

THE  
**STRANGEWORLDS**  
• TRAVEL AGENCY •



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# CHAPTER ONE

**T**here have always been places in our world where magic gathers.

You can see it, if you look close enough.

You might see an ancient horse and cart passing down a modern high-street; or a cobbled alleyway that people walk into, but never out of. Now and again, you might see it in a person – someone who looks like they've stepped straight out of an old photograph. Or, perhaps, someone whose bag seems to hover off the ground catches your eye in a coffee shop. And when you look again they, and their bag, have disappeared.

And, occasionally, you see magic in shops.

Squashed between brand name stores and fancy displays, the shops soaked in magic are never

eye-catching, or ostentatious. Their windows are stained with dirt and dust, and sometimes their signs have peeled away so much that it looks as though ghost letters are trying to work their way through. Magic does not wish to be noticed, you see. And most people are happy to pretend it does not exist.

The Strangeworlds Travel Agency was very much like a magical shop should be.

The leaded windows were dirty and cracked. There was peeling paint on the front door and it hardly ever seemed to be open. However, there was one element of the shop that refused to fade into the background: the sign over the window. It was always clearly painted, in silky gold letters embellished with black against a ruby-red background. There was one globe at the beginning of the sign and another at the end. The shop was out of its time, for certain, and yet the name was blazoned for all to see.



In the time between the agency opening almost one hundred and fifty years ago and the summer everything changed, the only thing that altered about the frontage

was the globes – they were repainted occasionally, to reflect the shifting borders of various countries.

So, a change was overdue. And it was a new visitor coming into Strangeworlds that ultimately saved the business.

As well as other things.

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Jonathan Mercator was working. At least, that's what he would claim to be doing, if you asked him. What he was actually doing was sitting at the shop desk, ankles crossed on the surface as he leaned back in his chair, reading.

A number of open journals lay on the desk beside his shoes, and the sound of several out-of-sync clocks, ticking to their own distinct rhythms, filled the otherwise silent air. Jonathan paid them no attention.

It was going to be, by his standards, a very busy day.

A shadow crossed in front of the large bay window. And then it passed again, this time pausing in the region of the front door. After a moment the door opened, scraping over the swollen floorboards, and a boy came in, curling not so much his lip as his entire face at the sight of the shop interior.

Jonathan raised his eyes over the edge of his novel and watched the boy with interest.

‘Um . . .’ The boy looked around. ‘This isn’t Games Warehouse, is it?’

The interest slipped from Jonathan’s face like water vanishing through a sieve, and he gazed around in false astonishment. ‘Isn’t it? Whatever gave you that idea?’

The boy pulled his phone out. ‘It’s supposed to be here.’

‘Ah, well then. If your *phone* says this is the place, it must be correct. Don’t trust your own eyes, whatever you do.’ Jonathan reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and fished out a very small magnifying glass. It was made of a bronze metal, with a thick glass lens. He tossed it at the boy, who caught it uncertainly. ‘Have a good look around, make absolutely certain, why don’t you?’

‘What’s this for?’

‘Humour me.’

The boy frowned and lifted the magnifying glass to his face. ‘What am I supposed to see? Does this even work? Everything’s blurry.’ He put the glass back on the desk. ‘What sort of place is this?’ His loud voice was absorbed by the room, so the sound of it fell rather flat.

Jonathan sighed, picking up the magnifying glass and putting it back in his pocket. ‘The sign over the window wasn’t enough of a clue? We’re a travel agency.’

The boy snorted. ‘All right, maybe it does say *travel agency* over the door, but you don’t even have a computer.’

Jonathan looked at his desk, before taking his legs off it. As well as the pile of journals, there was a half-drunk mug of tea and a plate with the crumby remains of toast and peanut butter still on it. He put the novel he was reading down, fanned open to save the page. ‘What on earth would I need a computer for?’

‘Er . . . don’t you need to book flights? Arrange holidays?’

Jonathan smiled. A smile full of secrets. ‘I’m not that sort of travel agent.’

The boy frowned. ‘What *do* you do, then?’

Jonathan pushed his glasses up his nose and folded his hands, his fingers interlocking like gears.

But he was saved the trouble of answering by the suitcase to his left springing open.

