

BEFORE

Merlin sat back in the rowing boat as the oars splashed and dipped, splashed and dipped. Beside him on the seat, his pen scribbled busily in his diary. High above in the cloudless sky, a flock of plump pink pigs flapped past on gossamer wings.

A winged fish leapt out of the SeaSky—close enough to touch its shimmering scales—and performed a loop-the-loop, scattering drops of SeaSky over Merlin's face before diving back down into the water. He leant over the side of the boat to watch the fish streak to join its flock, darting like a hummingbird through the translucent blue. Far below, at the very bottom of the SeaSky, water-clouds drifted. What would it be like to be that fish, to live in the SeaSky, free to leap and play? More fun than being a boy, on his way to Library Island for yet another boring lesson with a pile of fuddy-duddy Books.

Merlin turned to stare behind him once again, far across the SeaSky to where the dark shadow of an island crouched at the edge of the horizon, almost buried in heavy cloud.

It seemed to tug at his eyes like a magnet. Had it always been there? And if it had, how come he'd only noticed it a few weeks ago?

To me, he ordered his diary and pen and they floated into his hands. He shoved them into the pocket of his cloak and focused his attention on the oars again.

Row on, he told them. *Row to Library Island*. And the oars obeyed him. Merlin lay back, his face to the sun. The boat slid past his friend Vincent's place, the wake from the oars sending tiny wavelets slapping against the wooden stilts which anchored the little house in the SeaSky. There was no sign of Vincent's rowing boat. He must have already set off for Library Island. Merlin smirked. Vincent's Magic couldn't make the oars row for him. He would've had to row himself across the SeaSky, which meant sweat and sore arms. None of the others had the Magic of Command. And the more he practised it, the more powerful he felt inside.

Ahead, Library Island shimmered like a mirage. The Library, ivy-covered and turreted, towered above the beach, where tiny waves lapped upon the strip of pale sand. The rowing boat ground gently on the beach and Merlin jumped out. His cloak, stitched with hundreds of tiny mirrors, tinkled and flashed in the sun's light. Under his bare feet, the sand was warm. Vincent's boat was already there.

Fasten, Merlin ordered the loop of rope lying in the bottom of the boat, and the rope rose like a snake and wriggled over the sand towards a tree, winding itself around

a branch where Vincent's rope was already tied. Merlin turned and gazed one last time at the dark island, then set off up the beach towards the Library.

A small round mirror hung from a nail on the Library door, facing out to the SeaSky like a watching eye. As Merlin approached, he noticed that the distant, dark island was reflected in the mirror. He walked up to it until his own face stared back at him—a boy with slanting green eyes, like a cat's, and black hair tied back into a pigtail. Carved into the mirror's wooden frame were the words:

WHO ARE YOU?

'Merlin,' he said, and waited for the door to open. Nothing happened.

Open, he ordered it. It didn't.

Merlin frowned and pushed at the door, but it stayed firmly shut. Suddenly, his reflection seemed to swim and swirl and break into pieces as if someone had tossed a pebble into a pond. When it settled again, his reflection had changed: his head had swollen to twice its normal size, his mouth curled into a smug smirk and his green eyes flashed with self-importance. A voice spoke from the mirror.

'Be careful, Merlin. None are so empty as those who are full of conceit.'

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the image swirled and broke up again and his own reflection stared back at him.

Merlin blinked. What was *that* about? The door creaked slowly open and he stepped into the Library.

The fusty smell of ancient Books tickled his nostrils. A ladder leant precariously against the rows of bookshelves. Vincent balanced on it, trying to pull out a large volume from the highest shelf. Merlin grinned. Vincent didn't have the Magic to summon Books from shelves, to make things obey him.

Lately—ever since he'd noticed that dark island—he'd wanted to wind Vincent up. He turned to the door behind him.

Slam! he ordered it.

The door crashed shut. Vincent swivelled on the ladder, lost his footing and tumbled, all arms and legs in a flurry of Books. In a flash, Merlin summoned a plump cushion from an armchair and sent it flying across the room to catch Vincent's fall. Vincent landed on it and three heavy Books crashed to the floor beside him. He stumbled to his feet, his thin, dark face screwed up in anger.

'Why'd you do that?'

Merlin shrugged. 'Just a joke.'

'A joke?' Vincent stayed where he was, scowling at him. 'Do I look like I'm laughing?'

Merlin wandered over to inspect the three Books lying splayed on the floor. He made a face at the first, which he and Vincent had read last week. *The Book of Wasteland's* cover was dreary, damp and grey, and just looking at it made him tired. He bent to the second. It had a strange, cobwebby cover and a wispy white title:

THE BOOK OF FORGETTING

Even as he stared at the words, they began to melt away.

