The Kingdom of Broken Magic



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Maggie opened her eyes to the cold, damp morning. It was the beginning of everything. Unaware of the day's significance, she raised her head from a pile of rags and scanned the attic. Everything was as it always was: pigeon poo dripped through the roof, bats rustled in the rafters and tiny paws scuttled across the floor. She burrowed back into the rags hoping the day would disappear, but something, or someone, tickled her toes.

"Leave me alone," she groaned, pushing whatever, or whoever it was away with her foot.

An urgent voice echoed through the attic, "Wake up, Maggie. We're late. If we don't go down now, you know what'll happen to us."

Maggie looked up and scowled at the small boy offering her his hand.

"How can you be so bright and early?" she said as Josh hauled her up from the rags.

"Dunno," he said, grinning and tugging fingers through matted curls. "Better hurry."

They moved towards the stairs but stopped as an icy chill settled around them and the slow, deliberate flapping of wings filled the stairwell. A black crow flew into the attic stirring tiny whirls of dust from the floorboards. It circled above their heads ignoring their efforts to shoo it away. Drawing closer, it settled its wiry talons on Maggie's head.

"Ouch go away. You're hurting me," she said, trying to shake the bird off, but its talons only dug deeper into her scalp. It looked down its black beak and squawked, "Downstairs!"

"Get off her," Josh said, pulling at its wings. A woman's voice rose from several floors below.

"Carry-On! Get down here. Quick!"

The crow rose in the air, strands of Maggie's hair falling from its talons, and flew out of the attic with a low, guttural caw.

Maggie turned crossly to Josh, small beads of blood blossoming in her hair.

"I can look after myself, thank you," she said, folding her arms firmly across her chest.

"Nice to have a bit of help though," Josh said, and, grinning, added, "Carry-On suits you as a hat."

Maggie punched him affectionately and laughed. She did not know if she had a brother, but if she did, she was sure he would look like Josh. And if he had a sister, which he might, somewhere, Josh thought she would look like Maggie. They shared the same dark complexion, eyes and hair. Maggie always chopped hers into short spikes, while Josh let his corkscrew crazily over his shoulders. Dark circles framed their eyes, and their skin was covered in scabs, bruises and sores which they constantly picked at.

Josh looked around at the puddles of water seeping into the piles of rags which served as their beds.

"I hate this place," he said. "It would be even worse without you, Mags."

Maggie gave what she hoped was a comforting smile, but which hid the same fearful thought – what would she do without Josh? He was her only friend and ally at the Scribbens' Home for Very Wayward Children. They knew nothing else and were each other's family. All they knew was that they had either been dumped on the Home's doorstep or dropped down its coal chute as babies.

Maggie wrinkled her soot-smudged nose. "You smell, Josh."

"So do you!"

Maggie smiled and waved a hand in the air graciously like royalty. "Yes, like a rose."

Josh sniffed at the air. "Mmmm… sausages and mash, pies and gravy…"

They giggled and their mouths watered.

"Let's run away," Josh said. "We can make a dash for it when the gate's opened."

"Again? They always find us."

"We might be lucky this time."

They had run away so many times, they had lost count. Each time they were caught and dragged back to the Home and punished.

A louse crawled from Josh's grimy collar and headed for his chin. Maggie shot a hand out, pincered it between her fingers and popped it.

"Four," she said.

Josh flicked a louse from Maggie's arm to the floor and squashed it with a bare foot. "Six. I'm winning," he said. Their laughter was interrupted by the woman calling again from downstairs.

Maggie clutched at Josh's hand. "I can't stand it anymore. Every day I wake up and wish it was my last day here," she said, holding back tears.

"Promise you won't go anywhere without me, Mags."

"I promise. We'll always be together, Josh," Maggie said as they rushed out of the room.

An enormous woman squatted on the bottom of the stairs in a large feathered hat. She levered herself up with the help of the bannisters and turned a face like uncooked pastry towards them. Maggie and Josh instantly wished they had a rolling pin to flatten Miss Scribbens into a pie crust.

"What do you say to your one and only?" she crooned.

"Good morning, Miss Scribbens," they chorused.

"Very good," she said, herding them towards the kitchen, her feet slapping behind them like wet fish. Her long, full skirt scraped against the walls. It was stitched with pockets full of "things-that-might-come-in-handy", such as candles, spanners, screws, stockings, slippers, walnuts, boiled sweets, a compass and bread and cheese. Carry-On flew down, plucked a dead mouse from one of them and settled on her shoulders. Cries of babies rose from the basement.

"You're late again," Miss Scribbens said in a voice strangled by the many jewelled necklaces fastened tightly around her neck. "Lateness is thievery. Stealing time, but you're good at stealing. You're the bestest pickpocket we've



had, Miss Fever Fingers. But remember, you must never disappoint your one and only, who wants gold coins. Lots of them."

"Gold. Gold. Gold," Carry-On crowed, chewing on its mouse.

"Remember you are Wayward and Wayward is what the Devil does," Miss Scribbens said. "Which is why nobody wants you, except your dear, kind Miss Scribbens."

All around them, the Home's massive rooms and long dark corridors filled with the sounds of small hands dusting and polishing. A tiny girl moved slowly past the door on her hands and knees, scrubbing at the stone floor. Carry-On flew towards her with a creaky triumphant caw and tipped her bucket over. A stream of soapy water poured down the long corridor. Trembling, the girl stood up, her skirt soaked.