Perhaps, before things become too complicated, we should clarify precisely *why* this young man was so sceptical about The Strangeworlds Travel Agency.

First of all, the visitor was correct in pointing out that the place was a technological relic. Indeed, the most modern item in Jonathan Mercator's possession was a typewriter from the 1960s. He liked to type passive-aggressive notes on it and hide them in library books. The desk the typewriter sat upon wouldn't have been out of place in the office of a Victorian headmaster, and even Jonathan's clothes looked old. You got the feeling someone might well have died in some of his tweed suits. They were not the sort of thing you'd expect an eighteen-year-old to be wearing.

Then there was the fact that the travel agency had no fancy posters of Disneyland, or the Algarve, or anywhere else you might have wanted to visit. There were no posters at all, in fact. Only a few globes and atlases. And something that was like a globe, except the sphere was shaped more like a pear than a ball.

And then there were the suitcases.

They filled an entire wall of the travel agency, sitting in neat wooden slots that had been built right into the wall. The shelves went from floor to ceiling, each suitcase snug in a niche of its own, its handle waiting to be grasped and pulled down. There were more suitcases stacked between two fireside armchairs like a coffee table, others neatly arranged in piles

against the far wall and a couple leaning against Jonathan's desk.

You could count at least fifty of them stacked in the wall, and not a single one was alike. There were leather ones, heavy cardboard ones, shining crocodile hide ones, and some made of skins that would make even the most learned of zoologists scratch their heads. Some had stamps on their edges, some had splashes of paint, and at least a dozen had paper labels tied onto their handles with string.

The Strangeworlds Travel Agency looked more like a lost and found office, or a rather specialist antique shop, than a travel agency. So it was hardly surprising that the boy was suspicious – even before the suitcase sprang open.

At the sound of the suitcase bursting open, Jonathan turned around, startled, his wood-and-leather swivel chair screeching on its casters. The suitcase lid flew back and a torrent of water splashed out of it.

'What's happening?' the boy gasped, backing quickly away from the flood.

Seconds later, a man climbed out of the suitcase as if it were a trap-door. He was soaking wet and coughing. A collapsed telescope was hanging from his belt in a leather hoop. He quickly reached back down

into the case and heaved until a woman half-clambered, half-tumbled out as well. She landed on her hands and knees, her many-layered dress dripping onto the floorboards. She had three pairs of spectacles hanging around her neck, and thick black hair that was braided and decorated with little strips of ribbons and lace.

And around her right ankle was wrapped a bright red and very slimy-looking tentacle.

‘The blasted thing’s still got hold of me, Hudspeth,’ she huffed, sounding more annoyed than frightened, even as the tentacle wrapped itself higher around her leg.

Her partner gave a sort of mild slap to the tendril. ‘Get off. Pick on something with the same number of legs, why don’t you?’

The tentacle clenched tighter and went redder.

‘Kindly disentangle yourself,’ Jonathan sighed. ‘I can’t have anything coming back with you. You know the rules.’

The woman kicked again, and at last the tentacle let go of her ankle and fell back into the case with a splash.

The suitcase jumped, and the lid snapped shut with a **CLUNK**.

The couple lay on the floor, wet through, catching their breath and grinning like no one who had just

climbed out of a suitcase along with an overly affectionate octopus had any right to. Then they looked at each other and started laughing.

Jonathan pulled one of the journals towards himself. He flipped through it to the right page, and picked up a pen. ‘Welcome back, both of you. Mori and Alfred Hudspeth . . .’

‘Just Hudspeth, if you don’t mind,’ the man winced.

‘Fine. Hm,’ Jonathan pouted. ‘Your registration doesn’t mark you as due back for another week. Didn’t you have a jolly old time?’

‘Jolly’s not the word I’d use.’ The woman, Mori, ruffled her hair, and lifted a pair of glasses to her face, before taking them off and trying a second pair which she kept on, apparently liking them better. ‘The weather’s taken a turn for the worse – you wouldn’t believe the size of the waves. There was talk of ships being blown off the edge of the map entirely.’

Hudspeth nodded. ‘Worst storm I’ve seen for a long time. The ports were all but shut down on the lower half of the world. And they’ve swapped currency again, did you know that?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake.’ Jonathan picked up a piece of paper and wrote on it, shaking his head. ‘They do it

so often they'll be back to a barter system next time someone visits. Did you at least get some decent notes?’

