

*A Clockwork Heart*

A novel submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## *Prologue*

*Not all fairy tales end with Happy Ever After. Some begin that way.*

*The girl who casts no shadow has become a wife. The world once again has an Oracle and the realms of Light and Shadow are in harmony.*

*The pact between Alchemist and Nightwalker is no more. The pact that stood for so long has crumbled to dust and rests in the ruins of Constantinople. But a bargain has been struck. Those of the Council who would harm the girl have agreed to let her be... for now.*

*Some would say that these are all matters which do not concern the likes of me for the world is vast and I, La Fée Verte am but small. What can one do but only have regard for that tiny part of it which concerns us?*

*I have gained my freedom, but I sometimes find myself missing Paris and the absinthe-green dreams I used to weave in return for lumps of sugar.*

*They have given me my own quarters in the glasshouse that leads off the breakfast room, and I have filled it with green: Angelica and anise now blossom in large clay pots amongst the ferns and fancy moth orchids that were brought from far away. But beneath the wooden cladding and frames that allow me to pass unhindered, the glasshouse is still made of iron. And were it not for the stray bumblebees I invite in to stay with me, I would be completely alone in this vast grey city of smog and drizzle. It is a place I have grown to despise, despite my good fortune.*

*I digress. The sunrise is about to call upon the day and there is work to be done. For such is the nature of the two realms that make up this world: As happiness and contentment grow in the Light, so from deep within the Shadow,*

*the dark counterparts grow too.*

*Sometimes in the quiet hours of the day I sense it, and I grow afraid.*

*My mistress is too immersed within her happiness to sense what will come to pass... and I do not have the heart to tell her. Yet.*

*Better to let her enjoy this contentment a little longer. She will need the memories of this happy time to sustain her, because when the darkness comes, it will take everything.*

## Chapter One

Amsterdam, 5 February 1904

The *Water Lily* creaked happily as she surged against the headwinds that heralded the end of the flight. Elle eased the airship to a lower altitude, preparing the ship for landing.

Below her, the canals and gingerbread buildings of the city came into view. Amsterdam was as pretty as a picture, but there was no time for sightseeing. Today was a day for business. The Greychester Flying Company was about to collect its first paid freight consignment. Strictly above board and legitimate.

Elle smiled with pride. Her very own flight charter business. It was almost as if an invisible hand had granted every wish she had ever had in one magical sweep. She had so many ideas about what she wanted to do with her new venture that she could hardly sleep at night. She ran her gaze around the wood and glass interior of the cockpit. The repairs and improvements that had been made to the *Water Lily* were superb. Marsh had insisted on installing brand-new navigational instruments and a state-of-the-art balloon-gas relay system. She had protested, but he had been adamant. She was secretly thrilled though. In fact, one would never have thought the *Water Lily* had been riddled with bullet holes and dangerously close to being scrapped just months before.

*Bought with his money, not yours . . .* the voices whispered to her.

‘Oh, do be quiet you old crones!’ Elle spoke out loud. The voices who spoke were the Spirit of the Oracle. An amalgamation of fragments from the souls of each woman who had, over the centuries, held the position. Elle knew

that when she died, a little part of her would rise up to join them too. And as much as she hated the fact that they were always watching her, it gave her comfort to know that somewhere within that patchwork of souls was a bit of the mother she had never known. It was just a pity that they were such a bunch of busybodies who always chose to interfere at the most inopportune times.

*Never forget who you are, child,* the voices said in answer to her thoughts.

‘Yes, yes, I am the Oracle, the source of wisdom; the one with the gift of sight; the force that holds the many folds of the universe together; the one who channels power to those who are deserving.’ She recited the mantra they had taught her in a bored singsong voice. ‘Trust me, if there is one thing I cannot do, it’s forget who I am. Now please leave me alone to enjoy this moment, would you? Today I am flying and I want none of this Oracle business spoiling it.’

*As you wish . . .* the voices faded away.

Just then, the communications console started rattling and spitting out a ribbon of tape, clearing her for landing.

