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# The Map to Everywhere

Written by

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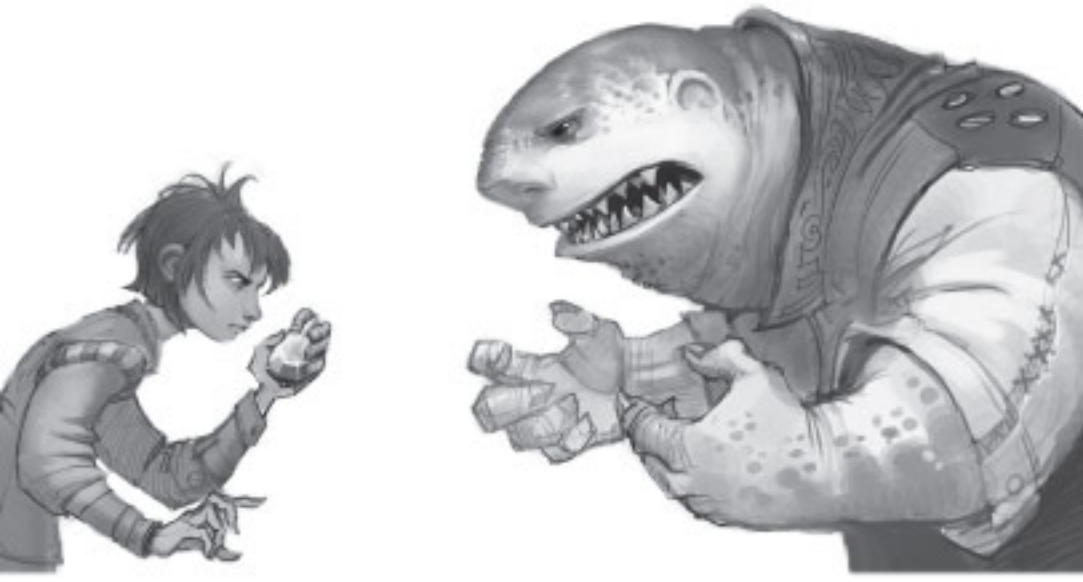
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# CHAPTER 1
## The Ghost of Gutterleak Way

Fin crouched behind a rack of bootleg flavors, trying hard to ignore the taste of rat fur and broccoli juice seeping from the grungy bottles. No more than ten minutes before, the owner of the dirty little shop, a nasty, gray-scaled old monster called Sharktooth, had let him in for a quick browse before closing time, then promptly forgotten he existed.

Plenty of people planned for a break-in, Fin thought

with a smirk. Not enough planned for a break-*out*.

Fin kept low as the old swindler locked the shop door—after all, he was forgettable, not invisible—and watched Sharktooth lumber into the next room to go to bed. Then he waited while darkness fell in earnest over the twisted streets of the Khaznot Quay, until the high winds that constantly shrieked down from the mountain to the bay reached their evening pitch.

Finally, it was time to act.

Uncurling himself cautiously, Fin rubbed the feeling back into his legs, then crept past shelves filled with all sorts of secondhand junk to the old display case behind the counter. His prize stood out beneath the smeared glass: a golden gemerald brooch, bright and shiny as the sun. He licked his lips in anticipation.

With one careful finger, Fin found the hidden wires behind the display doors and followed them back to the traps set to protect them: a single handcatcher and a few acid squirts. Standard stuff—disarming these barely counted as practice.

"Pretty soggy, Sharktooth," Fin muttered under his breath as he popped the traps loose and jimmied the lock. "At least give me a workout next time." He grinned as he gripped the handle of the display doors. He'd be in and out before the nasty bafter even hit his pillow.

That thought vanished the moment he pulled the doors open and they let out a screech so loud it practically

shredded the air. Fin shuddered. The perfect crime, spoiled by a rusty hinge!

Old Sharktooth burst from his bedroom. "Who's dyin' tonight?" he bellowed, brandishing a heavy cane.