‘Decent enough.’ Hudspeth pulled a damp-looking book from inside his shirt and put it on the desk.

Jonathan raised an eyebrow at it. ‘You realise that each one of these guidebooks is extremely valuable? Not to mention unique to each suitcase?’ He picked it up between thumb and finger. It dripped. ‘This is not how I expect Society members to treat documents in their care.’

‘Hey, there wasn’t a lot of time for sitting and writing essays,’ Hudspeth laughed.

Jonathan didn’t join in.

Hudspeth held his fringe back. A cut was visible on his forehead, white where the water had made the wound swell. ‘See that? More than a slight fracas by the time we got to the Cove of Voices. Captain Nyfe doesn’t want to give passage to anyone she doesn’t know, not with how things are at the moment, so we had to catch a lift off one of the smaller vessels to try and get around to The Break. And we almost lost the suitcase when the storm started . . .’

‘And then the – the octopus things.’ Mori wiped at her eyeliner with a manicured finger. ‘What did she call them?’

‘*Hafgufa*,’ Hudspeth said. ‘Monsters of the mist.’

‘That’s it.’ Mori dabbed at her makeup again. The makeup around her eyes was somehow still immaculate. ‘They seemed to be attracted to the suitcase. We had to jump overboard when the beast got hold of the ship. Never seen that before. We were picked up by one of the lifeboats, but finding somewhere to open the case was a nightmare.’

‘Doesn’t mean we wouldn’t do it again.’ Hudspeth grinned.

‘Well, thank heavens you managed to wade back through that ocean of excuses,’ Jonathan said drily. He opened the damp book, and gave it a read. ‘All of one single paragraph written, too.’ He looked up. ‘You know this really isn’t good enough.’

The couple blushed.

‘There wasn’t really time—’

‘We – we nearly lost the suitcase, you know.’

‘*Don’t Lose Your Luggage*,’ Jonathan snapped. ‘That’s Rule Number One. If you wear that badge on your arm,’ Jonathan nodded at a very faded and torn patch on Hudspeth’s sleeve, ‘you abide by the rules and requirements. This isn’t just an opportunity for you to—’

‘We’ll do better, next time,’ Hudspeth interrupted dismissively, helping his wife to her feet. ‘You all right, Mori?’

‘Just about.’ She checked her clothes, fixing them back into position.

As she moved her skirt, a magnifying glass attached to a ring swung down from where it had been tucked into her belt.

This magnifying glass was not as small as the one Jonathan had returned to his jacket pocket. This one was the size of a hairbrush, and had a heavy sort of look about it. The handle was a stained red wood, trimmed with polished brass. The circle of brass that held the lens in place was gleaming, and the glass itself was thick. It was attached to Mori’s belt by a metal loop, like the sort of ring you put your keys on, only much stronger and nicer to look at.

Jonathan stared, his face going from polite to outraged like the flick of a switch. ‘You – you took a magnifying lens with you?’

‘Only as a precaution,’ Hudspeth said quickly. ‘You never know—’

‘I *do* know,’ Jonathan snapped, drawing himself up so he seemed much taller than his usually unimpressive five-foot-eight. ‘How – how *dare* you? You know full well you do not have the authority to wield that.’

‘Listen—’

‘No, *you* listen.’ Jonathan came around the desk, his eyes flashing dangerously behind his glasses. ‘You’re Society members. You know the history of the agency, and you know *why* those lenses are a restricted item. How dare you keep one, let alone take it with you? I am your Head Custodian. I should strike your names off the ledger right this second.’

Mori blushed redder than ever. ‘It was just in case—’  
‘In case of *what*?’

‘Sorry.’ Hudspeth raised his hands. ‘Jonathan . . . Mr Mercator . . . We’re sorry. We got it in Five Lights, and thought it might come in useful.’

Jonathan held his hand out. ‘Hand it over.’

The couple looked at each other.

‘I am your Head Custodian,’ he repeated. ‘Unless you want a lifetime ban, hand it over. Now.’

Reluctantly, Mori unhooked the ring from her belt, and put the magnifying glass into Jonathan’s hand.

