GHOSTLIGHT
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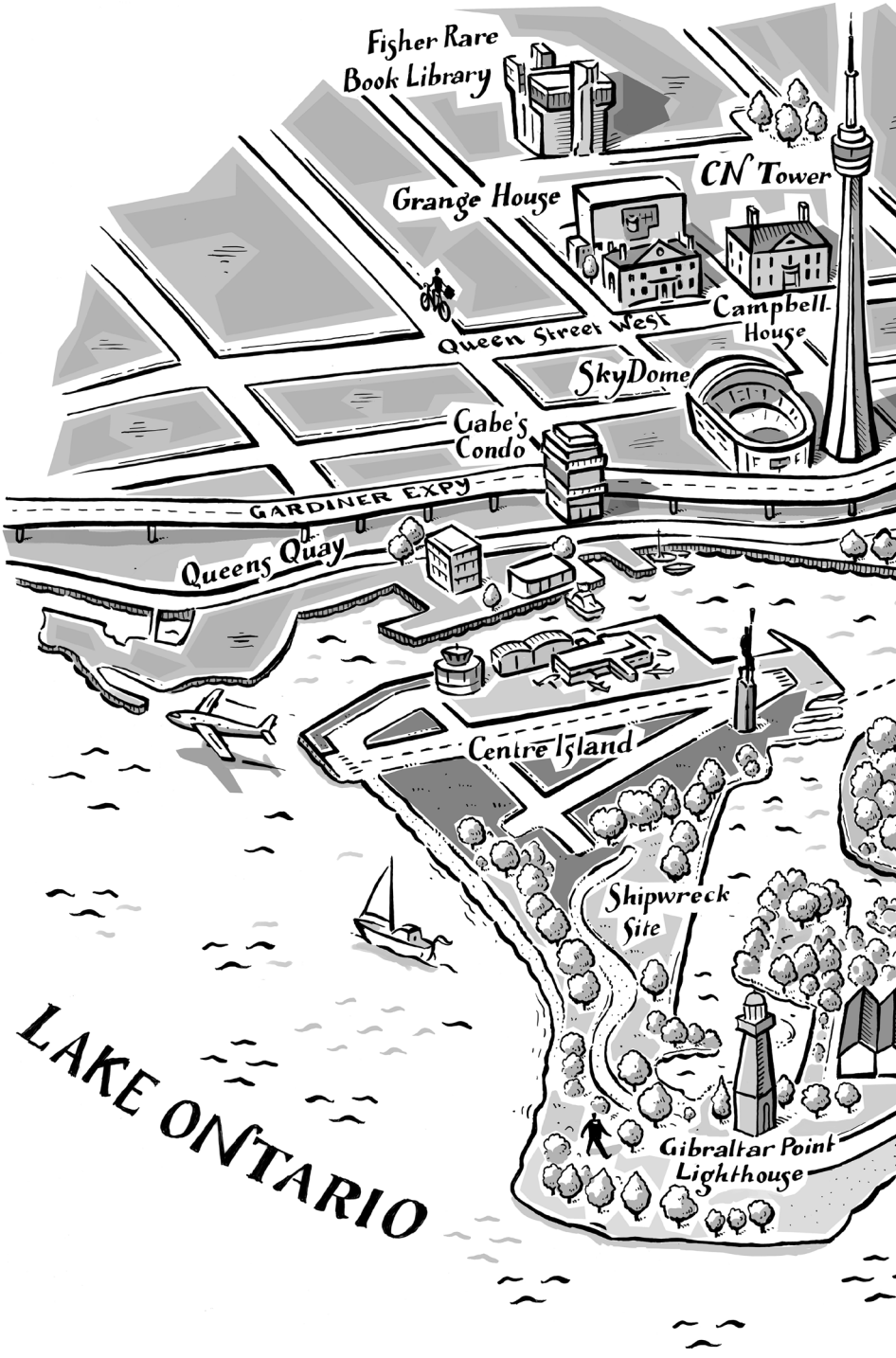


