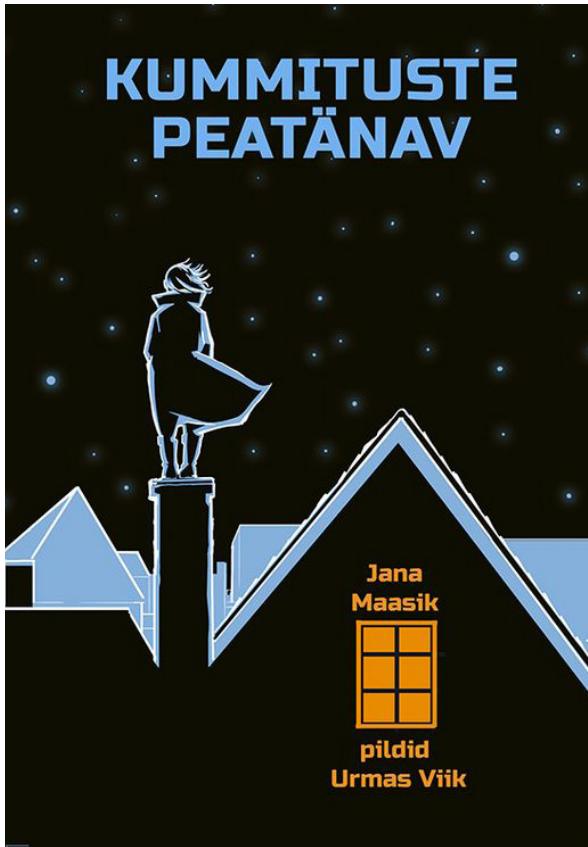


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### **Ghost Way. The Riddle of the Key**

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The lives of 12-year-old twins Hugo and Loona have been altered forever. And it's no wonder, because dealing with their beloved dad's unexpected death is no easy task. Hugo, who shared a love for making art with his dad, has lost interest in everything. Loona, who used to be a real busy bee, can't even get out of her pajamas anymore. As if that weren't enough, their mom has an accident and ends up in the hospital, leaving the twins pretty much on their own. Searching for some kind of consolation, Hugo and Loona come across a mysterious old-fashioned key and a newspaper clipping in their dad's desk in the attic. After they show their neighbor Professor Kruubel what they found, the kids realize they themselves may be essential to solving the mystery. However, they haven't a clue that the key will also draw in a myriad of ghosts in Tallinn's Old Town.



## Reading sample

[pp. 18–19]



It was a soft, pathetic click. One-eighth of the panel jerked out from under the desk and lowered by maybe a centimeter. Hugo jammed his fingers into the crack and pulled.

“It won’t budge,” he said.

Still, it was undoubtedly some kind of an opening mechanism. A rusted contraption that was supposed to go downward. Loona compared the top and bottom of the city model.

“The panel’s right under Toompea Castle,” she observed.

It sounded logical, as that was the only part that could fit a secret compartment. Hugo tugged again, but the panel went no further.

“Maybe that’s as far as it goes,” Loona said doubtfully. “You’ll break it.”

Hugo came up with the idea to spray the cracks of the mechanism with WD-40 and drip lock lubricant oil into it. Their dad’s toolbox contained everything they needed. Ten minutes later, he was able to stick his entire hand into the compartment. His fingertips brushed something cold.

“It’s a key.”

The key was quite large. Judging by its appearance, it was also very old.

“I wonder what door it opens?” they both asked almost in unison.

“Check and see if there’s anything else,” Loona prodded.

The kids couldn’t see into the space; it was barely large enough for the boy’s hand to fit inside. He felt around the bottom.

“Just this, nothing else,” he said in disappointment, pulling out a scrap of paper. It was a newspaper clipping—tattered, faded, and blotched from moisture. Written on the top edge was: “The Tallinn Informer. September 24th, 1912”.

The article read as follows:

Ermilde Josephine Kruubel, also known as the Soothsayer of Stolting Tower and Old Lady Kruubel, foretold that a great war will soon break out, after which a new

regime will govern the territory of Estonia and the city gates will be opened. Ermilde Josephine did not wish to provide any further details upon enquiry, but insisted that she knows it just as surely as she knows that the Earth is flat and man did not evolve from apes.