Elle brought the airship round portside and lined her up, ready to dock at one of the platforms that lined the docks on the western district. With a shudder and hiss that sounded almost like a sigh of contentment, the *Water Lily* berthed.

‘There you are, my dear,’ Elle said to her ship as she turned the crank handle that released the tether ropes. ‘All safe and sound.’

Almost as if in answer to that, one of the boiler tank valves opened to release some engine pressure.

Elle opened the hatch and let the ladder rope drop to the ground. With practised ease, she climbed down and stepped on to the wooden docking platform.

‘Miss Chance, I presume!’ A tall man with a shock of white-blond hair that was thinning at the top waved at her.

‘Ah, Mr De Beer.’ She smiled at him.

‘Welcome to the fair city of Amsterdam.’ He spoke in an accent that was tended towards rounded vowels.

‘Thank you. It’s so nice to finally meet you,’ she said as she shook her new Dutch docking agent’s huge hand vigorously.

‘And the same to you,’ he said graciously. ‘It is an honour to be working with the famous Eleanor Chance.’

Elle didn’t have the heart to correct him on her new surname. Simply being Elle Chance for the day, not Lady Eleanor or Viscountess Greychester, was a bit of a relief, if she was honest with herself.

She loved her husband Hugh with all her heart, but the pomp and ceremony involved in becoming part of his world over the last few months had been more than a little overwhelming.

‘I have the papers ready here, to sign if you will. Once it is completed, I will tell the men to start loading the freight. I have told them to be extra careful with our precious tulips.’ Mr De Beer pointed to the crates of bulbs which were stacked on wooden pallets and tied down with coarse rope. They were indeed ready to be loaded into the hull and destined to brighten the gardens and huge glasshouses of Kew that summer.

‘My men shouldn’t take too long. Sign here, if you please,’ he said as he

handed her a wad of papers.

Elle felt a pang of sadness when she signed the docking papers and charter before handing them back to Mr De Beer so he could tear off the counterparts. Patrice, her old agent, had been such fun to work with. Back in the day before things went wrong.

In the old days, before Constantinople, Patrice would have taken her to some exotic disreputable bar or café for a drink while they waited for the freight to be loaded. He would have had her in fits of giggles with his lumbering charm and silly jokes. Despite his betrayal and all the terrible things he had done, Elle found herself missing his massive moustache. She had been told afterwards that very few bodies were ever recovered from the Constantinople earthquake that had killed almost every living alchemist and a large percentage of the Nightwalker population. They had all been gathered in an underground amphi-theatre when the vortex that their leader, Sir Eustace Abercrombie, had created, collapsed, bringing part of the city down with it. The last memory Elle had of Patrice was of him hanging on for dear life at the edge of a spinning vortex of complete darkness . . .

She closed her eyes at the thought. Patrice had been sucked into oblivion, never to be seen again. She did not think that a funeral had been held for him and the thought of it made her sad. Such a wasteful and futile quest for power . . .

‘Miss Chance, is everything all right?’ Mr De Beer asked. He looked concerned.

Elle blinked herself back to the present. ‘Yes, all is well. I was just remembering something. Silly, really.’

She shrugged off her dark thoughts. Patrice had betrayed her, and he had betrayed her husband too. Even if he were alive today, she did not think she could forgive the fact that he had sold her to the alchemists as if she were nothing more than a means to gain a profit.

Elle took a deep breath. Today was the beginning of a new era and she wouldn't allow dark thoughts to taint things. 'Say, do you know where the pilots' mess is?' she asked De Beer.

'Ah, yes, it's just over there. Upstairs in that building with the green roof.'

'Thank you.' She smiled at De Beer. 'Take off in three hours?'

He doffed his flat cap. 'Will see you then, Miss Chance.'

The pilots' mess room was exactly where Mr De Beer had said it was - on the first floor of one of the administrative buildings adjacent to the landing docks. The smell of meat stew mingled with the odour of tired bodies, leather and tobacco hit her halfway up the stairwell. It was a familiar smell that made her feel warm inside. It was the smell of freedom.