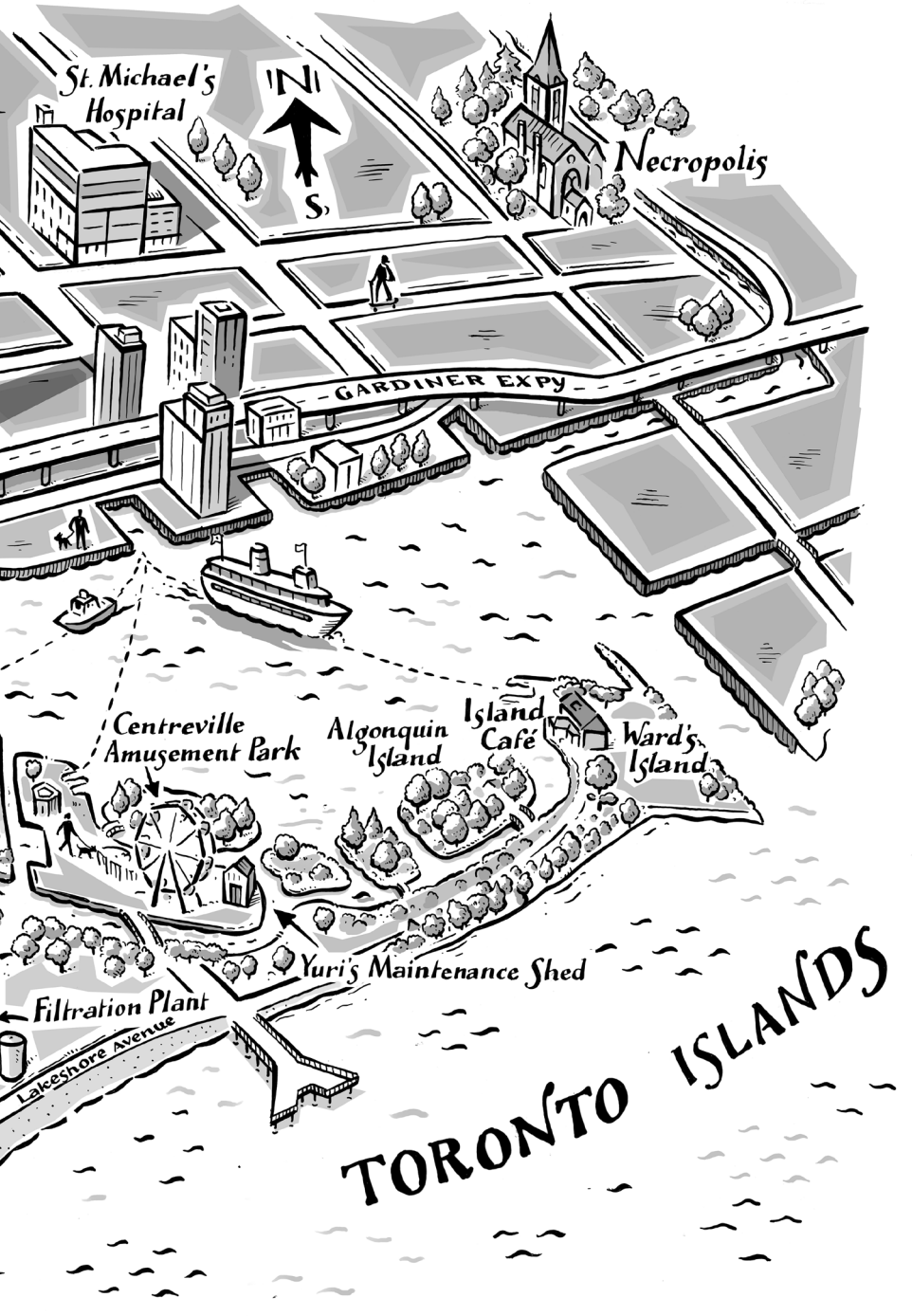
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N
S
Necropolis
GARDINER EXPY
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Island Café
Ward's Island
Yuri's Maintenance Shed
Filtration Plant
Lakeshore Avenue
TORONTO ISLANDS

1

Rebecca Strand was sixteen the first time she saw her father kill a ghost.