Loona frowned. The journalist was obviously trying to be funny. They’d no doubt made up the part about the flat Earth and evolution. Loona and Hugo had learned a thing or two from their historian dad. They knew, for example, that the First World War broke out in 1914 and the independent Republic of Estonia was declared in 1918.

“The prophecy came true!” Loona whispered in awe.

[pp. 41–42]

### 6. The Department of Especially Secret Things

“So that means they found the key,” Barclay murmured pensively. “Are you completely certain?”

Aaria nodded.

“There’s no doubt. What’s more, it’s now clear that the boy is very sensitive. He can sense things that...”

“The boy’s name is Hugo, correct? What do you mean by ‘things’?” Barclay interrupted.

“Well,” Aaria began, then paused.

“He saw me. Clear as day. And heard me just as clearly. I have a strong suspicion that he can see spirits who are caught in the human world... ghosts, poltergeists...” she blurted out loudly.

“You mean... he can see his father?”

“I reckon Karl Säde isn’t exactly caught, per se. He’s just unbelievably worried about his wife Anna. And their kids, too, of course.”

“Do you think his son has seen him?”

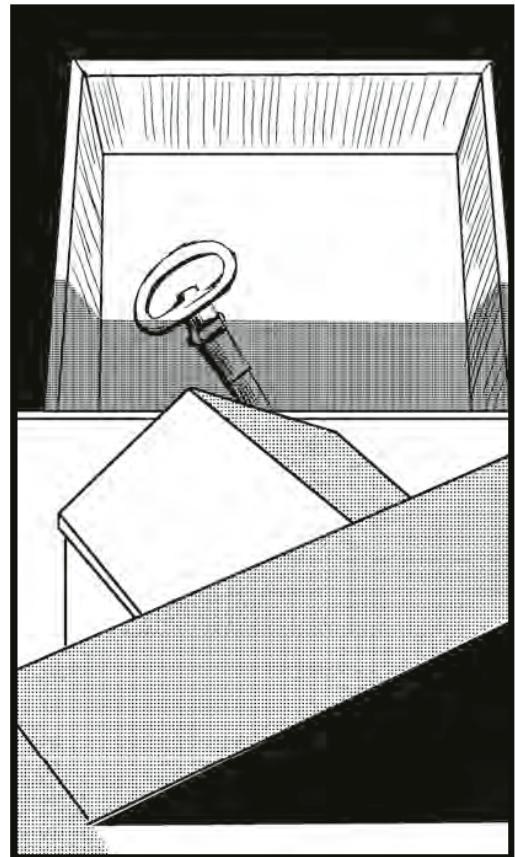
“No, I don’t. Karl Säde is careful. He spends most of his time by his wife’s hospital bed and only peeks at his children from a distance, like when they’re coming from or going to a café or the grocery store. And a couple times in their home at night. Though given how sensitive the boy is, it’s maybe a little too reckless.”

Aaria had told Barclay almost





Maybe that's as far  
as it goes.  
You'll break it.



everything. But only almost. She hadn't spoken a word about talking to the twins herself or helping to rescue their mother by doing so. She knew she'd done the right thing. And she knew full well that it was against the rules. She'd broken the first and most important law that had been set long, long ago: "Under no condition are guardians of the key permitted to speak to holders of the key." Aaria had taken a risk, fibbed, and told Barclay only half-truths. In her report, she'd written what a guardian of the key usually does: the beginning of the journey, the end of the journey, and the activities in-between. The latter just involved keeping an eye on the key, Hugo, Loona, Anna, and Karl Säde.

"Speaking of sensitivity," said Barclay, "you can, of course, go to the statistics department and ask for the latest data, but as I recall, only one person in a thousand has that kind of ability. And that one might not even be aware of their ability if they never encounter us. Sometimes, it fades with age. But not always."

Aaria stood up and paced back and forth beneath the towering, arched ceiling of Barclay's office. It had an ideal echo. The delicate tapping of her shoes on the floor doubled in their reverberation and went silent when she stopped to inspect one or another particularly interesting antique object.

"How far do you think they've gotten in solving the key's mystery?"

"Not very far," Aaria replied. "But they're working on it. They also found a little clue along with the key—a newspaper clipping."

"Yes, I read from your report that you visited their home. What do you plan on doing next?"

"The fact that the boy is so sensitive made me think I should maybe change my appearance. So as not to stand out. But that's not possible, is it?"

