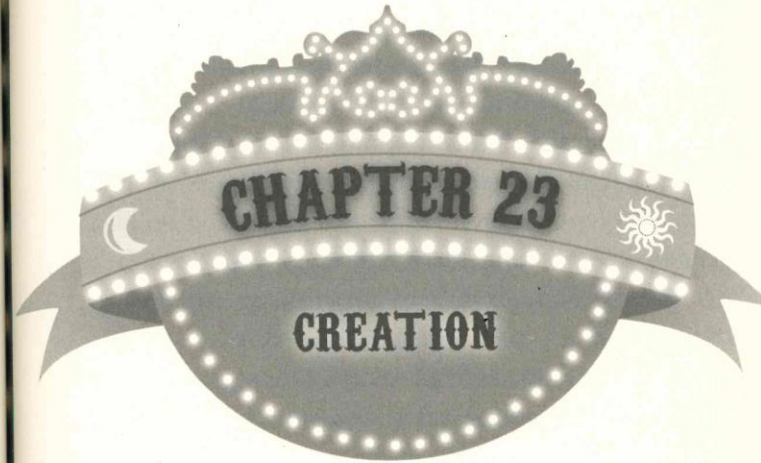


Monday

Sharpe had saved his life twice now, after all. The stress of the crumbling Emporium and of Mr Silver's disappearance might be taking its toll. He hoped so.

All the same, Ellie had been right. Sharpe was Daniel's responsibility.

From now on he'd watch his every move.



Edinburgh, June 1896

A pair of well-worn grey shoes stepped from the train carriage onto the platform of Edinburgh's Waverley Station. Lucien Silver had come home.

His handsome face was now a little more lived-in. The hair was a tangle of wild waves, the chin dotted with dark stubble.

He stayed for a few days in a modest hotel near the centre of the city. He walked the wide streets, occasionally stumbling upon a building or a point of view that would spark hazy memories of rare trips outside the walls of Castlefoot Home for Lost Boys.

On his third day, Lucien discovered an empty

building in one of Edinburgh's narrow backstreets. He asked around, learning that the shop belonged to an elderly baker who had retired and left it empty.

On the morning of Lucien's fourth day back in Edinburgh, word of something remarkable began to spread. The old baker's shop was gone. It had been replaced (overnight, it seemed) with a grand building made of sparkling black stone. An Emporium of some sort, though nobody was exactly sure what it might sell.

Some described the place as a living dream. Some said that the young man who ran the shop must be a genius, an illusionist with no equal, for inside the shop they had seen Wonders beyond belief, or science, or reason.

Word of mouth is a magic of its own. Many that lived in the city, or nearby, became bewitched, returning again and again, sometimes every day. When journalists and writers picked up on the story, a new wave of patrons descended on Edinburgh, eager to see the work of the remarkable young man they'd read about. They came from Glasgow and Newcastle, Liverpool and London and beyond. None were disappointed.

And nobody ever suspected that the magic was real.

Lucien lined his pockets with more money than he ever imagined. He barely slept. His days were spent

running the Emporium, his nights imagining new Wonders to capture the imagination of the public.

With every stroke of the pen he would remember Vindictus Sharpe's cold words in the graveyard, words that fuelled his every move: *"You will never be better than me. I rescued you from the gutter, and that is where I expect you to return..."*

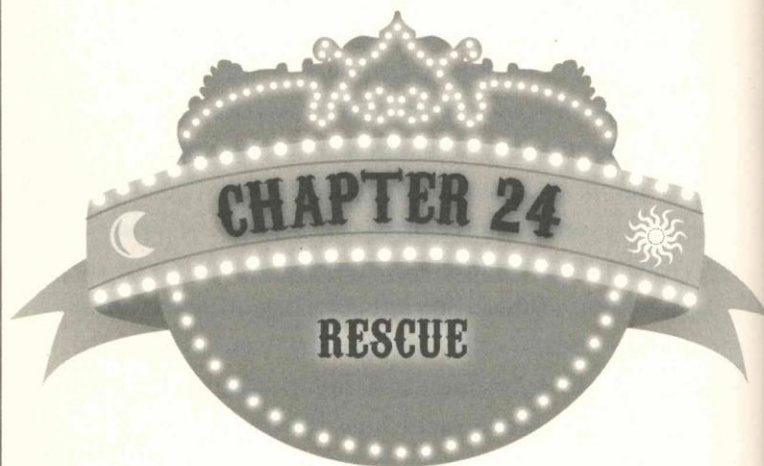
Lucien had no intention of ever returning to the gutter. He wished beyond anything that one day Sharpe would walk through the doors. Then he would laugh in his face, and Sharpe would be forced to admit the cleverness of Lucien's magic.

In the meantime, the Nowhere Emporium was open for business.

Yes indeed.

And business was booming.

Tuesday



The Emporium's decay was speeding up. The cracks in the walls grew, and chunks of stone began to break away. The once shining black brick seemed dull and lifeless. Lamps had flickered out, and could not be relit. Doors began to lock without explanation. A strange illness was beginning to strike the staff; they became weak and fevered.

Daniel felt it too; his connection with the shop was fading. There were frightening moments when he found himself lost and confused, only for his knowledge to return.

Several times, Sharpe left the Emporium at night, complaining that he needed to eat – though Daniel had never seen anything pass his lips except whisky. When

Sharpe was gone, Daniel sometimes found himself hoping that he wouldn't come back. The uneasy feeling in his gut was getting stronger, and the more time he spent with the magician, the more positively Daniel felt he was hiding something.

One night, when Sharpe was out, Daniel checked in on his friends.

Caleb was revelling in his role as organiser. Every day he'd been sending out groups of vendors and performers to the increasingly dangerous far reaches of the Emporium. There were phantom sightings and false alarms, but no Mr Silver.

And no Ellie.

"We've discovered a long-lost part of the Emporium," Caleb told Daniel. "A secret tunnel! It'll take days to properly search it, and Ellie has gone with the expedition."

"They won't find him," said Daniel, and he told Caleb about his attempt to write in the book, and the door that almost ate him.

"So you think Silver is alive?" said Caleb. "That's great news!"

"Maybe," said Daniel, "but why doesn't he want anyone to find him? What's he doing? What's he so scared of?"

"We should call off the search parties," said Caleb.

"Agreed," said Daniel, and the thought that Ellie would finally be coming back cheered him. He missed

her. He missed how she made him happy and angry and want to tear his hair out all at the same time. And he had been terrified that something would happen to her, that she'd be caught in one of the crumbling Wonders as it self-destructed. He hoped she'd be able to help him work out what was going on. And just having her around would make him less nervous about spending time with Sharpe.