She was woken by a hand on her shoulder, and opened her eyes to Papa's face, flickering in the glow of his lantern. He held out her shawl and said, "Get up. I need your help."

Her first thought was: *At last!*

Immediately she leapt from the warmth of her bed and listened for the weather. No rain lashed against her window. No wind howled. She fastened the woollen shawl around her nightdress.

"Is a ship in trouble?" she asked.

"We need to hurry."

She followed him downstairs and outside. In the calm sky glowed a full moon and stars sharp as gemstones. Not even a hint of mist hovered over the lake. It was hard to imagine a ship foundering on such a night.

Still, boats ran aground on the island's sandy shoals all the time. Jutting from its beaches were the broken ribs of old, wrecked hulls. Many times over the years, her parents had helped drag survivors ashore and into the shelter of their home. But her mother had died of fever two years ago, and last month her older brother, Bernard,

had ventured off to Kingston to apprentice as a stonemason. It was just her and her father now, so maybe, finally, she'd have a chance to prove herself.

But as her eyes swept the smooth water, she saw nothing amiss. Her father headed straight for the lighthouse. For a second she wondered if something was wrong with the lamp itself – had it gone out? – but then the beam swung around, cutting its white path through the night.

"Papa? What's wrong?"

At the huge red door of the lighthouse, he turned the iron clasp and entered. Stepping inside, Rebecca shivered. Even though it was summer, cold radiated from the thick stone. Her father was already vaulting up the spiral stairs, and she hurried after him.

The hot, thrilling whiff of lamp oil hit her as she climbed up inside the lamp room. Atop its stout iron column, the blazing beacon turned, sending its beam through the high windows. The Gibraltar Point Lighthouse was the tallest of all the lake lights, rising from the western point of the island that sheltered Toronto's harbour. Across the water were the glimmering lights of the city, home now to almost thirty thousand souls.

Her father hung his lantern from a hook and immediately took up his spyglass. He opened the door and ducked outside onto the narrow catwalk that encircled the lamp room. Rebecca followed.

"I had a warning from the Niagara Light," Papa said, scanning the water to the south.

Rebecca looked across the vast sweep of Lake Ontario. From this height, you might sometimes see the spray rising from the falls. And on clear nights like this, you could often catch the pale flicker of the Niagara Light on the American shore.

"What kind of warning?" She'd never known lighthouses signalled one another; but this was exactly the sort of thing she'd been hoping Papa would teach her one day. Now maybe with her brother Bernard gone—

"Something's coming."

Her skin prickled. The way her father said it, she knew he didn't mean bad weather. Papa lowered his spyglass and turned to her. He was a solemn man by nature, but she had never known him to look so grave.

"Tonight must be the night you learn."

Joy instantly overwhelmed any nervousness. "I'm ready! Papa, I want to know everything!"

She'd been born on this sandy crescent of an island, and her whole life, her father had been keeper of the Gibraltar Point Light. Even though she'd never been permitted to help – that privilege had always gone to Bernard – she was sometimes allowed to watch them tend the lamp. She knew how to replenish the whale oil and trim the wick; she understood the ingenious pulleys and gears that made the beacon revolve. The lighthouse itself felt like a vital gear in her own life. Just as the sun rose each morning, each night the lighthouse beam swept across her curtained window, every two minutes. It was as fine a lullaby and guardian as any child could

ask for. For as long as she could remember, she'd wanted to be a keeper.

"You may not thank me," Papa said, "for the things I'm going to tell you."

On the catwalk, she had a powerful premonition that her life was about to change forever.

"You know that I tend the light, to warn ships away from the shoals," her father said, "to guide them into safe harbour. But there's more."

Abruptly, as if he'd heard something, he turned. Following the beacon's beam, he lifted his spyglass to his eye. He did not hold the rail to steady himself, but stood with his legs wide, like a sailor balanced on the prow of a ship, awaiting a storm – or worse.

"What do you see?" Rebecca demanded.

