

# Rita Wong and the Jade Mask



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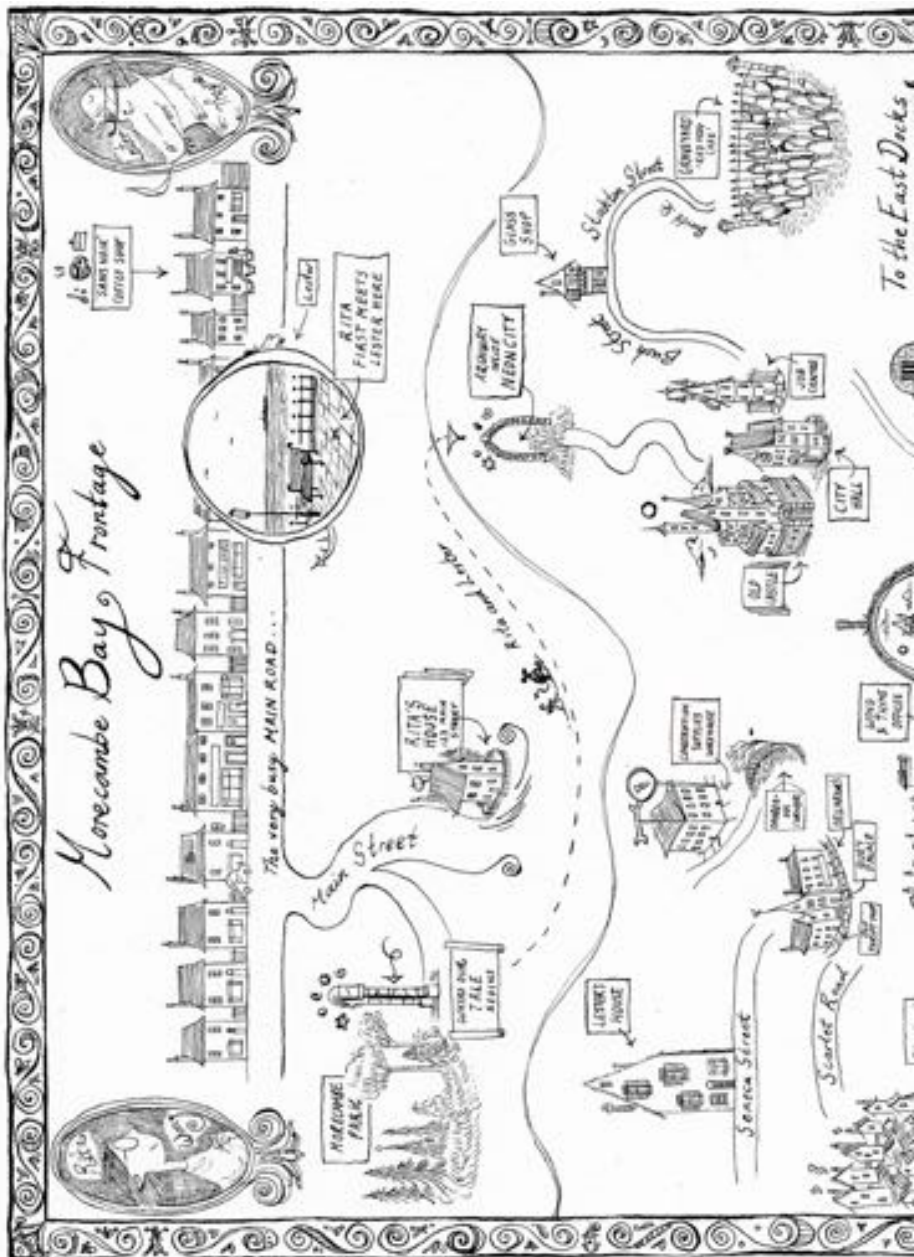
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# Norecombe Bay Fortage









# CHAPTER ONE

## A Bad Night at the Toy Shop

A small lithe man in a big top hat was carrying an enormous sheet of copper. He looked over his shoulder and opened the door to a toy shop. Inside the shop was warm and carried the scent of orange chocolate. Looking around, the man spotted a shelf containing an arrangement of dusty figures. He smiled at a vampire doll in a white bridal gown but frowned at the sight of a toy tiger with black stripes and brown eyes.

