

THE CASE OF THE DREAMING DRAGON

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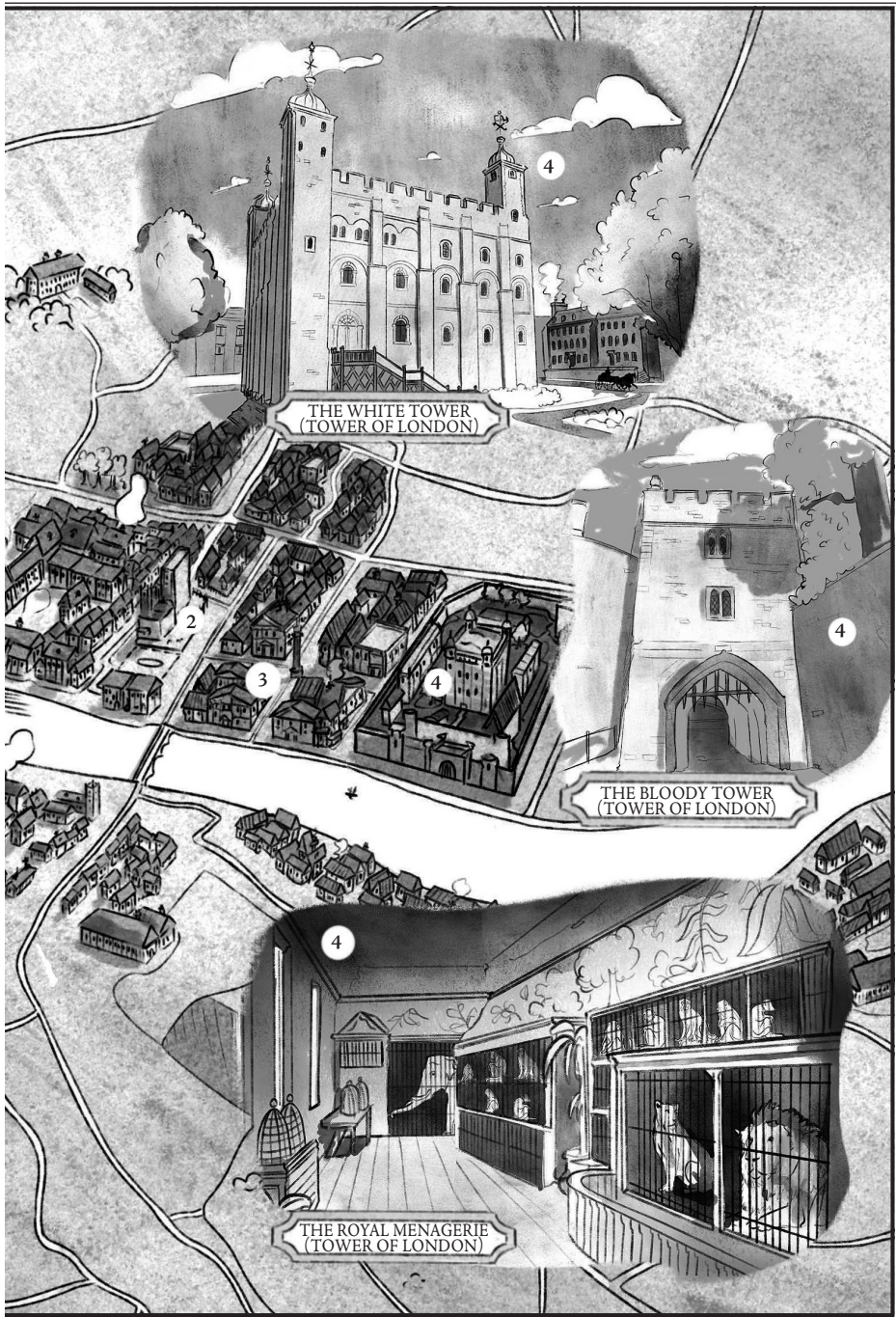
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THE WHITE TOWER
(TOWER OF LONDON)

THE BLOODY TOWER
(TOWER OF LONDON)

THE ROYAL MENAGERIE
(TOWER OF LONDON)



THE DRAGON OF MARY-LE-BOW

The Dragon swung in a full circle against the wind. She'd been moored to the great golden weathervane for nearly a hundred years. It was such a short time, but how the city had changed. Before she was here, the Great Fire had surged through the streets of London, turning everything to embers and ash. Then, slowly, she had watched the city being rebuilt along the traces of the old roads: new houses, new shops, new churches.