"Quicker than I thought," he muttered. He held the spyglass out to Rebecca. "Look."

Her hands shook as she brought it to her eye.

"Do you see?" he asked.

All she beheld was silvered water, glinting in the moonlight. Then the lighthouse beam picked out something bobbing on the surface. At first Rebecca thought it was a piece of timber washed out from the mill. Her stomach clenched.

"A body!"

Then the lighthouse beam had passed, and all she saw was dark water.

"Where did it go?" She shifted the spyglass to and fro, with no luck.

"Wait for the light to return," said her father.

When the beam swept past once more, the body reappeared. It was facedown in the water. A sodden blouse; long, weed-matted hair. An arm weakly churned the water.

"She's alive!" Rebecca cried, looking away from the spyglass. Her father had already rushed back inside the lamp room. She hurried after him. "Papa, we need to get the boat!"

She didn't understand why he wasn't sounding the alarm, or bolting to the beach. The poor woman had obviously been washed overboard, or her ship had foundered. "Papa?"

From around his neck, he slipped off the tarnished lighthouse pendant he always wore. He inserted it like a key into the sturdy iron column that supported the lamp. Rebecca heard the sound of metal pieces clicking into place. Suddenly the lamp stopped revolving. From the sides of the column two iron handles shot out with a clang. Gripping them, Papa swivelled the beacon, directing the beam as he wished.

"I never knew you could do that!" Rebecca exclaimed.

"Go outside, find her," her father instructed.

Bewildered, she returned to the catwalk. Lifting the spyglass, she found the woman. Maybe Papa wanted to focus more light on her before the rescue. Both the woman's arms were paddling feebly, though her face was still submerged.

"Is the light bright upon her?" Papa called from the lamp room.

"Yes! But she's so weak—"

"Watch now!"

The woman lifted her head clear of the water and revealed her face. All the breath rushed out of Rebecca's body. It was like no face she'd ever beheld, the terrible eyes filled with such malice. The light was bright on the woman's face, and her eyes shut tight, and her tattered hands lifted as if warding off an attack. Holes began to open in her flesh.

"The light's killing her!" Rebecca cried.

"She's already dead," her father replied.

As it disintegrated, the body sank. Rebecca sucked air back into her lungs, then turned to her father, who'd come outside to stand with her. "What was that?"

"A ghost."

He said it like any other word. A chair. A cat. A house. She caught herself shaking her head no, but her brain could not think of any reasonable explanation for what she'd just seen – or hadn't seen.

"I couldn't see it at first," she said, remembering. "Not until the beam passed over it."

"Yes. The brightness of our lamp reveals ghosts."

She stared at the beacon in astonishment. All her life she'd thought it was just a simple lamp – a powerful one, yes, but that was all.

"And it . . . melts them?" she asked.

"Sends them where they are meant to be, be it Heaven or Hell."

Rebecca touched her hand to her chest. "It made me feel like I couldn't breathe."

"Some are terrifying to behold. It's part of their power."

Questions pelted her brain. Through her bewilderment, she felt a sting of indignation. "Mother always said there were no ghosts! You did too!"

"I lied," Papa said, taking the spyglass and scanning the bay. "To keep the secret of our Order."

"*Order?*" Rebecca said.

"We don't have much time." He handed back the spyglass and returned to the lamp room. "She's not the only one."

She hurried after him. "There's more?"

"I'll need your help, Rebecca. My vision is not what it once was."

This, she knew, was true. Despite his spectacles, he squinted, even to see things close at hand. He complained sometimes of headaches.

"You must be my eyes tonight, Rebecca," he told her. "Can I trust you?"

"You can trust me."

"Can you be quick?"

"I have always been quick, Papa."

Her legs were trembling, but she drew strength from her father, tall and steady as the lighthouse itself. If he could withstand the oncoming storm, so could she.

From the base of the beacon's column, her father flipped down a hinged metal plate so that it lay flat against the floor. He stepped onto it and slipped his shoes into two thick leather straps.

"What're you doing now?" Rebecca asked.