Miss Scribbens thrust a large bag into Maggie's hand.

"You can never escape your Miss Scribbens. Carry-On and his birdy mates have an eye on every street corner."

The crow pecked viciously at Maggie's heels, propelling her towards the back door. Miss Scribbens pushed Josh through the kitchen and into the scullery.

"Wash the dishes, and if I catch you licking the plates again, you know what will happen."

A heavily ringed hand shot before him. Josh shivered. With a loud laugh she threw some plates into the sink, turned on the tap and squeezed herself out of the door.

Josh stared through the window at the yard disappearing into a foul stew of creeping fog. The Home's iron gates clanged shut, and Maggie's muffled footsteps grew fainter. Josh felt suddenly afraid. Would he ever see her again?

2

The fog's filthy fingers reached into Maggie's throat as she groped her way through a series of dank archways into a street of expensive shops. Ghostly figures passed her by, coughing and spluttering. Carriages and horses nudged the kerb, their wheels and hooves muffled by the fog. She



glimpsed a woman, as if through a veil, hurrying her child along, an arm wrapped protectively around his shoulders. Maggie sighed wistfully as she imagined them arriving at their home welcomed by warmth and laughter. She and Josh both longed to be part of a family, but in their hearts they knew it would never happen. Who would want two smelly, lice-ridden children? They were doomed to be at the Scribbens' Home forever. Maggie tried not to feel sorry for herself as the fog thickened around her. Perfect for pickpocketing. Soon, she was bumping into passers-by and apologising while invisibly removing coins, wallets, snuff boxes, fobs, purses, brooches, tie pins, cuff links, gold cigarette cases, with quick, light fingers.

Her bag grew heavy. Tired and weak with hunger, she collapsed into a doorway. Just one more picked pocket before I rest, she thought. She heard the steady tap of a stick on the pavement and watched as a short man, round as a plum, emerged from the thinning fog. He wore a thick red cloak and twirled an ebony cane in one hand. His silver preened moustache curled like a question mark around his cheeks.

Maggie held out her hand. "Please sir."

He smiled kindly and searched through his pockets.

Maggie's eyes flicked over his fur-lined cloak and the jacket beneath it. He stared down at her bare feet.

"You must be freezing, child," he said. "Where do you live?"

Maggie sniffled. Concerned, the man leant towards her, and she smelt spices and tobacco. Her fingers darted into his pockets like arrows. She clasped something that felt like a small stone. A jewel perhaps? The man seized her wrist and looked disappointed. "Foolish child," he said.

Maggie sank her teeth into his hand and ran as fast as she could, the stone clasped tightly in her hand.

"Thief, thief!" the man cried as he ran after her. Others joined him. The bag slowed her down. Turning it upside down, she emptied its contents across the cobbles. People fought over its spilt treasure, blocking her pursuer's path. The stone grew hot in her hand, burning her palm. Her legs grew weak, and her chest ached. The fog thinned, and she saw the man still running behind her with a policeman who waved a truncheon and blew his whistle at her. If they caught her, she would be thrown into prison, or worse, returned to the Home. She sprinted forwards but a large crowd of cheering people formed a solid wall against her. There was no escape.

The policeman reached out to grab Maggie. She dived into the crowd and disappeared through a forest of legs. She reached the kerb and stood up. The crowd pushed and shoved behind her as clowns on unicycles juggled dinner sets, and acrobats turned giddying circles They gasped in horror as the shadow of a huge grey beast loomed above them. A strange long nose hung like a snake from between its tiny eyes and plucked hats from heads and sent them spinning into the air. A fire-eater balanced on the creature's back, a blaze of flames shooting from his mouth. Children tugged at the creature's brightly knitted scarf and gasped when it twined its nose around a small boy and lifted him onto its head. Ladies fainted at the sight of its enormous bottom.

"The circus! The circus!" the children cried, but fell silent as a large cage rolled slowly past them. The crowd shrank back. Three of the biggest cats Maggie had ever seen peered through the bars at the crowds. They growled and roared, revealing long, sharp teeth. One of them chewed on a large bone.

A caravan, painted in all the colours of the rainbow, trundled behind them. Music tinkled from its windows and blue smoke rose from its tiny chimney. The crowd surged forwards. Maggie gave a loud scream and fell into



the street. She watched helplessly as the caravan's iron wheels crunched steadily towards her.

A sudden rush of air lifted Maggie from the ground and a pair of feathered arms pulled her through the caravan window.

"Here you are dearie, home at last," a woman's voice soothed as the arms folded around her like a pair of giant wings. Maggie stared up at the bright apparition that held her so tightly. Eyes as bright as a summer sky were shuttered by purple-painted lids, a tiara swayed from a stiff mountain of orange hair and her lips blazed red. Maggie blinked – she had never seen so much colour on one person.

The stranger set her down, revealing the full effect of the blue and silver satin corset. A tiny skirt covered the tops of the woman's muscled legs. "My own dear one, fate has delivered you into my arms. I have been looking for a child like you for a very long time. You're the right size, the right shape, the right everything," the woman said, her eyes puddled with tears.

Maggie swayed on the caravan's travelling floor and gawped.

"Do you want to go back to where you came from? I'm not a kidnapper. I won't keep you against your will."

The delicious smell of apple pie and gammon wafted