The mess was really nothing more than a large, slightly grubby warehouse that had been converted to serve as a canteen and waiting area for pilots and crew between flights. The wooden floorboards were scuffed and grey paint flaked from the walls, in the way that utilitarian buildings seemed to do.

She walked up to the canteen counter and ordered a coffee. It came in a tin mug and had a faint blue-grey film on the surface that hinted at the hours it had been brewing behind the counter.

She had just picked up her coffee when someone called her name. 'Ellie!'

Only her father and one other person called her that.

She spun round to greet the young man who was, at that moment, bounding



up to her like an over-eager Labrador retriever.

‘Ducky!’ She hugged him with genuine affection.

‘Or should I rather bow and say, good afternoon, my lady?’ In one quick move, he converted her hug into a half-nelson that would have made any wrestler proud.

Elle started laughing and dug her fingers into his ribs to tickle him. This was a practised manoeuvre she had perfected while they were in flight school.

Richard ‘Ducky’ Richardson was the brother she never had.

Ducky, so called because of his prowess on the cricket field, let go of her.

‘My word, it’s good to see you. What on earth are you doing here?’

‘I’m flying.’ She smoothed her auburn hair back into its customary low knot at the back of her neck.

‘Is that old tub of yours still in the air?’ he said with amazement.

‘The *Water Lily* is not a tub. And she’s just had a complete overhaul. I’d bet she’d outrun that rickety old bucket of bolts you call a ship any day of the week.’

‘Ha! Now that’s a wager I’d like to take.’

‘Just name the day and I’ll be there.’

Ducky grinned at her. ‘Oh, Ellie. It’s so lovely to see you. I’m so sorry I missed the wedding, but I was in Japan and I couldn’t get back in time. You did get married awfully quickly,’ he said with naughty smile. ‘I would have thought you would be busy planning christening breakfasts at the moment.’

There had been more than a few finely arched eyebrows raised at news of her sudden marriage to Marsh and the gossipmongers were all watching eagerly to see if their suspicions were correct.

‘Oh stop it!’ Elle felt her cheeks grow warm. ‘When you know something is right, there really is no reason to wait. And besides, you know I’m not the type of girl who fancies elaborate weddings.’

‘Come, let me introduce you to the crew,’ Ducky said.

On the other side of the canteen, a group of men had halted their game of cards and were watching her intently as Ducky steered her over to them.

‘Lads, I’d like you to meet my very dear friend Mrs Eleanor Marsh, or, rather, Viscountess Greychester to be precise,’ Ducky said. ‘Elle, may I present the crew of the *Iron Phoenix*.’ He made an over-elaborate sweeping gesture.

Chairs scraped as the crewmen all rose to their feet, nodded awkwardly and mumbled ‘my lady’, in gruff tones. All except one. He was dressed like her, in a white shirt and brown leather coat.

‘Gentlemen. Do sit. Today I am simply Elle, the pilot. There really is no need for formalities, please.’

‘By all means, join us.’ The man who was still seated spoke with a soft drawl that immediately placed him from somewhere in the New World. America perhaps. She wasn’t sure.

She studied the men. Ducky was the embodiment of a clean-cut Englishman. Apple-cheeked, bred from solid stock and good to his bones. His only flaw was his natural sense of adventure. Despite his family’s best efforts, he absolutely refused to settle down. It was also one of the things she loved best about him.

Gritty was the word that first came to mind when her gaze fixed the American. He had the gravelly, freckly look of a man who had spent the majority of his life outdoors. He wore a fedora, pushed back on his head,

which he had not bothered to take off indoors. She stared at his hands that were resting on the table. Broad palms, strong fingers. The hands of a man who knew hard work. A soldier's hands, she decided. He was far too suspicious-looking to be a farmer.

He gave her a quizzical look. 'Well, are you going to sit down or not?' he asked.