"Shanks!" Fin shouted. He snatched the brooch. Sharktooth lunged. But a good thief moved on instinct, and Fin was the best. The cane whipped through the air just as he leapt to the counter. It smashed into the display, sending shards of glass scattering everywhere.

For a long moment, boy and beast stared at each other, waiting to see who would make the first move. Fin crouched a little, arms out, balanced and braced to run. Sharktooth studied him with eyes like black pits, double rows of jagged teeth gnashing below.

Then, with a growl, Sharktooth charged. Fin faked left, then jumped to the floor and beat feet for the exit. "Too slow!" he yelped as the old monster clattered after him, knocking busted earflutes from their shelves and sending rusty sun-funnels crashing to the ground as he went.

Fin didn't look back. He slammed the door open and burst into the darkness outside. Sharktooth's shop crouched in a short tunnel formed where two buildings had apparently decided to fall into the same alley at the exact same time; there were only two ways out. Fin chose one at random and took off.

"You little skuzzleweed!" Sharktooth cried, charging out after him.

Their footfalls clattered in rhythm against the background wail of the wind. Fin gulped. He knew he could outrace most folks; it came with being chased a lot. But a body didn't get to Sharktooth's level of sleazy without being chased a good bit itself. It was only a matter of time before Fin would go from shark bait to shark chow.

Fortunately, he had a plan for occasions like this. After all, being forgettable had its advantages for a thief. Folks' memories didn't fade quite so quickly when they caught him doing something like, oh, pilfering jewelry from their locked display cases. But one thing was sure in Fin's life: They *did* fade.

He ducked onto a side street and flattened himself immediately into the nearest doorway. A moment later, Sharktooth careered around the corner, roaring past Fin's hiding place. But after a few feet without sign of his quarry, he slowed to a stop, sniffing the air.

Adopting his most casual stance, Fin slipped up behind Sharktooth and tugged on the swindler's sleeve. "You looking for that girl who just came tearing through here, jangling a necklace?"

Sharktooth whipped toward him. "What? A girl? No…" He trailed off. One hand stroked his rough-scaled chin in thought. The high winds whistled overhead, making the lamplight dance in his jet-black eyes. "Coulda sworn it was a boy.… Got a good look at 'im… but now I think of it, can't quite recall.…"

Fin shrugged, sliding into his routine. "Well, it was a girl that came through here. Dark reddish hair, little shorter than me?"

Sharktooth tilted his head. "Dark hair, yeah, that rings a bell. And she *was* short…."

"That's the one!" Fin announced. "Tore through here like a mountain gust, shot right down that alley." He pointed to the row of buildings across from him. "Headed to the Wharfway Warrens, by my reckon."

Sharktooth nodded. "Thanks, kid." A cruel sneer curled back up his lip. "Now, don't count on ever seeing her again," he added menacingly. His cane whipped the night air as he trotted off in the direction Fin had pointed.

"Oh, I won't," Fin chuckled when Sharktooth was out of earshot. He waited a few minutes, until he was more than certain he'd been entirely forgotten. Then he pulled his hand from his pocket. Alongside the gleaming gemerald brooch sat the velvet coin purse he'd lifted from Sharktooth's belt just a moment before.

He ran a thumb over the surface of the brooch. Yet another successful caper for the Master Thief of the Khaznot Quay. He whistled as he sauntered up the street, counting the coins in his newly acquired purse. Turned out Sharktooth had made quite the haul today!

When Fin reached the Nosebleed Heights, where the poor folks' houses clung to the steepest parts of the mountain, he took the sharpest turns down the sheerest lanes until

he came to the soggy little bystreet called Gutterleak Way. His destination was the seventeenth house on the right: a rickety, narrow little place hunkered on the edge of a cliff. Atop its two usable stories, a high attic tower swayed in the wind, forever threatening to topple into the bay below.

Fin's steps slowed and his whistling trailed off. No one had left the light on for him, nor the front door unlocked. But it wasn't like he'd expected anything different. This was the only home he'd known since leaving the Orphan Preserve five years ago, when he was barely seven, but no one else knew it. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Parsnickle, who lived there, too.