Daniel heard the screams for help on a Monday morning.

He followed the noise, up and around, and found a corridor half caved-in, blocked by fallen chunks of roof and wall.

The muffled ring of shattering glass spilled from a warped, twisted door near the blockage.

The screams grew louder, more desperate.

Daniel ran to the door and tried to open it, but it was bent and jammed. He kicked at the handle, again and again, until at last the door burst open, revealing a palace made entirely of glass. It was beautiful. It was delicate and shimmering. And it was falling apart. Everywhere the glass was marked by crawling, inching cracks. The sound of glass popping and shattering was all around. As Daniel followed the screams, long shards fell inches from him, exploding on the floor in countless

sparkling fragments. He pressed onward, dodging and weaving, until he ducked under a doorway, entering a grand dining room.

His heart almost stopped. Anja was lying over a glass table. Her eyes were shut. A pool of black liquid, like ink, had formed around her and was dripping from the table to the floor. Stuck deep in her shoulder was a glass blade as long as Daniel's arm.

"Anja! Anja, I'm here! It's Daniel. Can you hear me?"

She didn't move, didn't acknowledge him in any way. Daniel struggled to drape her over his shoulder. Then he began to pull her away, her limp feet dragging on the floor as the dining room crashed down around them. Out into the main hall, and he gathered pace. But white-hot pain flashed in his foot, and he dropped to the ground, Anja landing awkwardly on top of him. Daniel knew his foot was bleeding; he could feel the hot blood pouring from the wound. He also knew if he didn't get Anja out they'd both be stuck many times over with razor-sharp glass. As the shattering roar became unbearable, he struggled up and dragged Anja through the door, jamming it shut behind.

"Help! Somebody help!"

"Daniel!"

Vindictus Sharpe sped towards them, blue eyes almost glowing in the dim light.

"Mr Sharpe! You've got to help her! Oh, she can't die. Please don't let her die!"

Sharpe brushed Daniel aside, crouched low over Anja. He felt her throat.

"She's alive."

Daniel slumped to the floor in relief. Sharpe pulled the glass shard from Anja's shoulder and a jet of black spurted high into the air. Then Sharpe's eyes closed and he muttered under his breath, his fingers tracing the outline of the deep gash. The pouring liquid slowed. Then it stopped. Torn skin began to knit together until nothing remained but the thinnest of scars.

Sharpe turned his attention to Daniel.

"This will hurt. Close your eyes."



Daniel sat by the fire sipping hot tea to steady his nerves as he waited for Sharpe to return. When the big man swept through the curtain from the labyrinth of corridors, Daniel leapt up.

"What happened? Will Anja be OK?"

Sharpe removed his coat, hung it near the door, and took a silver flask from the pocket, swallowing a mouthful of the liquid inside.

"She should recover. But even then, there's every chance she'll catch the sickness that's spreading

through the staff. Without Lucien they are rotting away, just like the Emporium. It's not blood inside them. It's ink."

Daniel pushed his palm against the cool glass of the window. Hot tears gathered in his eyes. Why was it that everything he loved, or cared about, or depended on went away in the end? What was wrong with him?

Sharp said, "I don't believe there's much time left." His big hands were pressed together, like he was praying. "We need to find Lucien. Now."

Daniel shook his head. "I've been thinking. Mr Silver has always done what's best for this place. Why would he stop now? If I'm right, and he doesn't want to be found, then there must be a reason. I trust him."

"Do you trust him enough to die here if you're wrong?" said Sharpe. "Look ... Lucien is *ill*. You said so yourself. He might not be thinking clearly. He might have gone mad for all we know. If we don't find him, I promise you, everything in this shop, including your friends, will be gone. And you're going to have to start thinking about life outside the Emporium again."

Daniel stared desperately.

"I don't want to leave."

"Then help me!"

"How?"

Sharpe let out a deep sigh.

"I know Lucien better than anyone. I know how

his mind works. Perhaps if I were to study the *Book of Wonders*, I might find something that you have missed. The tiniest clue can make all the difference."

Daniel reached for his pocket. He brought the book out and stared at the battered cover. He was tired, and frightened, and confused. Could Sharpe be right? Was it possible Mr Silver was losing his mind?

"It is your decision," said Sharpe. "If you do not wish me to have the book, I understand." He pointed to the gold watch on his wrist. "But time is running out. And consider this: how would you feel if the Emporium slipped away and you knew that you had not done *everything* in your power to save it? To save your friends?"

Daniel's hand trembled as he clutched the book. Sharpe was right: how could he ignore any chance, no matter how small, of saving his home and the people who had filled his life with magic?

He held out the *Book of Wonders*.

Sharpe stared at it. He licked his lips, reached out hungry fingers. Just like that, the *Book of Wonders* was gone, nestling in Sharpe's hands.

"How can I help?" Daniel asked.

Sharpe tore his eyes from the book.

"Mmm? Oh ... I insist on doing this alone, boy. I won't achieve much with you staring over my shoulder. Besides, you've been through quite an ordeal today. It's best if you rest."

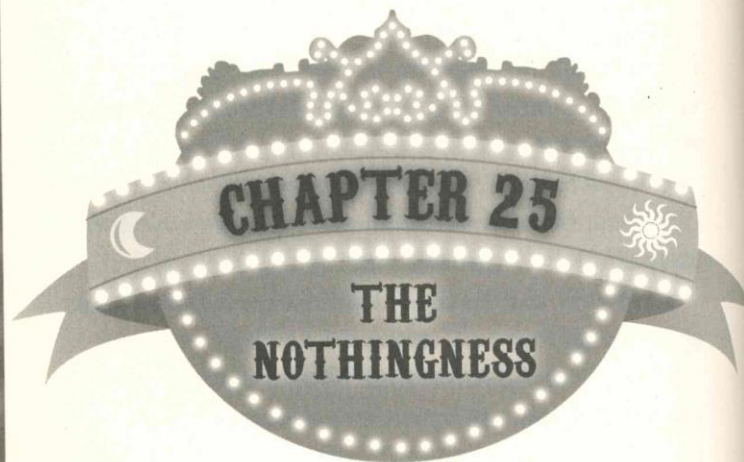
As Sharpe spoke, Daniel's eyelids grew heavy, and tiredness weighed upon his shoulders. "You'll tell me if you find anything?" he managed to say through a yawn as he slumped into a dusty old armchair near the window.