She got her answer soon enough. With an upward twitch of Papa's right foot against the strap, the entire lamp column telescoped up, lifting her father with it so his head almost touched the ceiling. With a twitch of Papa's left foot, the column lowered a touch. Using the iron handles, he swivelled the beam to and fro, taking aim with this strange spectral cannon.

"The angle of attack is superior up here," he said.

"Do all lighthouses do this?" Rebecca asked.

"I've made some modifications." He squinted into the night. "Now, go be my eyes!"

She hesitated and startled herself by asking, "Does this mean I get to be keeper?"

"Are you bargaining with me?" he demanded, looking at her sternly but, she thought, also with a new respect.

"If I can do this, will you let me?"

"After tonight, you may not want to. Now go!"

Rebecca ran outside to the catwalk and scanned the water with the spyglass. In the beam's light, a shape suddenly materialized. Her heart clenched.

"There!" she cried, and her father halted the beam. "Back to the south! Yes!"

The light now fully upon it, the ghost raised its terrible head, and Rebecca was certain she could hear a shriek from its fathomless mouth. Under the glare of the lamplight, the ghost flailed and quickly dissolved.

"Gone . . . it's gone!" she said over her shoulder. But her

relief was short-lived. As the beam made another sweep off the point, she gasped at the sight of three bloated shapes, churning the water.

"Near the mouth of the harbour!"

"They're heading for the city," her father barked, aiming the lamp.

Rebecca shuddered at the idea of these things crawling ashore.

"West!" she shouted back to her father, and then, "A little to the southeast," and when that ghost had dissolved, "To the northwest . . . that's the last of them!" She leaned, spent, against the doorway. "Is this what you do every night?"

Her father's eyes crinkled in a quick smile. "Not every night, no."

Rebecca thought of all the people of Toronto, sleeping in their beds, oblivious. Until tonight, she'd been one of them. Blissfully ignorant that the night contained such terrors.

"What do they want?" she asked. "These ghosts."

"They're filled with anger," Papa said, sweeping the light back and forth across the harbour. "Some died with hatred smouldering in their hearts, some are furious they're no longer living. These wish us harm. Keep your eyes on the water, Rebecca. We are not yet finished."

With a shudder, she returned her gaze to the harbour and its entrance. Burned into her mind's eye was the tortured and cruel face of that first ghost she'd spied.

"Are all ghosts so vicious?"

"No. Most are peaceful; some are lonely, and confused. Others

have things to set right before they can properly rest. But they're not dangerous."

"But these other ones, you said they can harm us?" Of course she'd heard ghost stories, but she had a feeling they were all about to be proved wrong.

"They are weak for the most part. They can barely shift dust. But over time some become stronger. Maybe they can turn the page of a book, or blow out a candle. Maybe knock a burning ember from an oven, and burn down a city." He squinted. "Where is he?"

"Who?" she demanded. He swung the beam hard, away from the city, out to the open lake.

"Look to the south, Rebecca!"

She ran around the gallery to follow his beam, lifted the spyglass to her eye. "Papa!" she yelled.

It was not a single body, but a monstrosity made of many. Arms and legs jutted crookedly at all angles, and the creature scuttled over the water like a terrible water beetle. It was headed not for the city this time, but the island – and the lighthouse.

"It's coming straight at us!" she cried.

The beam seared a hole in the ghost's carapace, and the creature skittered away.

For the first time in her life, Rebecca heard her father curse. "The others were just a distraction. Be my eyes, Rebecca!"

"To the west!" she cried. "Back two yards!"

But every time she shouted directions, the ghost darted away from the light.

"Angle it down more!" she called out.

"It won't go much lower!"

"It's almost ashore!" Terror welded her feet to the catwalk. With her free hand she clutched the railing, as though bracing for a tidal wave.

As the ghost scrambled onto the beach like a vast human centipede, her father impaled it with the beam.

"It's huge!" Rebecca gasped. Though it had many limbs, it had but one head, with a man's face. His furious corkscrew eyes seemed to suck the very moonlight into them, like water down a bottomless drain. The ghost's many limbs writhed, trying to break free from the light that had spiked it to the sand.

