

Prologue

Everything frightened her when she was four years old. A cluster of shadows at the end of the corridor, light winking off a door handle, the open mouth of a hunted stag on the long picture, and her own footsteps tap-tapping eerily, erratically, on the tiled floor.

She had lost her way. She had somehow become detached from her nurse, and all the corridors and doorways looked the same. She was too small to open any of the great doors. Worst of all, right at the end of the hallway and half hidden in shadow, there was an image of the devil, rising out of a crack in the earth, chewing the limbs of the damned.

And she could only totter towards him, because she didn't know where else to go.

If she screamed, and no one heard her, the devil would surely hear.

Her dress was heavy and sticky, chafing her beneath the arms, her breathing hoarse and uneven, coming out in ragged whimpers.

She knew already that it was a terrible disgrace to cry, except in penitence.

Finally she banged the flat of her hands against the carved panel of one of the great doors, and to her surprise it moved smoothly away. She stood in the doorway, light streaming towards her from two immense windows so that she could hardly see.

Then she saw his legs in their silk stockings; the long, pointed shoes.

She had hardly seen the duke since coming to live with him as his ward, yet she knew it was him. There was something spread out on the table in front of him and he was bending over it. She could see more clearly now his thinning grey hair, and the powerful nose with spectacles perched unevenly on the end of it. His lips moved as he read.

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Some impulse made her step forward; she didn't know what. She was almost as scared of the duke as of the devil.

He didn't look up until she had nearly reached the table.

Hello, he said, his watery blue eyes clearing. *You must be . . . Margaret?*

And when she didn't answer, he asked if she would like to see a marvellous thing. And when she didn't answer that, he held his hand out and she walked awkwardly over to him, and then he picked her up and stood her on a chair. He brushed the tears from her face with a quick thumb and told her not to touch.

Do you know what this is? he asked, and she shook her head.

It was a great map, he told her, a map of the world.

It curled at the corners and he had pressed it down with weights of various kinds: a small box, an ink stand, a wooden head.

The world was all colours; a mass of colours surrounded by blue. Around the edges the twelve faces of the wind blew the sea in all directions and tossed the little boats upon it. He talked her through the countries.

This is France, see, and this is Brittany, and this – this is England, where you live now.

She listened politely, not believing him. How could England be so small? She waited for him to explain the other features of the map: the fire-breathing dragons and salamanders, great snails and griffins and giants, beasts joined together with heads at both ends, and men with ears trailing along the ground.

In the centre of the world there was Jerusalem, of course, bounded by a circle that was God's holy tower. To the west there was an oval country, where unicorns played. There, he told her, it was possible to find the well of youth, guarded by two-headed geese in the pepper forests of Malabar, where there were trees that grew lambs from giant pods, and wool-bearing hens.

At the top were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Five rivers spouted from this garden, flowing south and west. If it were possible to sail south on one of these rivers, he said, past the line of the Equator, you would see men who walked upside down on their hands, and rain falling upwards on to the earth.

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But she was looking at the margins of the map, which were decorated with feathers and shells, and further up were the sun and moon, representing the firmament, and beyond that, of course, the glory of God. Which some men maintained you could sail to, he said, following her gaze.

She listened carefully, not liking to say that his fingers were digging into her as he held her on the chair. Sunlight shifted into cloud, and there was a spatter of rain at the windows.

He had sailed to some of the countries himself, he told her, and knew for a fact that Ireland was not near Spain. *And yet*, he said, half smiling into her serious face, *there is the world we live in, and the world of the imagination, and who is to say which is the more real?*

And now he was smiling not so much at her as at some inward vision.

He released her then, so that she tottered slightly, and he put out one hand to steady her, then began to roll the map up, methodically and swiftly rolling up the known world. She had a sudden dizzying sense of scale: England a small, brown corner of the world and herself a tiny speck on it.

He spoke about his time abroad, especially in France, where he had been captured by a woman wearing armour.

Do not underestimate the strangeness of the world, he told her. And then he said that this woman, who was known as Jeanne d'Arc, was the bravest woman that ever lived.

And then her nurse had appeared, flustered, anxious, and the duke had lifted her down from the chair, and she had hurried towards her in a stumbling run, back to the known world.

Later, much later, she learned that the world had changed from the flatness of a map into a globe, that it was not bounded by dragons and giants but by a sea of ice at both poles, that Jerusalem was no longer the centre of the world, and that there was a new land to the west, which was bigger than anyone had realized.

She learned also that her guardian had been accused of treason, that he had lost much of the nation's land in France, and that he had plotted to take the throne by marrying her to his son. For which

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crimes he had been sent to the Tower. And upon his release from the Tower he had been murdered on a ship. And the sword that killed him was rusty: it had taken six blows to sever his head. After which his headless body had been thrown upon a beach.

Still, when she thought of him, she remembered that afternoon in his study, the hiss of rain at the windows. He had spoken of a brave woman with deference, she remembered that. And he had unravelled the world for her, bigger, more colourful and stranger than she had ever known.