Sharpe flashed those white teeth.

"If I find what I am looking for, boy, you will know about it. Believe me."

And with that he turned and swept away through the curtain.

Daniel watched after him. Somewhere in the back of his head, something was screaming out at him. But he did not care any more. Tiredness wrapped around him, suffocating the world, and he curled up in the deep chair and closed his eyes.



CHAPTER 25

THE NOTHINGNESS

Daniel woke with a start. Several of the clocks on the walls displayed the date as well as the time, and they told him that he'd slept through an entire day. It was strange how tiredness had crept over him just as he'd given the book to Sharpe...

Daniel's hand touched the empty pocket. He thought of the book. Usually, when he wished to find anything in the Emporium – an object or a place – he would simply hold a picture of it in his mind and he would know in an instant where it could be located. But now, when he pictured the *Book of Wonders*, he could see nothing. There was a blind spot in his vision, like static interference, and it was not being caused by the weakening Emporium. The only explanation was

that Sharpe was blocking him, purposely keeping him at arm's length. And why would he do that? What did he have to hide?

Sharpe had made everything seem so hopeless, made Daniel think handing over the *Book of Wonders* was the only option left. But now his head was clear, Daniel was starting to realise the enormity of his mistake.

In half a beat he was through the curtain, and right away it was obvious that something had changed. Looking at the decaying great hall of stairways was like visiting some ancient ruin, or the site of a disaster. The stairs were worn and broken. Many of the flickering torches had died, casting the corridors in cold shadow and gloom. The air was tinged with the taste of smoke, and thick dust, and of something sour and metallic. In the day Daniel had been asleep, the Emporium's disease had progressed rapidly.

A terrible thought knocked the wind from him: the Nowhere Hotel! Would it still be standing? Were his friends OK?

Sprinting through the dark, Daniel found his path blocked time and again by the debris of collapsed corridors. A Wonder called the Shipwreck had burst open, flooding several passages with waist-deep water, full of colourful fish.

The door to the Nowhere Hotel was, like many of the other Wonders, cracked and warped. As soon as

Daniel saw it he knew something bad had happened inside. The revolving door deposited him in the lobby, which had been so vibrant and grand the last time he visited. Now it was silent. Lights flickered on and off, and columns of black marble were crumbling. There were fissures in the floor and places where the ceiling had collapsed.

"Hello?" said Daniel, flinching at the sound of his own voice. There was no answer. He did not want to go any further. He was scared, both of the lonely gloom and of what might have happened to his friends. But his friends were exactly the reason he had to go on. Ellie lived in this place and it was impossible for her to escape. What if she was trapped somewhere? What if she was hurt? But where? Which room was hers? Where should he begin his search?

"Caleb's room!" he said to himself. "What number was it? What number, what number, what number ... 108! It was 108!"

He ran to the elevator, punched the button. Nothing happened. "Of course it isn't working," said Daniel to the Emporium. "Why make things easy for me?" He kicked the wall, and a chunk of black marble broke off and thudded to his feet.

The stairs were narrow and steep, all bare concrete and flickering strip lights, and as Daniel climbed floor after floor the Nowhere Hotel creaked and groaned around him. He knew it could all fall apart at any

moment, knew that this Wonder could disappear from existence as easily as any of the others. But he pushed through the fear.

When he reached the tenth floor his legs and lungs were burning.

Keep going. Keep going.

Through the door, he took a slow step forward, and another, and then he froze. A metre or two in front of him, where there should have been floor and walls, should have been the door to Caleb's room, should have been something, anything ... there was nothing.

The walls came to a jagged stop, like some monster had bitten the corridor in half. The floor stopped suddenly, a lip of ragged black carpet; and beyond, opening up in every direction, was a darkness that went on forever. Daniel stared into the black, saw no wreckage, no light, no sign that anything at all had ever existed. He imagined stepping off the edge, falling into that nothingness, tumbling forever, losing all memory of who he was or how long he'd been there, until he became part of the nothing too, part of the fabric of the darkness. Lost.

Was Caleb lost? Anja? Had the nothing swallowed Ellie?

He tore one foot from the floor and stepped back. A deep rumble filled the place, like the breath of a sleeping giant. A small section of floor and wall broke off and spun away into the nothing as the world

lurched violently forwards, throwing Daniel onto the carpet. He landed with a thud, knocking the wind from his body, and rolled and skidded and bumped out of control towards an unimaginable fall. He threw out a desperate hand. His fingers found the ragged edge of the black carpet, and he clung on and managed to stop himself going all the way over. His lower body was now hanging out over the edge of the abyss. His grip tightened desperately on the carpet, but the weight of him was beginning to fray the material and he watched in helpless horror as the carpet ripped slowly, slowly, and finally snapped. He fell back with a sickening jerk—

A hand, huge and warm, wrapped around his wrist, hoisted him high. He was slung over a wide shoulder, and he watched, blinking the sweat from his eyes, as the remainder of the floor began breaking and crumbling like dry cake.

I'm dead, he thought.

The person who was carrying him leapt back, just as the floor collapsed completely, and for a moment Daniel felt like he was back in the Leap of Faith, soaring through the sky. Then they landed, and rolled, and tumbled, and Daniel was flung against something hard and cold.

"Are you all right?"

Daniel rubbed his head and face. There was a smear of fresh blood on his hand. Standing over him, looking down with a concerned expression,

was Caleb. They were back in the stairwell, but the nothing was spreading. The door to the tenth floor was being swallowed up, and the walls of the stairwell were already beginning to crack.

Daniel threw his arms around Caleb. "You saved my life!" he said. "Where is everyone? Is Ellie all right?"

"Let's talk on the move," said Caleb. "The further we are from the edge, the better."

Daniel noticed Caleb flinch as they descended the stairs. He seemed to be favouring one of his arms, holding it tight to his body. There was something else — something missing.

"Where's Mr Bobo?" Daniel had never seen Caleb without his ragged, no-eyed teddy bear.

Caleb's lip trembled. "He didn't make it," he said in a low, sad voice. "You saw. My room is gone. Bobo was inside when it ... when it was swallowed by the dark." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. When he lowered the hanky, a drop of ink trickled from his nostril. He wiped his nose with his hand, and stared at the black smear on his skin.

"I suppose I should have expected it eventually," he said with a sad sigh. "We're all just characters in Silver's book, and we'll fade to nothing without him ... just like the Emporium. Half of us were wiped out when the hotel began to crumble. Most of the survivors are dying of illness. It seems I can now count myself in that category."