"Is he melting?" her father shouted.

"No!"

"He's too strong. We can't hold him for long!"

Even as he said the words, Rebecca saw the creature slowly ripping itself away from the beam of light.

"He's getting loose! How do we kill him?"

When she glanced back at her father, he was removing a small bundled object from a hidden compartment in the beacon's column. As he unwrapped it, Rebecca's breath snagged. It was a circular lens of beautiful amber glass. Deftly, her father slipped it into a wire frame mounted directly in front of the lamp.

The effect was instant and startling. The beam disappeared, because all the lamp's light was trapped behind the amber lens. Like water behind a dam. The strange lens glowed, brighter and

brighter still. When it was almost too intense to behold, an amber beam shot from it, out through the window, down to the beach, where it struck the ghost like a lightning bolt.

In an eruption of fireworks, the vile creature was cut in two. Both halves writhed like overturned beetles as they were cut smaller still by the searing amber beam.

"To the right!" Rebecca directed her father. "There's a little bit trying to get away!"

Melting, the last remains of the ghost disappeared into the sand and water.

"They're gone!" she said, turning to her father.

"Be certain, Rebecca!"

"Yes, yes, there's nothing left!"

Her wobbly legs carried her back into the heat of the lamp room, and she sank to the floor. Numbly she watched as Papa swept the beam back and forth, examining the beach one last time. Then he lowered the beacon to its normal height. He stepped off the metal platform and snapped it back into position against the column. The iron handles were pushed into slots that quickly and creakily concealed themselves. Then, with a cloth, her father removed the mysterious amber lens, steaming, from its wire frame.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's called a ghostlight." He examined it closely before returning it to its secret compartment. "It's glass, but specially worked to strengthen the beam's power."

"For the really big ghosts?" Rebecca said.

Her father chuckled. "Precisely. Only the Order's master glass-blowers can make them. And they are very rare."

He set the beacon revolving in its usual clockwork fashion: a normal white beam from a normal lamp, sweeping reassuringly over lake and land. Rebecca started shivering so hard that her teeth chattered. All the shock of the last hour came crashing over her at once. She wrapped her arms around herself. Her father sat beside her and she leaned into him, pressing her cheek against his wool jacket with its comforting smell of pipe tobacco.

She inhaled slowly, trying to keep her thoughts from splintering into too many questions. One at a time. "So. You're part of a secret order that destroys ghosts?"

"The Keepers protect the harbours, the cities, the coastlines of the world – and have done so since the Lighthouse of Alexandria."

She pulled back to look at him in amazement. "The Pharos?" she exclaimed. An engraving of that ancient Greek lighthouse hung in her bedroom. "That was over two thousand years ago!"

"We stand guard over the night, to protect the living from the wakeful and wicked dead."

The wakeful and wicked dead. These were words to build a nightmare from. "Do they all come from the sea?" she asked.

"No. They come from anywhere people have died. From a cemetery. A hospital. A palace. We see an abundance upon the sea just because so many people travel by ship." Papa paused. "This is a great deal to hear all at once."

"No, I want to know everything! That last ghost, you called it he."

"He was once a man called Nicholas Viker, and he'd become very strong indeed."

"Why did he have so many limbs?"

"He contained many ghosts. He devoured them to make himself powerful."

Horrified, she looked at her father. "Like a cannibal?"

"Precisely so. He enslaved them inside himself, and stole their vital energy."

"Those poor people!"

"But when the ghostlight struck Viker, did you see how coloured lights exploded from him? Those were the souls he'd consumed, finally released."

"And the ghostlight did that? Freed them?"

"Yes. Before tonight, I had only heard accounts of it."

Rebecca's mind still churned with questions. "Why did Viker come straight for the lighthouse?"

"He wanted to quench our light, the one thing that can stop him. The Order's been watching him for some time, not just because of his strength, but because of his diabolical plan."

"What plan?"

Her father's smile was rare, and all the more wonderful for it. "We'll discuss that another time. Viker's gone now. We have vanquished him, you and I."