She could leave if she wanted to, separating into

the thousands and thousands of black fiery creatures that formed her. She could swarm away and hide in the cracks between the cobblestones and reform into a Dragon elsewhere. But she stayed here, watching the streets below.

The great Bow bells in the belfry beneath her had rung nine o'clock a while ago. At night-time, the streets of London were dark but rarely empty. Her Dragon eyes shone into the shadowy nooks, seeing everything. A rag seller was tucked against the wall in the churchyard, wrapped in scraps of linen and silk as a shroud against the cold night. He smiled. His dreams must have been taking him somewhere warm and kind. Candles flickered in the windows of the grand Mercers' Hall on Ironmongers Lane and, behind that, faint ghosts moved around St Olave's churchyard.

And here were the children, hungry and barefoot, searching for treasure – dropped coins, lost handkerchiefs, an apple rolled to the side of the road and forgotten. There were six of them, keeping close together for safety, with one guttering candle between them. The Dragon heard them laughing and calling each other's names as they darted about. They stopped by the slumbering rag seller. One stooped down and tugged at the shroud, but they moved on, leaving him to his dreams.

The Dragon spun round again, surveying east to west – the Lord Mayor’s Mansion House where her Dragon cousin was locked, starving, in the cellar by the devious Goldsmith. Then past the Royal Exchange and the Bank of England and the crowded, stinking Poultry Compter, crammed with despairing prisoners. A nightman’s cart headed north along King Street, the barrels, scrapers and brooms rattling in the back. While Londoners slept, the nightmen cleaned the stinking cesspits.

She swung back round and—

Where were the children? Oh, there they were, picking their way through George Yard, gathering splinters of wood and twigs. But something was wrong.

Two bright sparks like eyes. She looked more closely. They *were* eyes. Burning rat-red eyes in a child’s face.

The Dragon wasn’t good at understanding human age – she’d lived far too long and human years were like seconds to her. The rat-eyed child was small, but old enough to walk and talk. Perhaps eight or nine human years? It moved quickly, its nose twitching, hunched forward as if smelling the air around it. Then it squeezed its body into a nook beneath a crumbling wall.

There was a second rat-child, though this one was upright, like a human. It was only the sudden red shine from its eyes that gave it away. The gang of street children

stopped still, the candle raised higher. The rat-child stretched out its hand. Perhaps it held food or coin. The Dragon wanted to roar at the street children, warn them, but the Whittington Articles forbade Elementals from revealing themselves to humans unless there were very special circumstances. The Goldsmith harshly punished those who broke rules.

The first rat-child leaped from the darkness by the wall. The children jumped back. The candle fell and was extinguished. A child shouted for help, but the humans that came seized the street children, binding their wrists and ankles. Hoods were thrown over their heads. They were thrown into the back of a cart that clattered away to the east.

The Dragon twisted full circle, again and again, thinking about what she had seen. She should have warned those children of the danger! She should have ignored the Goldsmith and accepted any punishment dealt to her! Those weren't the first eyes she'd seen burning through the darkness. These weren't the first street children that had disappeared. It had happened before – a century ago, when the deadly Plague had raged through London. Was it happening again?

No! It must never happen again! That time, she'd only looked on and done nothing. This time she would

act. Who could she trust? Certainly not her own kind: fire spirit Dragons who obeyed the Goldsmith's every word. The Fumi air spirits had no interest in helping the Solids – the humans, who pumped stinking smoke into the skies. The earth spirits, the Magogs, were only interested in waiting for their leaders to awaken – the giants Gog and Magog, who slept on the Thames riverbed. The Chad water spirits also had no sympathy for the humans, who made London's rivers dirty and sluggish. And as for the humans, they had no interest in anything but themselves.

No! That wasn't completely true. She spun round until she faced north. There *were* two humans that she could trust – children that had saved London from destruction twice before.

Marisee Blackwell and Robert Strong, where are you?