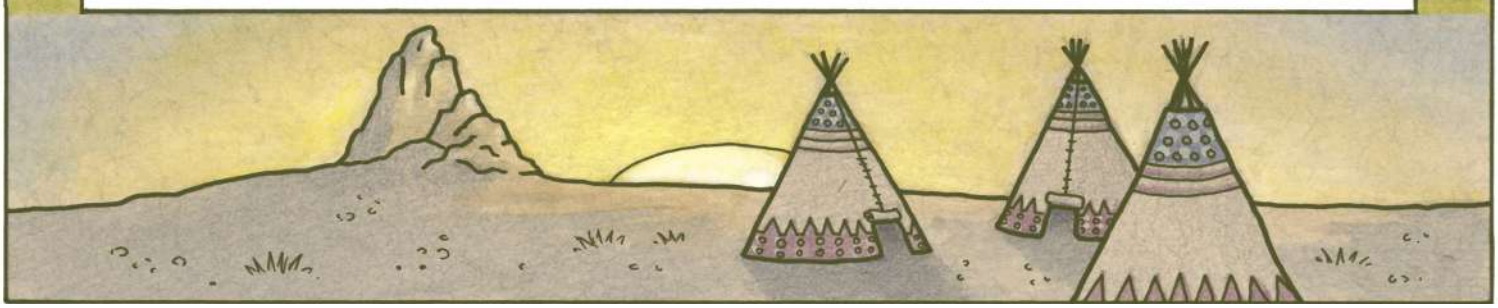


XIII

The shaman stood and led me into the tipi and we travelled back through the last magical places on earth. Through all those times and places. All those moons, rooms and doors. Back to where it all began...

I thought I was writing this final letter to send to you – just like all the others – but now as I reach the end, I realise I am not. What the shaman said to me is true: this was not my journey, but yours. I was never supposed to fall into that impossible, unnatural nothingness between the stars of No. 51 Newton Green. That was supposed to be you. My quest was to gather these objects and send you my stories – to get you ready to play your part and do what you were supposed to do in the beginning. To face your fear – and defeat the terrors you see there.

I know now that no raven can deliver this very last letter from the labyrinth. I must do that myself. And when I do, when I arrive and hand you the medicine bag, you'll be ready to return to the place where this whole crazy adventure first started...



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DEAD OF THE MOON (MIDNIGHT)
THE WEREHOUSE
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
NOW

THIS TIME IT WASN'T EVER going to be just a game. The double dare was real. *Real* real. As were the terrors within The Werehouse. But now you had the full story. You had the medicine bag and the objects it contained. Now you were ready. It was with a sense of grim determination that you set out from your house on the night of the Dead Moon. Most of the kids didn't have the guts to complete the dare, but that wasn't an option for you now. Back before you would gladly have let anyone take you place, but now you knew what you must do. To set things right. For on that thirteenth dark of the moon, no letter arrived in the beak of the dark messenger. In its place, a Navajo tipi had arrived, carrying Sam and some Native Americans inside it. And that kinda changed everything…

As before, at the time of the dark of the moon all the kids gathered at the thatched pub. As before, the night was cold and full with the threat of rainstorms. As midnight approached, everyone made their way to the derelict and deserted house, the sense of the unknown obvious in the nervous chatter. To not seem suspicious you tried to think how you had acted before, but your silence was taken as apprehension and fear. It also appeared perfectly natural to those around you. No one suspected you had walked this road previously. Then the sign was before you: DANGEROUS BUILDING. KEEP OUT. How different those words read now.

Pushing aside the thorns, brambles and rusted gate, you dropped into the garden and strode towards the boarded and broken house. Before the building had seemed like some great lurking beast, and now it felt doubly monstrous. Reaching the fallen stone, you turned and gave a small wave back to everyone – but mainly to Sam. Then came the waiting for midnight. Until the darkness would swarm, the night would crack open, and then…

"Stone! Stone! O Devil's Stone!
I Dare To Touch The Devil's Stone–!"

The carrion wings enclosed the world. The nightmarish shark's mouth between worlds split open. But this time you didn't run or scream. This time, you stepped right on through…

I

FIRST MOON: HUNTER'S MOON (OF MAN)
THE OLD RECTORY
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER 1852 | 00:01:37

UPON THE OTHER SIDE OF the night-framed doorway the Old Rectory house and garden stood waiting. Now it was you, not Sam standing upon the red brick path near the gate, before the chaotic mess of flames and the figures. Through the smoke the fanged master of the Wild Hunt faced the Reverend Nathaniel Grey, while behind the teenager is dragged to his doom.

"In the name of the Ghûl," the horned man was shouting, "I, Damfino, master of the Wild Hunt, claim this sacred place. Here we shall build our new lair." Before the white haired preacher can reply, you are already speaking, shouting into the still night air. "Never! Not while I am drawing breath!"

Damfino whirls around, and fixes you with his venomous gaze. At his feet the two vicious hounds start to growl.

"What pitiful whelp is this?" Damfino spits. "Who dares to defy me?"
You almost fail yourself then. Almost turn and run like before. But there in your mind are Sam's words: "I cannot get back to the garden, but you can." The handing over of the medicine bag and the twelve other objects collected within the journeying of the labyrinth. Of stepping inside that painted tent and moving through time and space to the exact moment where this whole crazy adventure had begun all those moons ago. "You spoke the words. 'Enter this house those who dare'. Did you think those words were hollow? Those who enter here must double and triple dare. Dare to dream. Dare to do. And yes, even dare to die."