Hudspeth scowled. ‘Cost me an arm and a leg, that did.’

‘You’re lucky it’s not costing you more,’ Jonathan said ominously. He dropped it into his desk drawer. ‘If you don’t trust yourselves to use a suitcase – and only a suitcase – don’t bother coming back here. This isn’t a game.’

‘All right,’ Mori said gently. ‘We’re sorry. We didn’t think. And we’ll do better with the guidebook, next time. And the suitcase. Not come as close to losing it, I mean.’

Jonathan shut the desk drawer, and nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Taking your responsibilities seriously, I see,’ Hudspeth said, with grudging admiration. ‘No offence meant, er . . .’

‘I’m quite sure.’

Mori’s dress dripped water onto the floorboards.

‘Until next time, then.’ Jonathan pushed the ledger towards the edge of the desk and placed a pen into the groove where the pages met.

The two travellers signed their names on the open page. And then there were quick handshakes and smiles, before Mori and her husband excused themselves. They walked inelegantly outside, their clothes still soaked.

The bell over the door shook silently, the tongue long since torn out.

Jonathan fetched a mop and bucket from behind the doorway that led to the back of the shop. He pulled it through on its three remaining wheels, before slapping the mop onto the floor.

He noticed the boy, whose mouth was flapping like he was a goldfish at feeding time. ‘Oh. Are you still here?’

The boy shook his head, snapped his mouth shut, and ran out of the door.

The bell wobbled violently.

Jonathan tutted, and carried on mopping the floor. Once it was dry, he picked up the wet suitcase in one hand, testing the weight and shaking off a few droplets of sea-water. There was a faint scent of cold and salt in the air.

Jonathan gave the suitcase an affectionate pat. Then he put it carefully back into its empty space on the shelves. He went over to the desk, and took out the large magnifying glass, holding it up to the light and examining the lens for a moment. It really was beautiful. Highly crafted. Made by someone who loved it, and would have done wonderful things with it.

A look of anger suddenly crossed over Jonathan’s face.

He dropped the magnifying glass to the floor, and brought his foot down hard.

The glass cracked in two under his heel.

He relaxed a bit. Better to have it broken than at risk of falling into the wrong hands.

He gave a small laugh, barely more than a breath with sound in it, and turned to say something. ‘Did you—’

Then quickly he shut his mouth again, in the way people do when they remember that the person they wanted to speak to is no longer there.

He was quite alone.

And he felt it.



## CHAPTER TWO

**F**lick should have been excited.

Her parents were. They were laughing and singing along with the radio like no one was watching. Even Freddy, the baby, was waving his sticky hands and kicking his legs as they drove up the motorway. It wasn't that Flick didn't understand the excitement over the new house ('A garden!' her mum had squealed for the ninetieth time, 'and two toilets!'), and it was true it was going to make things a lot easier for them all with Freddy having his own bedroom from now on . . . but she'd been born in the old flat (quite literally, as the paramedics were still hauling their equipment up the stairs because the lifts were broken that day), and she'd watched her mum and dad turn it into a proper home, with window

boxes that had actual flowers in them and a customisable doorbell instead of a buzzer – even if it did get stuck chiming *We Will Rock You* once the rain got into it.

‘It’ll be good to get away from the city and to somewhere with a bit of green around it,’ her dad had said.

Flick disagreed. She *liked* living in the city. And anyway, it wasn’t like the St Bosco’s estate had been right in the centre. It had been great living high up and above everyone else, with a panoramic view over town. In the cold weather, you could watch the cooling towers of the power station belching out steam and smoke. Flick’s mum used to tell stories about the towers, and say they were hiding dragons inside. Not that Flick believed that sort of rubbish any more.

She glanced at her backpack, beside her. It was brand new, because, once September rolled around, she’d be going to a new school. She’d spent a year getting used to the size of Lawrence Academy, where the Year Sevens moved in packs like prey animals, and now she was going to be attending Byron Hall, where there were less than 400 kids in the whole school. And she had to wear a tie. The only bit about it that didn’t sound awful to Flick was the fact they let students use real pianos for music lessons.