"Hmm."

Barclay twirled the ends of his moustache, which formed two neat gray half-circles on either side of his nose.

"Changing the optical illusion? It'd be to your advantage, certainly."

[pp. 83–85]

## 11. Waiting for All Souls' Night

They were standing by the schoolhouse again. Aaria's eyes glinted as she scanned the horizon. Magnus's eyes were narrowed with nervousness and trained upon Aaria. They'd circled above the city for ten minutes, but the Maid had pulled off a perfect disappearing act.

"So, how're you doing... anyway?" the boy asked cautiously.

"Better."

"You don't have to be so hard on yourself, you know. People make mistakes. It's only human. And ghosts make mistakes. It's only ghostly."

Aaria stuck her chin up a little higher and remained silent.

"There was nothing I could do," the boy said apologetically.

Aaria knew it was true. Magnus had also felt the collector's pull. They all had. Every ghost, including the Watchmen of the In-Between and the Guardians of the Key. Touching an open collector was risky, not to mention holding it in your very own hands.

"There were so many people and with that powdy, I didn't dare..."

All the while, Aaria was thinking I'd have been compacted into a dense mass in an air-tight container in just a few seconds' time. She berated herself harder than she ever had before.

"Honestly, I'm not so experienced either," Magnus added.

Something is very wrong, Aaria thought. This whole situation. It's soaring way above both our heads.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" the boy mumbled.

"When I'm silent, it doesn't mean that I have nothing to say, but that you don't want to hear it," she grimly replied.

"But I do! Why would you think I don't!?"

Aaria tried to muster a smile.

"Sorry. It was my fault that the collector opened and I didn't realize it right away. I was just so astounded that there was a poltergeist and..."

"Everything happens in slow-motion when we're practicing."

The Maid had been a maelstrom of energy and movement. She looked like a demonic leopard on the loose as she



whooshed towards the Old Town ahead of them and did three flips a couple dozen meters above the ground as if it were nothing. She was as fast as lightning, and also suspiciously numb to the collector's power.

"What I'm interested in more is how on Earth there could be a poltergeist moving freely around Tallinn."

"Exactly!" the boy agreed.

"Nowadays, poltergeists can only be found in the In-Between!"

They were all poltergeists in the In-Between, lounging in magnetic-field baths and tending to their ability to think and materialize while simultaneously having the ability to move lighter objects just as capably as humans. And there, they were bright and clearly defined, not your ordinary nightmares, phantoms, or specters. In the human world—or at least in Europe—all poltergeists had been rendered harmless a decade ago!

"We need watchmen. Where are they?"

Aaria was confused by why they hadn't run into a single one all morning.

"And we need to locate the Maid, too."

"I can go look for her," Magnus offered. His eyes regained their usual sparkle. "If I see her, then I'll get her with felix. You take it easy, okay? Guard the key and the twins and..."

Aaria went into a café, sat down at a window table, and thought. She could only hazily recollect the One-Eyed Maid's story. The Maid was revengeful by nature but hadn't been very active in the last hundred-and-twenty years. She haunted the place where she'd been killed—the bastion tunnels. Relatively weak. There was no one left for her to take revenge on. Aaria couldn't figure out what was keeping her in the human world. And what's more, how could she be so strong?

<sup>1</sup> A "collector", a.k.a. "collection cup", is a place where a ghost "softened" by magnesium chloride is contained. Collectors have silver hinges and tiny double locks. They are made of masterfully carved walnut and lined with brilliant-colored velvet and metal leafing. The collector is a snug little place, especially given its inviting melody and scent. It offers immediate drowsy peace and promises blissful eternal rest.

<sup>2</sup> A "powdy" is a mixture of barium peroxide, magnesium, and aluminum powders, combined with another secret ingredient. Because of its explosive nature, it is only used in dire circumstances. The banning of powdies was discussed prior to the eruption of problems in England. Its use is never taken lightly because a powdy does not give any option. It destroys.

The democratic leaders of the In-Between usually release ghosts who have soaked into containers back into freedom after a memory cleaning. They must be given a choice, and they are. They may go forward, but they may also go back.

<sup>3</sup> Felix, a.k.a. magnesium chloride, has the weakest effect on ghosts. It makes them drowsy, lowers their resistance, and makes them more receptive to the scents and melody of a collector.