"Anja?" said Daniel. "Did she make it?"

"She survived," said Caleb. "She is still recovering from her injuries." He smiled, and placed a massive hand on Daniel's shoulder. "I heard you saved her. Everyone knows, Daniel Holmes, and we thank you. We are in your debt forever."

"The way things are going there won't be time for tomorrow, never mind forever," said Daniel. "Where are the rest of the staff?"

"Silver made a hospital wing years ago," said Caleb. "In case anything ever happened to his customers. It has never been used until now. Thankfully it's still in one piece. For the moment at least." He let out a wheeze, wiped inky blood from the corner of his mouth. He waved away Daniel's concerned look. "There's nothing can be done for the ill. We can only make them as comfortable as possible."

"And Ellie?" asked Daniel. "Have you seen her?"

Caleb shook his head.

"Her search party was due to be the last back. They haven't returned yet."

"She's still out there?" Daniel leaned against the wall and put his face in his hands.

Caleb sighed. "She's tough," he said. "I'm sure she'll make it back." He paused to wipe his nose again, and then went on. "There is something I think you should know. Ellie doesn't have a condition; there's no

magical disease that stops her from leaving the shop. It's Mr Silver who's keeping her here."

"What? You mean she's his prisoner?"

"He loves her very much," said Caleb. "But he says Ellie must stay for her own protection. He will not tell her exactly what she needs protecting from. Ellie thinks he is being selfish. She believes Mr Silver keeps her in the shop because he doesn't want to be alone. So, you can see why she's so desperate. Not only is her father missing, but he is the only one who can release her from this place. She is trapped in a crumbling tomb."

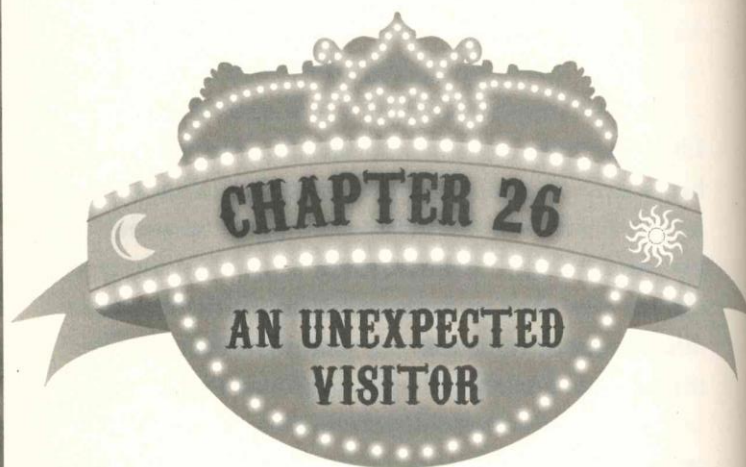
They reached the lobby, the fire-eater and the boy, and stood face to face at the exit.

"You are not carrying the *Book of Wonders*," said Caleb, indicating Daniel's empty inside pocket. "I can sense when it is close by. It's the first time I've seen you without it since Silver disappeared." He began to cough wildly, and leaned on the wall, wiping more inky blood from his face.

"I have to go," said Daniel, worry swelling in his chest. He didn't dare confess that he'd given the book away. "Try to look after the others, and yourself. And if you see Ellie please tell her I'm so sorry and I need her help. I'll see you soon."

He turned away, wondering if he'd ever see the fire-breather again, and began to walk the lonely corridors in search of Vindictus Sharpe and the *Book of Wonders*.

Wednesday



Edinburgh, June 1897

Lucien Silver's Emporium was the talk of Edinburgh, and far beyond. There were days when the shop was so busy that he barely remembered a face, the stream of customers becoming a blur of smiles and compliments.

But on the first anniversary of the Emporium's opening, Lucien was introduced to a face he would never forget.

He had placed an advertisement in each of the city newspapers, announcing that entry to the Emporium would be free. On the day itself, Silver sat at his desk near the red velvet curtain, nodding to passing

customers. Many of them commented that it seemed impossible that so many wondrous rooms could exist in a stick-thin little shop.

Near the end of the day, someone approached the desk. At first, Lucien did not look up from his book, but then he heard a familiar voice, deep and firm and cold.

"Hello, Lucien."

Vindictus Sharpe had not aged a day since their last encounter in the rainy Edinburgh graveyard. This did not shock Lucien. In his travels before he settled back in Edinburgh, he had discovered layers of magic that were hidden to all but a select few, magic that could unlock the mysteries of life and time and the universe. He was more certain now than ever that he knew the secret to Vindictus Sharpe's long life. Sharpe was stealing the future from innocent people; stealing time and adding it to his own life.

Lucien stood. He had been waiting for this moment for a long, long time; to be able to rub his success in Sharpe's face, to show him how wrong he'd been. He had actually stayed awake at night imagining exactly what he'd say if they ever crossed paths again.

This was the chance.

Something shifted behind Sharpe. He moved aside, and Lucien's eyes met those of a second person.

All thoughts of Sharpe were lost.

The young woman was perhaps a year or two younger than Lucien. Her skin was fair and freckled,

and her hair fell in tumbling red curls over her shoulders.

"This is Michelle, my daughter," said Sharpe.

Michelle held out a porcelain hand, and Lucien kissed it. As his lips touched her skin, the air in the room seemed to shiver and crackle.

Lucien pulled at his necktie. "Pleasure to meet you. I ... I don't recall your father ever mentioning a daughter."

Sharpe sat on the edge of the desk and began examining one of Lucien's fountain pens. "There were a great many things I did not mention. Michelle has been in boarding school most of her life. I travel the world, and that is no way for a young girl to grow up."

Lucien nodded. He felt his gaze drawn back to Michelle.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked. "What brings you to Edinburgh?"

"Business," said Sharpe. "I am booked to perform in Edinburgh for one month. Word of your work has reached me from the magic committee." At this he glanced around the shop. "I could not resist stopping by for a peek."

Lucien smiled. "Then a peek you shall have. Miss Sharpe, would you care for a tour of my Emporium?"

Michelle Sharpe's blue eyes met Lucien Silver's thunder-grey ones. She smiled a shy smile. "I'd like that very much, Mr Silver," she said.

And so Lucien led the way, taking great delight in Michelle's amazement, using every opportunity to remind Sharpe how the idea for the Emporium was born in the very same notes he had dismissed as nonsense.

Two hours later, when the tour was complete, Lucien watched Sharpe and his daughter stride down the narrow street.

He was sure of two things.