Elle realised that she had been staring. 'Oh yes. Of course,' she said. She set her coffee mug down on the table as she took the seat Ducky offered her. As she sat, she shoved her new leather holdall between the legs of her chair. The strap was new and stiff and she had to wiggle it around a few times before the finely stitched brown leather would settle.

The holdall had been a gift from Hugh. He had spotted it in the market in Florence on their honeymoon. 'For the one that I didn't manage to save in Paris,' he had said when she had unwrapped it from the tissue paper.

They had spent that afternoon curled up in front of the massive medieval fireplace in their room while the grey winter rain slipped down the windows outside. A honeymoon in the middle of winter did have its advantages, for it was far too cold to be traipsing about outside sightseeing for too long.

'Do you play cards, Mrs Marsh?' The American spoke, interrupting her thoughts.

Elle looked straight into the bluest eyes she had ever encountered.

Without thinking, she started twisting the plain gold wedding band she recently started wearing on her left ring finger.

'I've been known to play the odd hand,' she said.

She lowered her hand unobtrusively, feeling silly.

He smiled. 'Well, then. Mr Richardson, why don't you deal us a fresh hand. The rest of you men have three hours' shore leave. And don't make me have to come and collect you later.'

'Aye, aye, captain,' Ducky said picking up the cards as the remainder of the crew took the hint and went off on their own business.

'Captain?' Elle looked at Ducky.

Ducky looked embarrassed. 'Ellie, this is. Logan Dashwood.'

'Captain Logan Dashwood,' the American said.

'I am first officer on the *Phoenix*,' Ducky said quickly. 'Ran into a spot of bother in Yokahama. Dashwood here was a good old sort and helped me out. I gave him the *Iron Phoenix* as payment but on the condition that I stay on as first officer. Long story, but it's for the best.' He gave Elle a look imploring her not to ask any questions.

'At your service, ma'am.' Dashwood touched his hat. He wore no collar and she noticed that his shirt was unstarched and unbuttoned at the top. A long strip of leather darkened from wear was wound loosely around his neck. A small amulet carved from what looked like black stone was threaded through the leather, just visible above the place where the buttons met. Elle could feel the dark hum of power from the Shadow side emanating from it.

Elle narrowed her eyes slightly. There was something odd about this man. She did not trust him.

'So are we going to play cards or are we going to sit here staring at one another all day,' Ducky said brightly.

Elle gave Ducky a stern look which told him that she was going to have a serious talk with him once they were alone. She turned to the man opposite her.

‘Well, Captain Dashwood, let’s play.’

He met her gaze. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ he said with a slightly mocking curve to his smile.

Elle looked down and picked up her cup. She took a big sip of the lukewarm liquid and instantly regretted it. The coffee was tinny and so foul that she could not help making a face.

‘That coffee looks like it could strip-clean the tanks of a spark engine,’ Ducky said, breaking the tension.

‘You are not wrong.’ Elle put the mug to the side. Her wedding band glinted in the watery light of the mess hall.

Dashwood’s smile broadened. He reached over and took her hand in his. ‘Not married that long then, I see?’

‘Long enough,’ she answered, drawing her hand away.

‘That wedding band looks new. Does your husband approve of you gallivanting around the world in the company of men, Mrs Marsh?’

Elle glared at him. ‘I am not gallivanting. I am working. There is a big difference between the two, Captain Dashwood.’

He held up his hand. ‘I was just trying to be friendly. No need to get your underthings in a knot.’

She could tell that he was laughing at her, but she was used to men treating her like this. She had spent years fighting the perception that she was some spoiled rich girl who took to flying because she was bored. It came with the job.

‘So, Ducky, tell me about Japan.’ She turned to her friend, ignoring Captain Dashwood entirely.

Ducky widened his eyes at her. 'Japan was incredible. Had to get out of there in a hurry, though.'

'It's all over the London papers,' Elle said. 'Such a worry, isn't it?'

Dashwood gave Ducky a very stern look.

