
THE MYRIAD MYSTERIES
OF
EARTHA QUICKSMITH
Loris Owen

The Myriad Mysteries of Eartha Quicksmith

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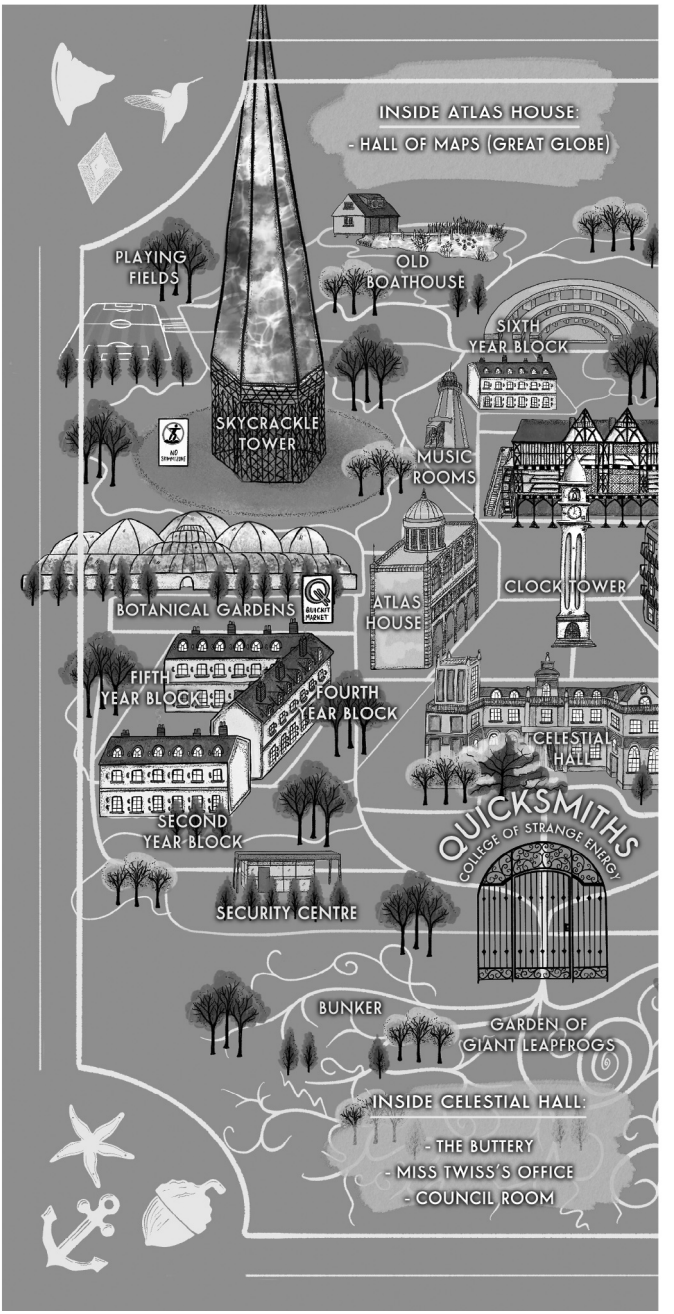
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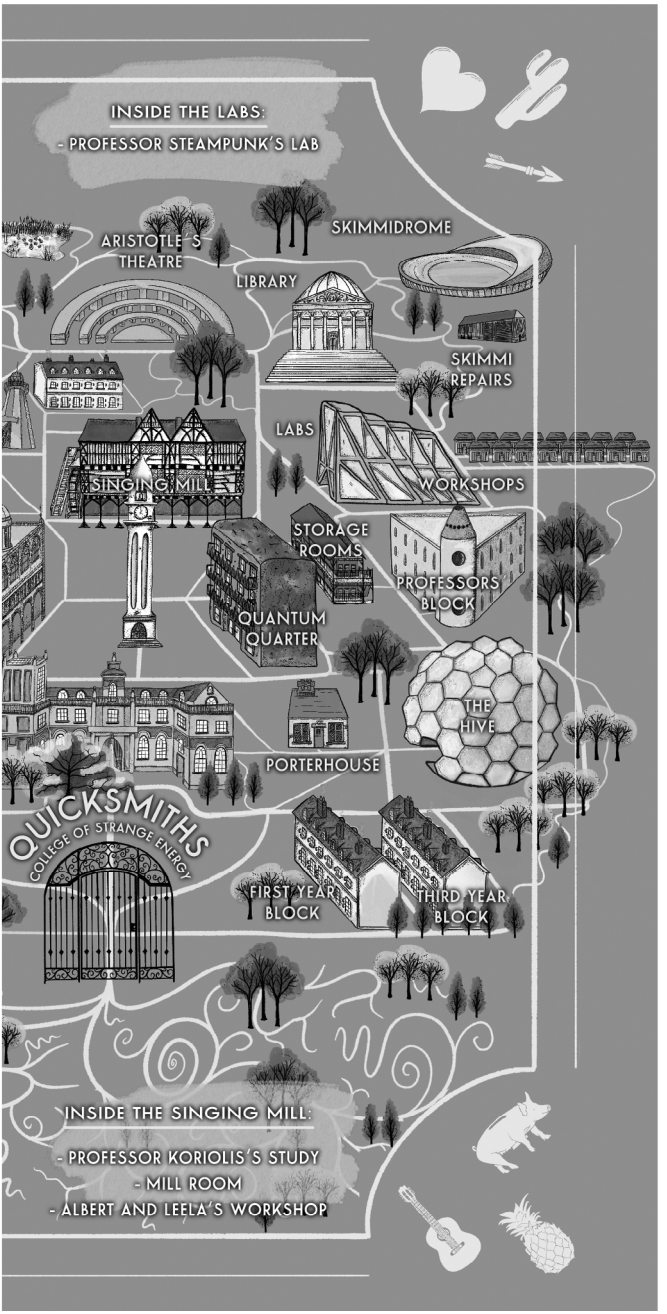
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To Mum & Dad