Number one: he had surpassed Sharpe in every possible way. More importantly, Sharpe was aware of this fact, and it would eat away at his insides like an infestation of maggots. This thought made Lucien very happy.

Number two: Michelle Sharpe was nothing like her father. She was enchanting and warm, and Lucien knew that he must, no matter what it took, see her again.

His wish was granted the next day.

Michelle returned to the Emporium, and this time she was not with her father.

"I had to see it all again," she confessed. "It is remarkable, and impossible. I couldn't stop thinking of you or your Emporium when I left."

They walked the shop's ever-growing number of corridors, Michelle laughing in delight when rain began to fall in one of the passageways. Lucien produced a black umbrella seemingly from nowhere and held it over her head.

The day passed in a haze of shy laughter.

As she left, Michelle gave him a lopsided smile. "I

don't think my father likes you very much."

Lucien breathed in her words. "The feeling is mutual," he said.

"You're not scared of him the way everyone else is, are you?" Michelle said.

"No. Being frightened of him is only giving him what he wants."

Michelle beamed at him. Then she did something he had not been expecting. She leaned in, pressing her lips gently against his mouth.

When the kiss was over, Lucien stumbled back a step, ran flustered hands through his tangled hair. "What ... er ... what was that for?"

But she only smiled and turned away, through the door to the cool Edinburgh sunshine. Lucien watched her, his face pressed against the glass of the shop window, until she turned the corner and was gone.

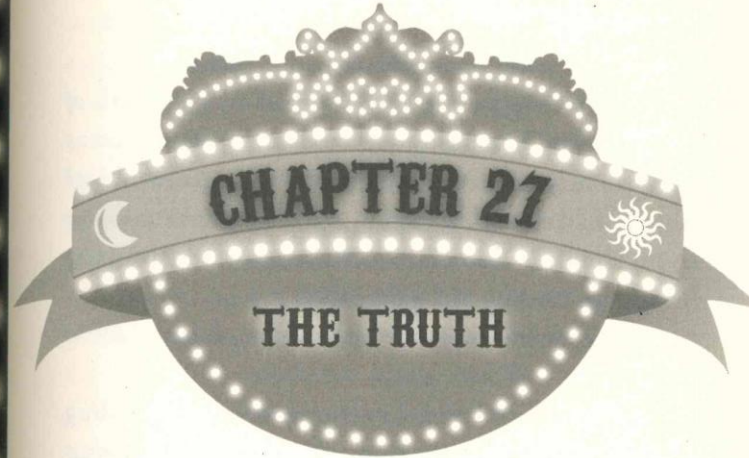


Lucien and Michelle spent every day of the following month together, hidden away from the world. Each night, he would create a new Wonder to bewitch her. The sound of her laughter was intoxicating, and the touch of her lips a drug to which he soon became addicted.

Beat by beat, Michelle Sharpe was stealing Lucien Silver's heart.

If only he had known what was next on her list.

Thursday



Daniel's worry was turning to cold panic. He had rushed back to the shop front to look for Sharpe, but he wasn't there. He prayed that all of this was a misunderstanding, that Sharpe simply wanted privacy to study each page in his quest to find Mr Silver.

But as Daniel paced anxiously around the dusty room he grew more certain that Ellie had been right, that there was something off about Sharpe. He began to move the pieces around in his mind, struggling to fit them together: Sharpe had shown up only days after Silver's disappearance; there was a hungry look in his eyes every time he caught sight of the *Book of Wonders*; Daniel had fallen into a

deep sleep after handing him the book and hadn't seen or heard from him since...

Just like that, the puzzle clicked together.

If the wrong person got hold of it, the *Book of Wonders* could be used to hurt the Emporium just as easily as help it. It couldn't be a coincidence, could it? Sharpe had the book, and everything was crumbling so much faster. Somehow, his presence was speeding things up, causing more damage.

And there was one room where that damage could be fatal.

Daniel ran and ran, his legs and lungs pleading for rest. He needed to know if he was right about Sharpe. And he now knew beyond doubt he had to get the *Book of Wonders* back. Without it, everything Mr Silver had ever created would be lost.

But as he made his way deeper into the corridors, his mind clouded, and he became confused, losing all sense of direction. His connection with the shop was fading again.

"Not now. Please!"

A twist and a turn, leaping down a staircase three steps at a time, and another and another, until one of the stairs crumbled beneath him, and he rolled the final few steps and landed with an awkward slap on the floor.

Daniel's arm throbbed. He fought back the tears, clenching his fists.

A flutter of wings. A flash of silver.

Something clipped Daniel's shoulder, and landed with a graceful hop beside him. The silver magpie twitched its head to one side, observed him for a few seconds. Then it called out again, and almost immediately the second bird appeared, gliding in a circle over Daniel's head and corkscrewing down to land on his shoulder. It pecked at his ear.

Daniel tried to wave it away.

"Beat it. I'm not in the mood."

The pecking continued. The first bird, the one at Daniel's side, called out again, and flew off down a dark corridor. Before he could blink, the bird was back, this time landing on his head and pecking at his skull as if trying to open a tough nut.

Daniel let out a laugh.

"You can show me the way!" he said, scrambling up. "Come on, we need to get to the Fountain."

The birds were clearly agitated as they flew. Daniel found it difficult to keep up, and every so often they'd swoop down and nip him on the ear, or pull at his hair with sharp beaks. They led him to the great hall of staircases, down and down, to a crumbling corridor where frost was gathering on the black stone. Daniel rubbed his hands together as he breathed winter morning air. A door was ajar, letting a blade of sunlight into the darkness. Daniel knew where he was, knew that he had visited this place before when he was new to the Emporium. He

paused at the entrance, reached out and traced the frost-covered golden letters:

The Fountain

With a push the door was fully open, and Daniel stood once again on the surface of a frozen pond surrounded by woodland, hot breath rising from his mouth. Everything was as he remembered: the crisp air, the endless stretch of blue sky.

And then he saw the broken mountain of stone that lay in the centre of the pond where the fountain should have been.

Daniel hurried out across the pond, his feet crunching in the frost. He picked up a piece of what had once been the fountain and tossed it from hand to hand. There was no sign at all of the silvery liquid, the imagination that Mr Silver had described as the lifeblood of the Emporium. Part of the outer bowl remained intact, though there were sharp fragments of rock jutting out here and there, one of them smeared with a thin red liquid. Blood.

"A sorry sight, don't you think?"

Vindictus Sharpe stood a few metres away, on the opposite side of the fountain, his hands behind his back. He had not been there a moment ago.