But he didn't hold it against them.

With the ease of many years of practice, he jumped from the stoop to the storm gutter and shimmied his way along it until he reached the kitchen window. Fin always made sure to keep this one oiled properly, and it slid open without a sound. And just inside sat the old bread tin where the Parsnickles kept their coin.

Carefully, he pried the lid off and looked inside. Then he shook his head. Empty. The Parsnickles were too generous; if he let them, they'd give every last drillet to keep a stranger from missing a meal, and would go hungry themselves for having done it.

Fin tipped the contents of his new purse into the can, then placed the brooch on top. Mrs. Parsnickle had pawned it that very morning to Sharktooth, at a price that was a

rip-off even by the swindler's normal standard. Then she'd turned right around and used the money to buy shoes for the six-and-unders at the Orphan Preserve.

Fin didn't feel bad about stealing it back, not for a second. He'd have stolen the world for her, if he could have. After all, that was what he felt like she'd given him, back when he was a six-and-under. Except for his mother, Mrs. Parsnickle was the only person he'd known who'd ever really remembered him, and she'd treated him all the more special because of it. It wasn't her fault she had finally forgotten him, too. Everyone did, eventually.

And besides, he knew she only had eyes for the under-sevens. He figured she'd only remembered him in the first place because she cared so much for the little ones. He'd just gotten too old, that was all.

At least being forgotten came with some advantages, Fin reminded himself with a smile. This was the third time he'd stolen that brooch from Sharktooth this month! Though poor Mrs. Parsnickle really did think she was losing her mind when it kept turning up in her bread tin each time.

Warmth spread through his chest as Fin replaced the tin, closed the window, and scrambled up the gutter to the attic tower, watching out for rotten molding as he went and holding on tight when the wind blew too strong. When he reached the very top, he slipped through a broken window and breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to be home.

Hunched over awkwardly, Fin pawed his way across

the familiar mess that littered the floor. Mounds of cloud-catching nets tangled with self-fetching balls, old maps, and all the other junk he'd pilfered over the years but never really used. It was a testament to his thieving skill, and the biggest testament was right where he slept.

Even though there was no one there to see him, Fin produced Sharktooth's empty velvet coin purse with a flourish. "The last one!" he announced, adding it to the mound of velvet coin purses he used for a bed. Then he flopped into them face-first, luxuriating in the triumph of having completed his masterpiece.

It'd only taken three years and 462 picked pockets. The soft fuzz tickled his palms, tingling up his arms, and he didn't even mind when a cockroach skittered out of one of the pouches. He'd grown to like bugs, living in an attic and all. And at least roaches didn't bite, unlike the chitterchomps that had moved into the leather coin purses he *used* to sleep on.

"It was a good day," he whispered to himself, rolling onto his back. He drifted off to sleep imagining the look of happy surprise on Mrs. Parsnickle's face when she discovered the brooch the next morning.

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"BLIXIN' GHOOOOOOOOOOOSSSSTTTTT!" Mr. Parsnickle's shouts filtered up through the loose attic floorboards and hammered into Fin's ears. Outside, the

morning wind howled as usual, but even it was no match for Mr. Parsnickle's roaring. This was Fin's morning wake-up call; the old beast had probably noticed the missing cheese Fin had swiped for yesterday's dinner.

Fin rolled carefully off his makeshift bed, sweeping stray purses back onto it as he went. He weaved his way across the attic, crouching to avoid banging his head on the rafters, and pushed aside the sapphire-and-opal statue blocking the trapdoor to the house below. With a muted *thump*, he dropped into the back of an old closet the Parsnickles had never bothered refinishing (at least, not since the "ghost" had hidden all of Mr. Parsnickle's refinishing tools) and made his way silently down the stairs.

"For goodness' sakes, Arler," Mrs. Parsnickle was saying as Fin reached the hallway to the kitchen, "I've no time for your ghost nonsense! I'm late already, and the sixes will have the fives stuffed into the drying baskets by the bath pool if I don't get there soon."