All *that we see or seem*
Is but a dream within a dream.

Edgar Allan Poe


INSIDE ATLAS HOUSE:
- HALL OF MAPS (GREAT GLOBE)
PLAYING FIELDS
OLD BOATHOUSE
SIXTH YEAR BLOCK
SKYCRACKLE TOWER
MUSIC ROOMS
BOTANICAL GARDENS
ATLAS HOUSE
CLOCK TOWER
FIFTH YEAR BLOCK
FOURTH YEAR BLOCK
CELESTIAL HALL
SECOND YEAR BLOCK
QUICKSMITHS
COLLEGE OF STRANGE ENERGY
SECURITY CENTRE
BUNKER
GARDEN OF GIANT LEAPFROGS
INSIDE CELESTIAL HALL:
- THE BUTTERY
- MISS TWISS'S OFFICE
- COUNCIL ROOM


INSIDE THE LABS:
- PROFESSOR STEAMPUNK'S LAB
ARISTOTLE'S THEATRE
SKIMMIDROME
LIBRARY
SKIMMI REPAIRS
LABS
SINGING MILL
WORKSHOPS
STORAGE ROOMS
PROFESSORS BLOCK
QUANTUM QUARTER
THE HIVE
PORTERHOUSE
QUICKSMITHS
COLLEGE OF STRANGE ENERGY
FIRST YEAR BLOCK
THIRD YEAR BLOCK
INSIDE THE SINGING MILL:
- PROFESSOR KORIOLIS'S STUDY
- MILL ROOM
- ALBERT AND LEELA'S WORKSHOP



Chapter One

The Ark Hospital

Violet vapour seeped through the keyhole. Seconds later, the vapour solidified, cracked and fell tinkling to the ground in jagged shards. Kip and Albert leapt aside as a burst of light-flecked froth surged through the inch of space under the door and washed away the lavender splinters.

Kip faced the door, his hand ready to knock below the sign.

PROFESSOR STEAMPUNK'S
PYROTECHNIC ARK HOSPITAL
DO NOT DISTURB
(unless you have biscuits)

'Got them ready?' he asked Albert.