"Why have you come?" he said. "Didn't I ask for time to study the book alone?"

"Things have changed," said Daniel. "I think I made a mistake."

A pause. He took a long breath.

"I'd like the *Book of Wonders* back, please."

Sharpe raised a silver eyebrow.

"You'd ... like it back?"

"Yes. It wasn't really mine to give away. You can still study it, but I'd like to be there when you do."

A thin smile crossed Sharpe's lips. "If it was not yours to give away," he said, "then it is certainly not yours to take back."

Daniel stared into the cold blue eyes. An alarm bell was ringing in his head, telling him he'd been right, that Sharpe was dangerous. He glanced again at the fountain, at the sharp point of stone smeared with blood.

"Whose blood is that?"

Sharpe hesitated. Then he brought his hands from behind his back. They were clutching the *Book of Wonders*, and they were covered in cuts and scrapes.

Daniel took a half-step back. He wanted to run, but he couldn't. This was his mess, his mistake.

Sharpe flashed a smile like a knife. "You've caught me red-handed, as it were. To tell the truth, I am growing tired of the act. I have no intention of returning the book to you, Daniel. In fact, the only

reason I allowed you to hold on to it for so long was that I thought you might lead me to Lucien."

Daniel stared at the *Book of Wonders* in Sharpe's big hands.

"I don't get it ... wrecking the fountain ... you're speeding things up, killing the Emporium. Why?"

"Back when we were walking together," said Sharpe, "you asked me what Lucien was running from. What could possibly frighten him enough that he spent his whole life looking over his shoulder, always ready to flee to the next town, the next city, the next window in time..." Sharpe brushed a hand over his neat silver hair, ran his fingers over his moustache. "The answer, boy, is that Lucien Silver was running – is still running – from me."

Daniel heard the words, but he could not make sense of them.

"Why?"

Sharpe moistened his lips with his tongue. He lifted up the *Book of Wonders*.

"The book?" said Daniel. "That's what all of this is about? So if you've got it, why are you still here? Why haven't you just taken it away?"

"It's not quite as simple as that. A magician cannot steal a magical object from another of his kind. The bond between the creation and the creator is too intense. If I walk out of here with the book, it will not work for me as fully as I desire. No, for the *Book*

of *Wonders* to truly be mine, I must either win it from Lucien, or he must pass it to me with his blessing. The latter is never going to happen. So I have no choice but to take the book through more ... aggressive measures.

"I have been chasing for many years, boy, and each time I come close, each time I can feel the book, smell it, Lucien wriggles away. Not this time. Something is different. He is weak. I found him easily." At this Sharpe spat on the frost. "You can see how he has reacted, running away like the weasel he has always been."

"You hoped I'd lead you to him," Daniel said, "so you could ... what? Kill him?"

Sharpe smiled an affable smile. "That's about the size of it," he said. "But seeing as you failed in spectacular fashion to locate him, I turned to other means. I knew that there must be a weakness somewhere in the Emporium, and that I could find it in the book." He opened his arms. "And here we are. The Fountain. Lucien has been relying on the imagination of his customers to keep the place running. He is weaker than I thought. He no longer has any customers. And now that the fountain is no more, the Emporium will crumble much more quickly.

"Lucien has a choice. He can either stay in his hole like a rodent and die with this place, or he can come out, come out, wherever he is, and face me. Either way, the *Book of Wonders* will be mine." He nodded to

Daniel. "You have talent, a connection with the book that could be very useful. The end of the Emporium need not be the end of your journey. I could help you become great."

"Help me like you helped Mr Silver?" said Daniel. "No thanks. I don't fancy a knife in the back."

Sharpe shrugged his wide shoulders and said, "Lucien has nobody to blame but himself. His actions, his cowardice, sealed his fate. The choice is yours. Stay here and wait for the Emporium to die. Go down with the ship. Or learn from the best, and open up a new world of possibilities."

Daniel returned the cold stare, trying with all of his might to hide the fear coursing through him. The enormity of his mistake was hitting him hard. *He* had invited Sharpe in. *He* had handed over the *Book of Wonders*.

Every cell in his body was telling him to turn and run.

But Daniel did not run away. He stepped forward.

"You ... you think I could be great?" he said.

Sharpe leaned his head a little to one side, as if sizing him up.

"I think that, together, we could discover secrets about the book that even Lucien does not know."

Daniel took another step forward, his heart thundering. His eyes flicked to the book, but only for half a second.

Just a little closer.

"How can the book have secrets from Mr Silver?" Daniel asked.

"Magic has its mysteries, my boy ... even for the best of us..."

From somewhere behind him, Daniel heard the call of a magpie.

Sharpe looked away only for a moment, but it was enough.

Daniel snatched the book from his hands and spun away through the frost towards the doorway. He didn't dare look back as he ran.

What next? Where to go? He almost tripped over his own feet. A few more steps ... just a few more...

A strong hand grabbed at his hair, snapped him backwards with such force that his feet left the frosted ground. When he landed, there was no time to react. Sharpe stood over him, sneering. He grabbed him again by the hair and dragged him up. Then, a look of mad fury on his face, Sharpe reared back and struck Daniel across the mouth.

The world blurred at the edges. Daniel stumbled to his knees, blood pooling in his mouth. Sharpe was stalking towards him like a big cat. He was enjoying himself. Daniel backed away, still on his knees.

"You'll never find him," he said, clutching the *Book of Wonders* to his chest. "Nobody will find him if he doesn't want to be found."

Sharpe nodded. "Then I'll wait," he said, "until this place falls apart and takes him with it. But I will win."

He raised his great hand again.

Daniel cringed, waiting for the next blow to arrive. But before he could connect, the magpies swooped down upon Sharpe, pecking at his eyes, crying out with chattering screeches.

Daniel knew that the birds were calling to him, *Run away! Take the book to safety!* But he was dazed, unable to do anything but watch Sharpe flail and curse.

Sharpe, who had been staggering backwards, grabbed one of the magpies as it arrowed towards his face. It wriggled and called out as he tightened his grip around it and slammed it to the ground with a sickening crack. Then he lifted his foot and brought it down with all of his strength and weight, crushing the delicate metal bird beneath the sole of his shining black shoe.

"No!" Daniel wanted to run at Sharpe, to jump at him and hurt him.

Sharpe looked up, dragging his gaze from the shimmering carcass of the magpie, and Daniel felt a jolt of ice in his spine.