Adjusting his top hat, the man turned and made his way to the back of the shop. There he descended a staircase that led to a basement. He stepped through

a pair of black silk curtains at the bottom of the stairs. A clock in the basement chimed thirteen but no one was counting.

‘Is this the headquarters of the *Baldness Acceptance Movement?*’ the man asked.

A friendly balding werewolf stood up. He had been seated behind a circular walnut table that took up half of the basement and was littered with sweet wrappers.

‘It certainly is,’ answered the werewolf. ‘And we’re always happy to have new members.’

The man bowed deeply, hiding his face with the brim of his hat. He dropped the sheet of copper he had been carrying to the floor. A loud clang passed through the room. He removed his top hat to reveal a glossy, brown, full head of hair. His young striking profile was defined by an emerald spotlight. His eyes looked at the occupants of the basement, while his mouth stretched into a smile.

‘My, my,’ he said. ‘I always wondered what a room full of giant hard-boiled eggs would look like.’

A nine-foot troll stood up from behind the table. The eyes in his face bulged more than his muscles.

‘Buddy, I don’t think I like your sense of humour,’ he said.

‘Sorry,’ the man in the top hat replied. ‘I’ve survived a dangerous night, and I just wanted a chuckle. I’m just practising being social. But don’t you worry. I’ll be *hair* today and gone tomorrow,’ he said, before leaning forward and letting out a laugh.

‘Another wisecrack like that, and you’ll be sorry,’ the werewolf announced, his hands balling into fists.

The man in the top hat smiled and approached the table. He walked briskly across a black and white marble floor.

‘If you try and make me sorry,’ he whispered, ‘I’ll polish your head like a filthy window. You have a temper like a tiger snake, my friend. But my bite is more lethal than yours. Now you and your friends should take a seat while I explain why I’m here.’

The troll picked up the table and threw it across the room. The impact ripped a yellow pipe from the wall which began to hiss steam. Above, a red strobe light began to blink.

‘I think it’s time for you to leave,’ said the troll.

‘How are you going to make me, Mr Shampoo Dodger?’

The troll charged across the room. He grunted and snorted as he lowered his head to attack.

The man in the top hat neatly sidestepped out of the way. Instead of meeting his opponent head-on, the man threw a volley of quick punches into the troll's back. He followed them up with an arm twist and a powerful back kick.

The troll was lifted cleanly off his feet. He felt himself fly across the room, and land back on his chair. The expression on his face was one of surprise and fear.

'My name is Ermington Snyder,' the man in the top hat announced. He squatted down on the floor to pick up the metal sheet. He removed a hammer from his pocket and nailed the copper layer to a wall. An atmosphere of evil then entered the room, and he left the occupants of the basement to endure it.

Glancing out of the toy shop's front window, Ermington heard a crack of thunder and watched the heavens open. The pavement, now slick with a deluge of rain, reflected a harmony of colours coming from neon lights in the street. As he stepped into the mist saturated night, he turned to face the front door.

Turning the key in the Chubb lock twice,

Ermington smiled to himself. The second rotation pushed the deadbolt further into the jamb. No one would be entering or leaving the toy shop ever again. He then snapped the key between his fingers, before disappearing into the jagged carbon black shadows of Neon City.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A Few Days Earlier in a Lonely Place

**T**illotama Kumar had met a lot of serious children and teenagers in her time. None, however, were quite as serious as Rita Wong.

For the last hour in the coffee shop, Rita had never looked up. She had buried her head in a book about Art Deco, stopping only to sketch in her notepad.

‘Hey, bookworm, you want another hot chocolate?’

‘Well,’ said Rita checking her mobile phone. ‘The library doesn’t open until nine o’clock. So, sure. I’d like another please, Miss Kumar.’

‘Please call me Tilo. Saying “Miss Kumar” all the time reminds me I’m thirty-five.’