Albert grinned and held up his cupped hands, scattering an assortment of crumbs. There was a rustle in Kip's pocket and a small, furry face with soft

brown eyes poked out. Pinky yawned, licked her lips, snuffled the pink smudge of her nose, and looked up at Albert hopefully.

'Cannot. Resist. Tiny mind control,' said Albert, lowering the biscuits robotically.

'Nope,' said Kip. 'Professors get professor snacks. Flying squirrels get flying squirrel snacks.'

Pinky looked at the biscuits longingly but took the slice of carrot Kip offered before retreating inside her comfy campsite in the pocket of his cargo shorts.

A faint sound whined out from behind the closed door, and Albert pressed his ear against the wood.

'Sounds like a giant mosquito riding a squeaky unicycle,' he said.

Itching to see what was happening inside, Kip knocked and pushed down the handle at the same time.

The laboratory behind the door was as big as the entire floor of the building and filled with honey-tinted light. An assortment of drones drifted along the gently curving contours of the room, exchanging quiet clicks whenever they met. Winged shadows of varying sizes had been burned into a section of one wall, and the opposite wall was covered in blue splatter marks.

Somewhere near the centre of the mostly empty lab, a black parrot was suspended in mid-air by golden spotlights shining out from some unseen source. Each

wingtip pointed to one of two tall spirals that rose up from the floor like gnarled trees.

'The Ark of Ideas,' said Kip, in the kind of hushed voice you might use in the overgrown ruin of a temple.

The Ark of Ideas. The ancient black parrot that had once belonged to Eartha Quicksmith. Everyone at the college knew her story – how an Elizabethan girl from the hardest of beginnings had grown up to be the greatest thinker of all time. And now, four centuries later, Kip and Albert stood before the mechanical bird that had kept the secrets of her forgotten discoveries to itself all this time. Almost to itself.

'It still hasn't quite sunk in,' said Albert. 'Gorvak fooled everyone in the entire college. How could someone as evil as him be related to someone as good as Eartha?'

'Distant relation,' Kip replied. 'Suppose a lot can change in four hundred years.'

'*We* solved Eartha's ten riddles,' said Albert. 'He never should have got to the Ark first and stolen all her ideas. He never should have got away. It's so unfair – that sneaky slimeball slimed up to us and tricked us into thinking he was on our side. I'll never get tricked like that again.'

Kip felt a brief anger flush his face as a memory rose up from that day on the cliff – the day the Ark

had been found. The sound Gorvak's boot had made as it connected with the parrot's ribcage.

It didn't need to get broken, Kip thought. *It shouldn't be broken.*

'At least it managed to fly back to us,' he said.

They both stared up at the black parrot.

'I wonder if it's said anything else yet,' Kip murmured.

He felt an urge to stroke the parrot's wing. It looked so fragile. Kip reached out, but then thought better of it. This was a lab, and bursting into the middle of Professor Steampunk's experiment might not be wise.

Instantly proving him right, a ticking sound came from the gnarled spirals and they each released a beam of Strange Energy. A midnight-blue sparkler trail and a stream of orange ripples met in the middle, exactly where the Ark of Ideas was. The two beams skirmished and sputtered, the Ark glowed for a moment, and a downfall of twinkling flakes cascaded to the floor.

'Watch out!' cried Albert.

The glittery residue formed an ankle-high wave which surged towards them with a sound like rattling marbles. They jumped to one side and watched it go past. Kip had been at Quicksmiths for long enough now not to be surprised by the wave of unknown Strange Energy that flowed up the wall, and across the ceiling.

'Looks like my little sis decorated your face,' said Albert cheerily.

Running a hand over his eyes and cheeks, Kip dislodged a rain of sparkles. He looked over at Albert to see lingering glitter melting down over the black starburst that crowned his head.

'Hah!' Kip replied. 'Well, it looks like my face decorated your hair.'

Overhead, the energy beams disappeared and a voice foghorned in their direction from the other side of the lab.

'Try the wingpit switch again will you please, Dennis?'