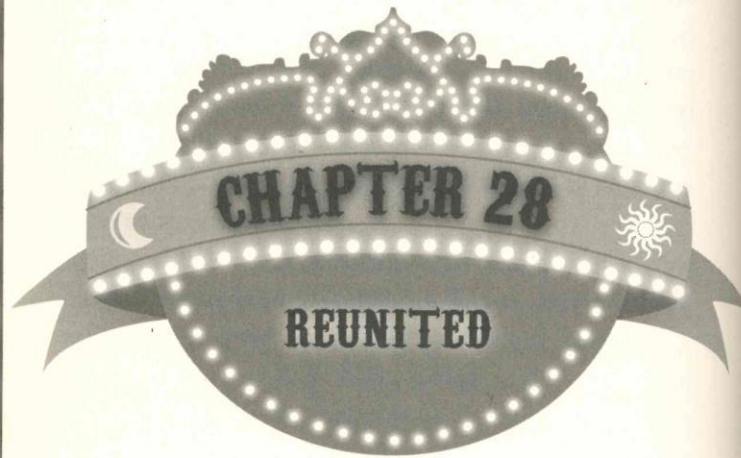
The second magpie continued to attack, buying Daniel moments. He glanced at the book in his hands, turned, and began to run.

The frost was slippery beneath his feet as he dashed to the door. Before he was through, he heard Sharpe

call out, "You can't hide forever, Daniel Holmes. Sooner or later, I will find you, and when I do, I will take back my book! The only way I'll leave without it is in a coffin!"



Friday



The wings of the surviving magpie flashed in the darkness as Daniel raced through the passageways. His fingers gripped the *Book of Wonders* tight. He did not know or care where the bird was leading him, so long as it was away from Sharpe.

Everything seemed darker than before; the shadows were deeper and the silence suffocating. Again and again Daniel thought he saw something shifting in the gloom; he imagined Sharpe posing as a statue, detaching from the shadows to make a grab for the book.

What now? What could be done to stop a madman? How much time was there to save the Emporium now that the fountain was gone? And what could he do about it alone?

The sound of splashing from around the next corner stopped Daniel dead. Steep steps led to a flooded passageway. The water was waist-deep. Shattered diamonds of light sparkled on the dark surface, cast from the lamps lining the walls, some of which were still lit. A lone figure was wading through the water towards him.

"Ha ha! Ellie!"

He felt such relief that he actually laughed out loud.

He crashed down the stairs, slipping under the surface for a moment, taking in an unpleasant gulp of salty water, which shot out of his nose as he coughed and spluttered.

"Ellie! It's me!"

Ellie, who had been staring into the water as she waded, looked up. Her eyes grew wide.

"Daniel!" she cried. "I've been looking all over for you since our search party got back. The place is in ruins! I've just come from the hospital. The staff are in a bad way. Caleb told me you'd rushed off." She paused, and stared at Daniel's bloodied face. "What happened to you?"

"There's so much to tell you," said Daniel. "I'm pretty sure your father is alive, and he's in the Emporium." Daniel told her about Sharpe's idea of using the book to find Silver, and how it had backfired. "I think it was a message," he said. "Your father doesn't want to be found."

"But he's alive!" said Ellie, hopping on the spot.

"Thank you, Daniel! I couldn't stop picturing him dying all alone in some dark corner." She hugged Daniel tight, and then she broke away, looking serious. "He's still ill, though, isn't he? The Emporium's falling apart. He can't hold it all together. So why doesn't he want us to find him?"

"It's not us he's hiding from, Ellie," said Daniel. "It's Sharpe. You were right about him all along. He's dangerous." Daniel took a deep breath. "He wants to kill your papa."

"He *what*?"

"Kill him, and steal the *Book of Wonders*. That's why he's here. He's been chasing Mr Silver for a long time. He's obsessed with the book! He'll do anything to have it. And the book won't work properly for him unless Mr Silver hands it over, or Sharpe beats him for it. It's the reason your father makes the Emporium move around so much – he's running away! I think that's why people from outside can't see you. It's your papa's way of protecting you. I'll bet it's the reason he won't let you leave the shop too. It's all to keep you safe from Sharpe."

Ellie's mouth moved wordlessly before she found her voice. "How do you know all this?"

"Sharpe told me so himself," said Daniel. And the story began to spill out of him: how the magpies had led him to the fountain; how he'd only just escaped with his life after stealing back the book; how one of the birds had not been so lucky.

Ellie's hand went to her mouth. "He wrecked the fountain? And he did that to you?" She pointed to Daniel's swollen lip. He could still taste the blood, and the saltwater nipped at the wound.

"I'm sorry," said Daniel. "I've messed everything up. I should never have let him in. All I ever wanted to do was help. I don't want to lose the Emporium, or Mr Silver, or you."

To his surprise, Ellie smiled her crooked smile.

"All that matters now is what we do next. We can still turn things around."

Daniel thought for a moment.

"If we can get rid of Sharpe," he said, "I reckon Mr Silver will come back."

"Why didn't Papa just stand up to him in the first place?"

Daniel knew what Ellie was thinking: that Mr Silver was a coward. He'd even thought the same himself at first.

"I don't think it's as simple as that. Your papa is weak. All the years of running the Emporium on his own have taken his strength away. I think he knew what was coming. He could sense Sharpe getting close, and he knew he wasn't strong enough to fight."

"That would explain the unicorn blood!" said Ellie. "It was desperation. A last attempt to get some of his strength back so that he could get rid of Sharpe."

"I think so," said Daniel. "Only something went wrong."

Ellie stroked the walls of the Emporium. "All these years I was sure he was keeping me in the shop so he wouldn't be lonely. I was always so angry at him."

"He's been protecting you. It's what they do, mums and dads."

"So what do we do?" said Ellie. "How can we get rid of Sharpe?"

"Everyone's got a weakspot," said Daniel thoughtfully. "We've got to find Sharpe's."

"But how? It's not like we can go and have a chat with him, is it? Get his life story over a nice cup of tea and some empire biscuits? He's dangerous!"