'And so Mr Richardson found himself stationed on the *Phoenix*. And a finer first officer no captain could hope for.' Dashwood said.

Ducky picked up the deck of cards, looking relieved. From the looks of things, they had been playing that American card game called poker, which had recently become all the rage.

Captain Dashwood placed a small stack of matchsticks in front of her.

'Shilling a stick? Or is that too rich for your blood?'

'Wager accepted, Captain Dashwood.' Elle gave him a slow smile. Her friend the Baroness Loisa Belododia had taught her how to play when Elle and Marsh had stopped by to visit her at her winter castle in the Carpathian Mountains. Loisa was an excellent card player and Elle had learnt a few tricks from her.

Ducky dealt the hand for them.

Elle felt the soft hum of magic from the amulet around Captain Dashwood's neck the moment she checked her cards, but she said nothing.

He won the first two games easily as Elle observed him play. Each time she looked at her hand, the amulet strummed with an energy that could not be ignored.

So the American captain was cheating... Well, she had a few aces up her sleeve too.

'Another game?' He sat back in his seat with arrogant satisfaction.

‘Why break a winning streak?’ she said.

He laughed softly as Ducky dealt again.

Elle closed her eyes and thought of two cards that would make up a bad hand on the table. Carefully she reached out with her mind and sent the image along the trail of energy that tailed out from the amulet back to the captain. His eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second and then he gripped his jaw with glee.

Elle glanced at her cards again. She had an ace.

She added her matchsticks to the growing pile in the centre of the table. The game was on.

Expressions grew serious as they concentrated on the cards.

Ducky bet. Elle took another card.

Dashwood drew a card and bit the corner of his lip.

Ducky placed his cards on the table, face down. ‘That’s as far as my bravery allows me to go,’ he said shaking his head at the small fortune in front of him.

Elle and Captain Dashwood stared at one another for a few long moments and Elle felt the crackle of energy from the Shadow side course through her.

‘What about you, Mrs Marsh?’ the Captain said.

‘Oh, I am still very much in the game, Captain.’ She added more matchsticks to the centre of the table.

‘Hmm, a woman with gumption. I am impressed. But let’s see what you are made of. I raise you,’ he said as he pushed all of his matchsticks into the centre of the table.

Elle felt the strum of his amulet and fought against it.

‘Very well, Captain.’ She put all her matchsticks on to the pile. ‘What else have you got?’

Dashwood scratched his chin and a look of uncertainty flashed across his face. ‘What did you have in mind, Mrs Marsh?’

This time it was her turn to give him a sly smile. She leaned forward and pulled the docking papers out of her holdall. ‘The *Water Lily* for the *Phoenix*. Winner takes both ships.’

Dashwood’s eyes widened in surprise for just a second, but it was enough to tell her that he had not expected her boldness.

‘Elle, no! Dashwood never loses.’ Ducky put his hand on her arm to stop her.

‘There is a first time for everything,’ she said without taking her eyes off the captain. ‘What do you say, Captain Dashwood?’

‘Very well then, if you are so eager to part company with your ship. I’ll take that wager. Perhaps you could even ask your husband to buy it back for you later,’ Dashwood said.

Elle felt a surge of anger but she kept her features neutral. The arrogance of the man was absolutely incredible. She’d wager that Ducky lost his ship in the same way.

‘Show us what you’ve got,’ she said.

‘Full house,’ he said as he laid the cards down on the table. ‘Three aces and two kings.’

Elle stared at his cards without saying anything.

He hooted and lifted his arms in the air. ‘I win, and you, madam,’ he pointed at her, ‘owe me a ship.’

‘Not so quickly, Captain,’ she said.

He sat forward in his chair. ‘What do you mean?’



‘Well, you see, there are four aces in a deck of cards. And I happen to have the fourth one right here. Along with a king, a queen, a jack and a ten. Of hearts.’ She laid the cards out one by one as she named them.

‘Blimey,’ said Ducky before he burst out laughing.

‘I think they call that a Royal Flush. Is that right?’