They turned off the motorway onto a tree-flanked road, following it past some very posh houses. The new Elm Tree Estate had been built right on the edge of the village of Little Wyverns, and apparently there'd been a lot of complaints about it. When the road narrowed to the width of about one and a half cars, Flick breathed in, as though she could make their old Corolla thinner. Another turning, and abruptly the houses of the new estate seemed to spring up around them, lining the pavements and filing backwards, each one perfectly placed behind the other, like dominoes.

Flick shut one eye, and poked her finger at one of the buildings, imagining it collapsing backwards and taking the whole estate with it.

‘This is us,’ Flick’s dad said, pulling onto the driveway. ‘Crikey. The garden looks a bit different to the show-home . . .’

Flick thought that was the understatement of the century. The picture on the front of their housing association brochure had shown the sort of lawn that got cut with nail-scissors. But there was no neat grass in front of their new house. In fact, there was no grass to be seen at all. There were, however, weeds. It looked like someone had played a bad game of Jumanji in the yard. Some of the nettles were as tall as Flick. Freddy,

freshly released from his car-seat prison, made a grab for one of them, but was quickly yanked back by their mum. He howled, and a cat shot out of the undergrowth and down the street like a ginger-and-white rocket. The cats around the flats had got used to Freddy's in-built siren. These new ones would have to learn fast.

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'This is my room,' Flick said, holding Freddy in front of her. He burbled, and rammed a fist in his mouth. 'I'll assume that means you understand. My room. Not ours, any more. Your room . . .' she walked back across the landing, 'is this one. Nice and small, because you're a small person.' Using the word *small* about the bedroom was being generous. Once Freddy needed a single bed he wouldn't even have room to stand up beside it.

The baby kicked his legs to get down. Flick put him on the carpet, which still smelled of the carpet shop, and let him crawl away, leaving a fine trail of crumbs as he went, like a specialised snail.

There was a baby gate at the top of the stairs, which Flick had no doubt her brother was going to learn to scale before the week was out. Like everything else in

the house, it was new. New carpets, new paint, new oven, even new plug sockets, which were crisp-white and smooth – nothing like the ones in the old place that sometimes crackled alarmingly when you put a plug into them.

Flick sighed as she put Freddy's night light on to charge. You couldn't pretend to be controlling the electricity with your mind if the plugs didn't crackle.

Downstairs, the two removal people were leaving. Flick's dad was giving each of them a tip and thanking them for their help. Flick gave them a smile as she carried Freddy over to the baby-jail (or playpen) her mum had put up to keep him away from the boxes and bags.

'So, what do you think of your room?' her mum asked.

'It's nice,' Flick said, flexing her arms after putting Freddy down. 'It's a bit beige.'

'The whole house is beige,' her mum said. 'Cream paint and beige carpets. If we ever get round to changing them, we can choose something more cheerful. I suppose they think it looks clean.'

'It *is* clean. There's a plastic wrapper on the toilet.' Flick went over to the box labelled 'Felicity's Clothes' and picked it up. 'I'll start taking things up, then?'

‘Thank you, sweetheart.’ Her mum handed the baby a rusk. ‘Be careful on the stairs, won’t you.’

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By the end of the day, most of the boxes had been sorted through. Freddy’s cot was assembled, and everyone’s bed was made, but they hadn’t got a dining table or chairs yet, so they were having fish and chips on the living room floor ‘as a treat’. Though Flick’s mum was still making them eat off plates with cutlery, even if Flick insisted that the wooden forks from the chip shop made everything taste nicer.

Flick’s dad sat picking at his fish. Isaac Hudson didn’t trust anything that came out of the sea. ‘There’s a free plastic bag comes with every fish,’ he would say loudly when they walked past the fish counter in Morrisons, ‘and it’s inside it.’ Flick was sure she would die of embarrassment before she ever got to leave home.

‘It’s a shame we won’t get a full day at it tomorrow,’ her dad said, abandoning his dissection of the haddock. ‘But we’ve made a dent in it. I can carry on unpacking tomorrow afternoon.’

‘You’ve got Freddy,’ her mum reminded him. ‘His new childcare doesn’t start for a day or so.’