An Oddjob Drone approached from the left. Drifting at about chest height, it looked like a small, floating, many-trunked elephant. One of these thin trunks reached into the yellow spotlights and flicked a switch concealed under the parrot's wing. Its beak opened and one eye fluttered.

'The Crazy Paving,' rasped the parrot, mechanically. 'The Crazy Paving. The Crazy Paving…'

It went on like that for a while until a second flick of the switch returned the Ark to its silent repose and the drone descended from the spotlights. It turned towards Kip and Albert and regarded them serenely.

'You have guests, Professor Steampunk,' the drone said loudly.

'Thank you, Dennis,' a voice echoed in reply. 'Over here! Follow the path.'

An Ember of Energy

A tarmac-grey pathway curved around the research area at the centre of the lab. When Kip and Albert stepped on it, it sprang into motion, sweeping them past the spiral energy conductors, and towards the far side of the room. As the pathway brought them closer, Kip saw that Professor Steampunk was upside-down, standing on all four of his hands.

Only the best kind of professor blows up their arms in an experiment and then builds themself four new ones, Kip thought, with a smile.

Arms bending at the elbow like short, bow-kneed legs, the professor scuttled over to meet them.

'I'm not always good at thinking on my feet,' explained Steampunk as he sprang lightly the right way up.

His spray of white hair was ruffled from being upside-down, and his face flushed. All in all, he looked not so much like a professor but more like a thin yeti in a lab coat recovering from a recent electric shock.

'Albert, Kip,' he said, 'welcome to the Ark Hospital!'

Albert offered up the handful of slightly squashed biscuits.

'Don't mind if I do, thank you,' said Steampunk, taking four at once, shaking off some glitter, and cramming an entire jaffa cake into his mouth. It was demolished in a few chews, as the professor considered the remaining three. 'Wouldn't it be

excellent to have four mouths?' His head twitched as if he'd startled himself with the idea, he scribbled a hasty line in a notebook he took from his pocket, and looked up at the two boys. 'I expect you're here to see how our patient's doing?'

Kip nodded.

'Has the Ark said anything else yet?' he asked, hopefully. 'Except "the crazy paving"?'

'The Ark has not squawked,' Professor Steampunk said. 'Not yet. But there is something interesting.'

Steampunk's four arms blurred into motion. He dusted biscuit crumbs off his lab coat and gave his college-issue Candle badge a firm double tap. A carousel of symbols appeared in a ring of hazy light around him, and he began to swipe through them.

Kip leaned in for a closer look. He had a Candle badge himself of course, but he was still learning about everything this powerful little device could do. His class had only been taught how to use the Carousel a few weeks ago. Made of a type of light you could touch, the on-demand console allowed each user to tap into the marvellous functions of GENI's Strange Reality Drive. Like all the First Years, he and Albert were still becoming familiar with the different apps, and Steampunk narrated helpfully as he flicked through the stacks of icons.

'That's the Wingmirror symbol – handy if you need eyes in the back of your head … Translator ….

Magnifier … Speech Bubble … Wormhole Positioning System … Scratchpad … Camera … Quicket Market. Ah, here we are … Wave Sensor!'

The professor stopped at a symbol formed of a magnifying glass and wavy lines, and ticked it flamboyantly with one finger. A veil of energy readouts appeared all around them.

'The issue has been focusing in on the Ark, which has been a bit challenging because it's such an unusual device, as well as being so oldfangled. But with GENI's help – I really can't imagine how we managed before Strange Supercomputers – and our measuring oojamaflips and a few tricks of my own – well, it looks as if there is an ember of energy left inside…'

'A battery?' Albert said.

'It could be the spark from some form of battery, yes. Or something else. Eartha was a genius after all. And there are many hundreds of combinations of Strange Energies that do gabberflasting things. It's a bit too early to tell you much more. Why don't you come back on Saturday morning – that gives me a couple of days.'

Kip and Albert stepped on the travelator path which began to propel them back towards the exit.

'Fear not!' proclaimed Steampunk as they slipped away. 'I have at least four more tricks left up my sleeves.' He waggled his quadruple hands above his head. 'If there's anything left in that mighty bird brain, I shall do my best to set it free.'