Dashwood blanched. He stared at the cards before him. ‘How is that possible?’ he muttered.

Elle shook her head. ‘Well, Captain, when using magic to cheat at cards, one should always make sure one’s opponent isn’t doing the same.’ She waved her hand sending a sudden surge of energy into the amulet. It glowed and Dashwood flinched, pulling it off his neck and away from his skin.

She turned to Ducky. ‘Ducky, how would you like to come and work for me? I suddenly find myself the owner of an extra airship in need of a pilot.’

Ducky gawped at her.

‘You dirty cheater!’ Captain Dashwood slammed his fist down on the table with such force that it made the matchsticks jump.

‘Oh no, Captain. It is *you* who are the cheater. I just happened to spot that little mind-reading amulet the moment we sat down. You really should be more circumspect about these things. Now, if you’ll excuse me.’ She gathered her holdall and rose from the table. ‘Ducky, will you bring the *Phoenix* to Croydon? Greychesters have a hangar there. Take on whichever crew members you consider to be good men and necessary in order to fly her home safely. I will ask Mr De Beer to arrange the papers for us.’ She turned and inclined her head at Dashwood. ‘Good day to you, sir.’

Ducky rose and gave Dashwood an apologetic shrug. ‘Wait, you can’t do

that,' he said.

Elle turned to Dashwood. 'A wager is a wager, Captain,' she said with a smile.

Dashwood stared at her open-mouthed, his hand still holding the glowing amulet.

Mr De Beer looked up from his desk when Elle strode into his office with Ducky at her heels. 'The *Iron Phoenix* is now part of the Greychester Flying Company Fleet,' she said.

'Is she now?' Mr De Beer said in surprise.

'She is indeed,' Elle said with a little nod. 'Can you arrange her papers for Croydon please? Mr Richardson will pilot her as soon as she is cleared for take off.'

'But what about Captain Dashwood?' Mr De Beer said.

'What about him?' Elle said.

Her docking agent dabbed his thinning hair with his handkerchief. 'Captain Dashwood is not a man I would like to have for an enemy, Mrs Marsh. I don't want any trouble.'

'Oh there is no trouble. We made a bet and I won. Fair and square. The *Phoenix* is mine and I make no apology for it.'

Mr De Beer shook his head in dismay. 'Very well then. I will arrange for the papers. You had better get ready for cast off, Mr Richardson. As luck would have it, I have a departure opening right after the *Water Lily*. You had better take it before the captain decides to change his mind.'

'I think that is an excellent idea, sir,' Ducky said. He too was looking slightly out of sorts. Elle noticed him glance over his shoulder at the direction

of the mess as he spoke.

‘Come, Ducky, you had better show me my new acquisition.’ She smiled in triumph as she left De Beer’s office. Today was truly a great day for the Greychester Flying Company indeed.

## Chapter Two

Ingolstadt, 5 February 1904

The icy winter fog swirled and spilled along the cobbled streets, rendering the stone-clad buildings slick as they stood firm against the biting cold.

Clothilde crouched silently on the roof amidst the slow-crumbling gargoyles that guarded the city. She watched as day fought night and the darkness dissolved into a murky dawn.

It followed her wherever she went, this fog. Ever present, ever swirling. She lifted her head and sipped the air. It would rain soon, as it always did. Below her, a single lonely bell tolled, telling the good people of this place that the sun was about to rise.

There were dark creatures afoot at this early hour. She was one of them.

In anticipation of the icy rain that would soon fall, she tightened her cloak around her, making sure that the hood covered her extraordinary hair. It was white as sea-bleached bone and it reached down past her shapely waist. Her skin was pale and fine; her features perfectly moulded as if shaped from the finest porcelain. Her lips were bloodless - perfect little crescents devoid of even the slightest hint of blush.

She knew many glammers of disguise and so she could change her appearance as she pleased, but in her unguarded state, Clothilde was almost entirely devoid of colour except for her eyes, which were a startling shade of sea green. She was *La Dame Blanche* – the Lady in White.