Rebecca grinned and felt her body start to relax. "Does this mean I passed the test?"

"It was a mighty test," her father agreed.

She wasted no time pressing her advantage. "So you'll let me be a—"

"I will train you, yes. You will become my apprentice. I hope that is acceptable to my impatient daughter."

She said nothing for a moment, she was so happy. "Thank you, Papa. Do I get one of these?" She pointed at the lighthouse pendant, which he was about to put back around his neck.

He raised a craggy eyebrow at her. "You will get one if and when you become a Keeper."

"I never knew it was a key. May I?"

He let her hold it. Despite its tarnished state, it was beautiful in its simplicity: a tapered rectangular column topped by a beacon of silver flame. Impulsively she slipped it around her neck, just to feel its weight.

"It's the symbol of our Order," Papa said, "and with the key you can—"

Her father skidded away from her across the floor, as though dragged by his ankle. "Papa!"

"He's inside, Rebecca!"

She lunged and gripped her father's arm, but the ghostly force was stronger, and Papa was pulled closer to the gallery door.

As the lamp revolved, its beam suddenly revealed the outline of a crooked creature with arms that looked like they'd been snapped and rejoined to form long, jagged limbs. One of them clutched Papa's ankle. The creature lifted its head, and Rebecca recognized the terrible corkscrew eyes. How had he survived? Then the beam passed, and he disappeared.

"Viker, you fiend!" her father roared. He dug a hand into his pocket, then flung a handful of iron filings at the ghost. With a hiss and the stench of singed hair, the filings somehow coated the terrible creature as he writhed in pain. Papa broke free and scrambled to his feet.

"Rebecca, the key!"

She rushed to her father's side at the beacon. "There!" he told her, pointing at the small keyhole.

Crouching, she inserted the end of the pendant, and turned.

The iron handles snapped out and Papa grabbed them and wheeled the lamp around – but Viker was gone. Before her father could sweep the room, he was snapped off his feet, as if he were no heavier than a puppet. He sailed through the doorway to land hard on the catwalk.

"Strike him, Rebecca!" he croaked.

Rebecca grabbed the handles tightly and swung the lamp until the beam found Viker in the doorway.

"Let go of my father!"

The ghost whirled, ablaze in the lamplight, and his eyes widened, drinking in the light, sucking it down and down – and Rebecca had to drag her gaze away, because she could imagine herself spilling into those eyes and never surfacing.

With a sickening hop, Viker was balanced on the railing like a gargoyle. He was much smaller than he had been – and surely weaker – but still he had the strength to grab Papa's ankle with a freakishly long arm and haul him into the air.

Rebecca aimed the beam right at the ghost's face, but he didn't shield himself with his arms. His mouth curled up in a jagged grin, filling almost his entire face. He swung her father out over the railing.

The normal lamp beam wasn't working fast enough. She needed the ghostlight. Her hands fluttered over the pedestal, searching for the secret panel. Her father must have sensed what she was doing, for he cried out:

"No, Rebecca!"

She ignored him. How else could she save him? Her fingers found the catch and opened the compartment.

"Rebecca, do not let him see it!"

She pulled out the ghostlight. The cloth fell away. In that second, Viker's head turned, and Rebecca felt his entire being locked onto the dazzling piece of amber glass. As she fumbled it into the wire flame, one of Viker's long arms shot toward her with its splintered fingers.

The ghostlight blazed. Its amber beam struck Viker full on, blasting him off the railing, still clutching Rebecca's father. But somehow the ghost, with that long, long arm, and its splintered fingers, still managed to pull the ghostlight loose—

As Viker tumbled through the air, though, the amber lens spun free of his fingers and disappeared into the darkness.

Rebecca burst out onto the gallery. Far below, in the moonlight, she made out her father's broken body.

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

The beam from the lamp shone around her as she sobbed against the railing. Too late, she saw the crooked hand that lurked near her foot like some terrible crab. It closed around her ankle. A searing cold crackled through her leg, making her cry out.

Then, with a whiplike motion, the dead hand flung her into the night.