Flick rolled her eyes. Her parents were rarely under the same roof. Her dad worked as a refuse collector, and was out the door at 4am, coming back as her mum left for her afternoon shift as a post office clerk. Her mum would come home just in time to bath Freddy and was sometimes so tired that she would go to bed at the same time as the baby. Flick's dad would try to stay up to keep Flick company, but often fell asleep in front of the TV. Most of the time, Flick would wake him up and make sure he went to bed, but sometimes she covered him with a blanket and left him.

'What are your plans for tomorrow, Felicity?' Her mum put her plate down.

This was a trap. Flick knew she should offer to help her dad unpack, but she'd been unpacking all day. She'd seen enough brown tape and cardboard to last a lifetime. She couldn't say so without sounding like the most ungrateful daughter in the universe though.

She stirred a chip through what was left of her ketchup. 'Um . . .'

Her dad saved her. 'I think you should have a wander,' he said. 'See what's happening in this little place. You could find out where your school is.'

'I don't think it'll be difficult to find,' Flick said. 'There's like ten buildings in the whole village, if you

don't count these new ones.' She put her cutlery down. 'But yeah, I'll go and find it. See where the library is, and stuff, for after school.'

Her mum nodded. 'That's very sensible. You can unpack your toys and things in the evening.'

Flick scowled. She was twelve. She didn't have toys. She had Collectables, and Items of Sentimental Value. But not toys. 'Sure.'

Freddy stretched from his position on the playmat, managing to yawn and fart simultaneously, and looked immensely pleased with himself.

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Flick drew her new (beige) curtains and switched on the lamp she'd brought with her from the old place. It was shaped like a mushroom and had been a present from Nanna and Grandad Pitchford when she was very small. There was a mouse at the base of it, and Flick used to pretend it was alive. She didn't do that any more, but she loved the memory of being able to pretend like that. Sadly, the lamp now had a big crack in the dome where Freddy had smacked it with a full bottle. It made the light form a sort of zig-zag pattern across the ceiling.

There were half a dozen boxes against the wall, each with her name on. Flick picked up the smallest one and lifted the lid. As she expected, there wasn't only her stuff in it – at the end of the packing, her dad had panicked and started to throw things into any box that still had space.

On the top, though, was the last thing Flick had packed. She lifted out a poster that had been folded over and over, and held it by a corner to let it flop open. The poster had been a Christmas present, and Flick stuck it straight onto the wall, the Blu-Tack from the old house still on the paper.

It was a very impressive poster, Flick thought. It was a map of the world, and the idea was to put a sticker onto each country you visited. Flick didn't have the stickers that had come with it any more – one memorable Saturday Freddy had found them and stuck them all over himself – but it didn't matter. The only country she'd managed to mark off the map was the United Kingdom, anyway.

Flick pressed two of her fingers to the UK, and made them walk like legs over the Channel to France, and then onwards through different countries, right until she got to China, and the land ran out. She sighed, a little seed of sadness sprouting in her chest. China

might as well be Jupiter – she had about as much chance of ever getting there.

She went back to unpacking, lifting out a battered-looking shoe-box that she didn't think she'd seen before. There was a crossed-out address on it, and a faded sticker on the front said 'I. T. Hudson' – her dad's name. She opened it and tutted in despair at the folded bits of paper, the expired key-card, and the broken and dry pens her dad seemed incapable of throwing away. There was a wooden jewellery box at the bottom, with a gold catch.

Flick pulled it out. It was heavy. Her mum didn't have a lot of jewellery, and her dad had worn the same Casio watch for as long as she could remember. Maybe this box held some sort of family secret, she thought excitedly. A box full of jewellery, or money, or proof that they were somehow related to a royal family halfway around the world.

She flicked the catch up.

And sighed in disappointment. The inside was stuffed full of yet more envelopes and paperwork. If she found the library, she really needed to get her dad that *Magical Tidying Up* book she'd heard people talking about.

She closed the wooden box, put it to one side and went back to searching through her things. At last she

found what she was looking for – a slice of agate crystal.

The agate was one of the few precious things Flick owned that had survived her baby brother. Her dad had bought it for her when they went to the Blue-John Mines together, just the two of them, a couple of years ago. The agate was as thin as drinking glass and swirled through with pink and purple.

She put it on top of her lamp and the zig-zagged light turned into an aurora on the ceiling.

Flick smiled and got into bed, letting the colours of the light paint themselves into her dreams.