The front door the rectory opens and out steps Tobias Crowe the gardener, and at the man's appearance Damfino offers his snide remarks.

"I will not let this sacred place fall into your foul hands."
"How so?" asks Damfino. "When we are so many and you but…" He pauses, glancing to you and then back to the house. "Two?" He asks the night. "Hold him! Little Crowe, do you really think you can dare defy me?"
"Not I. The labyrinth has sent us one who will be set that task."
Damfino shrugs, as if these last words are of no consequence whatsoever. Instead of replying, he pulls from his coat the crystal tipped wand and everyone draws back.

"This place in ancient times was known as Witchcross Mede," he says. "This place's magic is rooted in rock. But while the Maje are forbidden to use its power, I am not so sworn." Spinning on his heels, he stabs out with the wand and points it straight at you.

"Stranger!" Tobias shouts. "Find the guardian of the labyrinth and save the shadowstone!"

"I already have," you mutter under your breath.

From the wand's molten tip a shaft of light erupts, but not one shred of the wildfire touches you. Instead you hold up the medicine bag containing all those precious objects mentioned by Sam in all those many letters. The blaze hits the small pouch and surrounds it with brilliant silver light. So bright that it blinds. But then the light is thrown back at its creator and Damfino is consumed by its brilliance and sent spiralling off who knows where inside the labyrinth. That same fire leaps through the master's minions, great sheets of billowing flame that set fire to the hedges, the building and the gaunt-faced figures. And when the shimmering wave returns, you are blasted back through the web between worlds...

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DEAD OF THE MOON (MIDNIGHT)
THE WEREHOUSE
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
NOW

WHEN YOU AWAKEN YOU ARE lying in the dirt and weeds of the ruined garden with all the kids standing around you. In one fist you hold the charred and ruined medicine bag. And every bone in your body feels like it has suffered the most brutal of beating. Still, that is not what fills your mind. It is the sounds of the children cheering.

You are the first and only kid to enter that dark house and dangerous garden and come out. And in the eyes of every one of the children that surround you, this makes you extraordinary…

MARIE LAVEAU
MIDNIGHT
TONIGHT!
BLOOD & BONES
ADMIT ONE

The Fantasy Mail Adventure from Britain's Most Extraordinary Home

It was supposed to be just a game. A bit of scary fun. A lark. Every kid in the town knew the place as The Werehouse. They also knew the terrifying double dare linked to it; if you entered on the night of the dark of the moon and placed your hand upon the cursed stone; if you spoke the rhyme and walked into the empty house; if you did all these things, then you would never been seen again...

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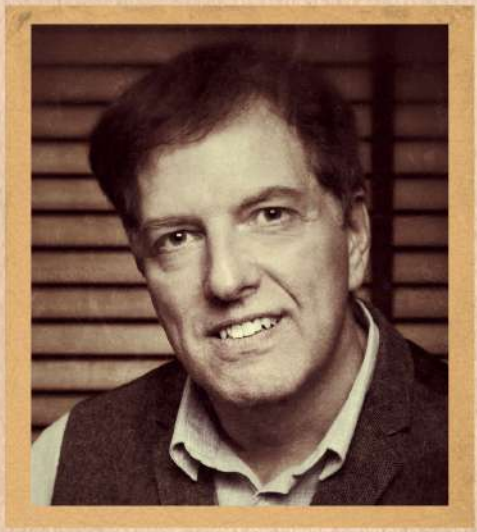

JOHN TARROW is a novelist, poet, storyteller and award-winning writer. His fascination with folk and faerie tales has taken him on journeys around the world, gathering threads of story and legend to weave into exciting new mythologies.

His collaboration with Talliston House & Gardens brings together its thirteen rooms in a fantasy mail adventure set inside "Britain's Most Extraordinary Home."

TARROW.CO.UK

REBECCA SOLOW is a freelance illustrator of children's books, young adult book covers and magazine stories, with clients ranging from large publishers to published authors. She enjoys bringing all sorts of stories into visual life, and has a special interest in folk tales.

She received both her BFA and MFA in Illustration from the Hartford Art School and primarily paints traditionally in mixed media.

REBECCASOLOW.COM

STONE! STONE! THE DEVIL'S STONE
WILL YOU TOUCH THE DEVIL'S STONE?
ENTER THIS HOUSE THOSE WHO DARE
WHEN THE MOON IS DARK: BUT, WARE!
SPEAK THE CURSE AND ENTER WITHIN ~
THEN ALL YOUR NIGHTMARES WILL BEGIN.

★★★★★

"a remarkable fantasy world"

THE TIMES

Letters from the LABYRINTH

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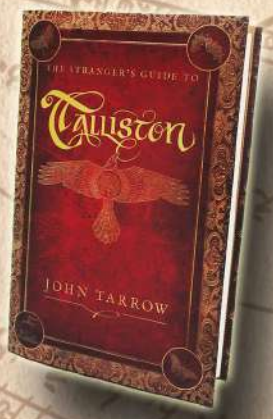

Based On the Worlds From

THE STRANGER'S GUIDE TO TALLISTON

TALLISTON.COM