To me, he summoned it, holding out his hands. The Book suddenly grew a pair of fine white wings and fluttered up to the topmost shelf, where it slipped into place among the other volumes. Merlin frowned. The stupid Books in the Library would still only obey him when *they* decided to. As if to prove the point, two sturdy little legs sprouted from *The Book of Wasteland* and it, too, stomped over to the bookshelves and jumped up to join the others.

Vincent was still moaning on. 'What's got into you? Just because you can make things obey you, it doesn't mean you're better than us. You've changed—writing in that diary of yours, keeping secrets. Your Magic's made you big-headed.'

The image of his head, swollen up in the mirror, jumped into Merlin's mind and he quickly shook it away. Vincent glared at him.

'You've turned into a right pain-in-the—'

'Lighten up.'

Vincent was no fun any more—he was jealous of Merlin's Magic. Merlin bent to look at the third Book. On its jet-black cover, silver letters spelt out the title:

THE BOOK OF SECRETS

This was more interesting. Before he could summon it, the Book sprouted dry, scaly wings—like a bat’s—and flapped up to land in his hands.

‘Look.’ He turned the cover towards Vincent. ‘Let’s see what it’s got to say.’

Vincent muttered something under his breath. Merlin carried the Book to a desk and plumped down in a chair and Vincent reluctantly joined him. Merlin ordered it: *Open.*

The Book creaked open. Its pages were completely empty.

‘Go on, then,’ said Vincent. ‘Make it read to us.’

Read.

The Book began to whisper, in a shadowy voice:

‘Since time began, the Land of Magics has been the home of children like you—children who never grow old. Each of you possesses a different Magic. But beware: Magics can be used for good or for ill.’

‘For ill?’ Merlin frowned.

Vincent stared at him meaningfully. The Book went on whispering.

‘Look too long at dark places, and dark events will occur, as sure as night follows day.’

Dark places. The island on the horizon crept into Merlin’s mind again. He shook his head irritably. Why did the Books always have to be so gloomy, warning him not to do things?

‘*Beware the Island of Darkness,*’ whispered the Book, as if it knew what he was thinking. ‘*Beware the Creature*

imprisoned in the Maze. A terrible fate awaits any child who gazes upon her.'

'What—what Creature?' Vincent shivered.

'Heed my warning. Ignore it at your peril. Do not venture into the dark places. Curiosity kills cats.'

The Book snapped shut. Its scaly black wings unfolded and it flapped up to the bookshelves. Merlin watched it slip back into place. Then he stood up and went over to the window. The island was a dark smudge on the horizon.

Vincent came to stand beside him. 'Best not look at it,' he said in a low voice.

'Too scared?' said Merlin.

'What d'you mean?' Vincent's dark eyes flashed with fury. 'Didn't you hear what the Book said?'

'Why should we believe everything the Books say? What if the Books are lying? What if this—this Creature in the Maze is just a story made up to scare us?'

The air suddenly filled with a cacophony of angry voices. The bookshelves vibrated. Every Book stamped and muttered.

'There's your answer.' Vincent turned and headed for the door.

Merlin said loudly: 'Only joking.' The Books' uproar died down. As Vincent reached for the door handle, Merlin ordered it:

Stick.

Vincent turned the handle, but nothing happened. He tugged at the door.

Open.

The door jerked open with such force that Vincent slipped and fell to the floor. After a moment, he slowly got to his feet, his thin face twisted with anger.

‘Think you’re so clever, don’t you, Merlin?’ he hissed. ‘Think you know better than the Books—just because you can make them read? Well, prove it!’

‘What are you on about?’

‘Prove that this—this *Creature* doesn’t exist. Prove that the Books are wrong. I dare you!’

The shelves began to vibrate again. Merlin glanced at them, then back at Vincent.

‘Nah,’ he said loudly. ‘Can’t be bothered.’ The Books quietened immediately.

Vincent shook his head, rubbing his back from the fall. He didn’t look angry any more. He just looked sad.

‘I thought you were my friend,’ he said. ‘Friends don’t do this stuff.’ He turned and went.

For a moment, Merlin stared at the empty doorway. Then he shrugged. Too bad if Vincent had no sense of humour. No sense of adventure, either. His loss. He turned back to the window, shaded his eyes against the sun and gazed at the endless blue SeaSky, and at the island—the Island of Darkness—on the horizon. Vincent had dared him to do what *he* was too scared to do himself.

I’ll show him.

A strange shiver passed down his spine.

Not fear, he told himself. *Excitement.*



Below, on the beach, Vincent trudged over the sand towards his rowing boat.

The Books were silent now, but Merlin knew they were watching him. He patted his cloak pocket where his diary was.

Time to go home and make a plan.