Fin winced, remembering the stink of that bath pool. At least he didn't have to deal with that anymore.

"The cheese, woman, the cheese!" Mr. Parsnickle yelped from down the hall. "The blixin' ghost moved the cheese!"

Fin snuck closer. In the reflection of a nearby mirror, he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Parsnickle pushing a knot of blue-gray hair into place atop her thin frame, Mr. Parsnickle's huge red face beside her. His thick jowly cheeks quivered around his white tusks.

"Oh, you impossible orc!" Mrs. Parsnickle laughed. Then came the kissing. Fin gagged. Grown-ups were so gross.

He peeked his head around the doorjamb. Mr. Parsnickle rifled through the larder a few feet away, pulling out a loaf of bread and some toadbutter, Fin's least favorite thing ever. Mrs. Parsnickle grabbed a slice, nimbly dodging the dollop of gray ooze Mr. Parsnickle tried to swipe over it, and headed to the door. Fin was just about to slip in and nick the crusty heel when Mrs. Parsnickle hesitated on the threshold.

"Arler?" She bent down and grabbed something from the mildewed wooden stoop. When she stood, she held a carefully folded scrap of white paper pinched between her twiggy fingers.

"Whazzit?" Mr. Parsnickle asked, slathering another hunk of bread in gooey muck. He jammed it halfway into his mouth and peered over her shoulder.

"Looks to be a letter," Mrs. Parsnickle pronounced.

Fin leaned into the kitchen, farther than he ever would normally. Regular Quay folk like the Parsnickles didn't *get* letters. Once in a while, the Preserve would send a notice via speakfrog, or a parrotboy might bring a message from Mr. Parsnickle's relatives on the Best-Not-Visited Coast. But never an actual *letter*.

"Let's see here," Mrs. Parsnickle said. Her brow wrinkled as she read. "Seems to be addressed to an 'M Thief.'"

"Master Thief!" Fin blurted before he could stop himself. That was him!

Mr. Parsnickle jumped so hard he hit the ceiling, causing bits of rotting wood and grout to rain down from it. Mrs. Parsnickle clutched the note to her chest, eyes as huge as midsummer moons.

For a moment, no one said anything. Fin tried to will the words back into his mouth. He wondered what he must look like leaning half out of the doorframe, black hair uncombed against his olive skin, clothes dirty from days without so much as a splash in a fountain.

"Vagrant!" Mr. Parsnickle cried, solving the mystery. He snatched a thick-handled broom and swung it over his head like a club.

Fin swallowed, and tried the one thing he knew for sure wouldn't work. "Mrs. Parsnickle?" he whispered. "It's me, Fin?"

Mrs. Parsnickle cocked her head at him. Her eyes narrowed just a bit. He searched her face desperately for a spark of recognition. Her mouth opened, just a little, and hope exploded in his heart.

"I'm s-sorry, young man," she stuttered. "Do I know you?"

Fin sighed as the hope fizzled. Of course not. Mr. Parsnickle pointed the bristles of his broom at him, making a slow sweeping motion toward the door.

Time to go. Again.

He marched, shoulders slumped, through the kitchen. No breakfast for him this morning. But there was something he needed more than a hunk of toadbutter-bathed

bread. Just at the threshold, he turned to Mrs. Parsnickle. She looked at him with the same blank stare, tinged with just a touch of fear.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

The corners of her eyes twitched and she frowned. "Breaking into houses is bad manners," she instructed him. Mr. Parsnickle snorted behind her, broom at the ready.

Fin shrugged. "Oh, not for that," he said. "For this!" In one quick motion, he jumped up and snatched the note from her hand.

Mr. Parsnickle roared and swung the broom. It smashed against the floor, missing Fin by inches.

"Shanks!" he cried, already moving. His legs pumped, carrying him out the door and down the narrow street, cobblestones bruising his feet as he went. That had been a close miss.

But the Parsnickles would forget soon enough, and no lock could keep him out. And, most importantly of all, in his hand he clutched the letter. *His* letter.