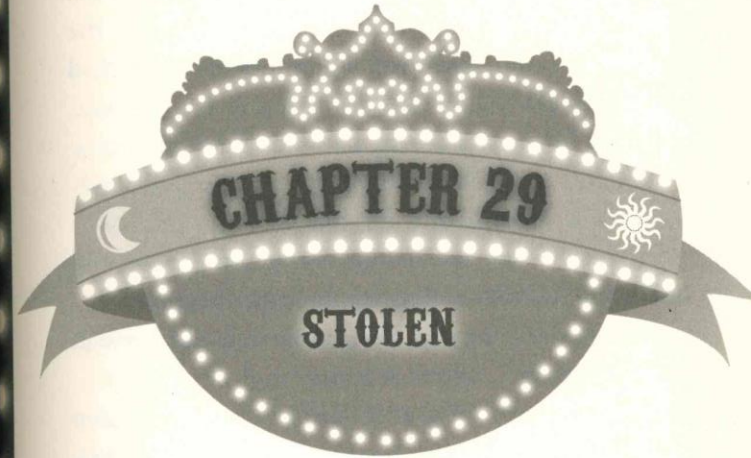
Life story...

The words echoed in Daniel's ears. He stared at the book, and began to flip through the pages, gathering speed as the idea properly formed. He heard Mr Silver's voice, far off on the horizon of his memory, from his very first lesson:

"I am a fan of stories. A collector. And there is no greater story than that of life. The Library of Souls holds on its many shelves the life story of everyone who has ever lived, everyone who will ever live."

Daniel stopped flipping. And there it was, staring back at him from the page in all of its dark, impossible glory. He flashed Ellie a clever smile.

"Who says we need to talk to Vindictus Sharpe to find out about his past?" he said. "This is the Nowhere Emporium, Ellie! Follow me."



Edinburgh, July 1897

Michelle Sharpe giggled as she walked arm in arm with Lucien through the Emporium's growing number of corridors.

"What have you made for me this time?" she said. "It cannot be more beautiful than the Crystal Lake."

Lucien allowed himself a smile. He had created a new Wonder for Michelle every evening since they had met. One door led to a room made entirely from velvet-smooth chocolate. Another revealed a trek through the branches of an enormous Christmas tree, the aromas of roasting goose, spiced mincemeat and coal dust dancing in the air. It had taken him

all evening to create the music mine – a vast cavern dotted with brightly coloured jewels that filled the air with beautiful melodies when they were plucked from the walls.

Lucien led her up a staircase to a solitary door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Open it and find out," he said.

She reached for the handle, opened the door, and took a few hesitant steps into the room beyond.

"It's a garden," she said, barely able to speak through her amazement.

She was right. It was a garden, an overgrown wilderness of plants and flowers and trees. But every petal of every flower was made of fire. The world inside this impossible room was dark, lit only by the flicker from the flaming plants – blues and greens, reds, yellows, oranges.

"It's a fire garden," said Lucien. "I thought of you when I made it." He blushed as she turned and stared into his grey eyes.

"It's perfect," she whispered, and she began to wander around the garden.

Lucien watched. "You can touch the flames if you like. They won't burn."

Michelle reached up, touching her fingertips to the flaming blossom of a tree. Burning cinders fell to the ground, but her skin did not burn, and she laughed and stared around like a child.

"I have a surprise for you," Lucien said.

"Another surprise?"

He took her arm, led her through an archway of creeping ivy to a clearing surrounded by apple trees, each apple a ball of softly glowing fire. In the centre of the clearing sat a table loaded with food.

Lucien pulled out a chair for Michelle, keeping a keen eye on her as she sat.

"Is something the matter?" he asked. "You look a little sad."

She shook her head and smiled. "How could I be sad in a place like this?" Then she nodded to the feast. "May I try something? It all looks so delicious."

They began to eat, talking, as they loved to do, about running away together to desert islands and exotic cities where nobody would ever find them.

"Another drink," said Michelle, and she stood and poured two large glasses of wine, handing one to Lucien. She raised her glass. "To you, Lucien. And your wondrous Emporium."

Lucien clinked his glass against hers, and took a long sip of the wine.

He knew something was wrong at once. The garden began to spin and blur around him. A distant, echoing ring filled his head, and he saw nothing but blurred streaks of fire. He dropped his glass and it shattered on the grass, wine spilling like blood. Lucien grasped at the table as the corners of his vision faded to black.

The darkness began to close in around him. He was falling.

The last thing he saw before he hit the floor was Michelle, his broken vision fragmenting her face into many pieces. He reached out for her. She did nothing but watch.



Lucien was wakened by a slow, rhythmic pounding in his head. He screwed up his eyes to the surrounding fire-plants, grabbed hold of the table, and hoisted himself up. He did not know how long he had been unconscious. Every bit of him ached.

The table lay as he remembered: there were half finished plates of food and Michelle's wine glass lay empty beside her plate. Lucien's glass popped and snapped beneath his feet as he stumbled around.

Nothing made sense. What had happened? Where was Michelle?

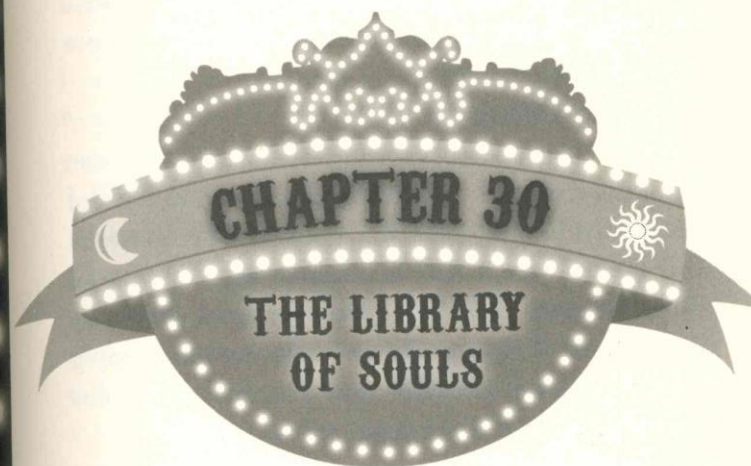
The mist in his mind began to thin. A thought struck him. Dread choked him as he reached slowly into his coat pocket – to the place he kept the *Book of Wonders*.

His fingers found nothing but material.

His pocket was empty.

More to the point, someone had emptied it.

Michelle was gone. She had taken the *Book of Wonders* with her.



High in the Emporium's twisting corridors, Daniel and Ellie stood before a doorway in the midnight brick. Cracks were crawling along the walls even as they arrived.

The door swung open. Daniel felt a cool breath of air on his face, and a familiar, earthy scent lingered. The door led to a set of wooden steps. The steps opened up to a vast cavern filled with a calm black lake. All around, huge shapes stood in the water, monstrous shadows reaching towards a ceiling that might have been miles above.

A twinkle of light flickered somewhere in the gloom. Then another. And another. Gas lamps were glinting to life all around, blinking stars in the great