The promised rain started sifting down, pinpricks of sleet, soaking everything before freezing into a black shell that covered everything.

Clothilde was used to waiting in cold places, for that was her lot in life, and most of the time she welcomed the numbness that it brought. But this morning she had an appointment to keep and so she dared not tarry.

She had chosen the roof of the great cathedral with care. The apex of the dome was a powerful crossroads between the realms of Shadow and Light. Far below her on the floor was a fine mosaic circle, its Shadow purpose cleverly disguised by the religious symbols of the Light.

This was ironic. Here, high above this city of learning and enlightenment, the Shadow was at its strongest.

She closed her eyes and sensed the barrier that held the two realms apart. The barrier was everywhere, visible in the shadows that are cast by every single thing here in the Light. But here, high above the circle, the portal lay open, ready for those who knew how to use it.

She extended her mind and touched the barrier. The energy reacted to her touch as if it were alive. Some said the barrier had assumed a life of its own after all this time and Clothilde was inclined to believe that. She felt a slight *frisson* of anticipation. The penalty for using the barrier was death. How stupid these humans were, she thought. Did they honestly believe that a few puny rules enforced by *Warlocks* could stop her? Clothilde cared little for the rules imposed by men.

She braced herself for the next step. She was hungry and the need for nourishment strong. Carefully, she reached in between the folds of space and time. It opened up before her – a small rent in reality, fringed with gold. She

rooted around until her hand closed around the pocket of trapped energy that hung suspended between the realms, ripe for the picking. The energy pulsed against her palm with a warm life of its own and the sensation sent a delicious shiver through her entire body. Unable to contain herself, she slipped her fingernails into the soft metaphysical membranes. It took only a second, the space between heartbeats, as the energy she craved slipped into her. The sensation was like biting into a ripe, exotic piece fruit – lush and exquisite. Clothilde could not help uttering a low moan as she felt herself fill with power.

Nothing came close to the sensuousness that tapping into the void could evoke.

She was young, measured against the many years members of her kind lived, but she had lived more than one human lifetime. She had known many things for she was a creature with voracious appetites. Sated, she stood and straightened her cloak, turning her head to sip the cool morning air. She stared in the direction of the university. She was being summoned.

The entrance to the small wing in the engineering faculty of Ingolstadt University was through a heavy door made of pure iron. Clothilde closed her eyes and enacted the glamour that she wore these days. Her eyes turned a darker shade of watery blue, her face filled with colour and her hair turned a mousy shade of brown. She was still pretty, but in an invisible, inoffensive sort of way. She pulled a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles out and perched them on her nose. Then, she wrapped her fist in her cloak to lift the knocker, flinching at the sting of the metal through the folds of fabric.

A young man opened the door for her. He was impeccably dressed in a fine suit, his hair still damp from where he had washed this morning. He wore a

little silver medallion pinned to the lapel of his jacket – a sign of his association with this place. His eyes lit up when he saw her, but she blocked his thoughts abruptly. He was easy prey, this young man who smelled of soap and lust. She would remember him for later – once her business here was concluded.

The young doorman frowned with a disappointment he did not fully comprehend before his sense of duty took over. ‘This way, err...Miss. They are expecting you.’

He led her down a chilly corridor. From the cobwebs that hung in the high corners of the ceiling it was a place few visited.

The metal doorframes briefly crackled with a glimmer of blue energy as she walked by and she had to stop herself from wincing at the protective spells they held as she passed each one. All these precautions... this was a place that held many secrets.

She was led into an opulent room, decorated with heavy baroque gilding and filigree. A bright fire crackled in the oversized fireplace and filled the room with warmth.

A group of men were seated around a long table that was placed perpendicular to the entrance. They were all dressed in black and each man wore a white mask tied with a black satin ribbon.

Pale, expressionless, anonymous faces turned to look at her. This was the Consortium: a group of international financiers who controlled the financial markets of the world.

The power that emanated from the group assembled around the table was almost tangible. But this was a power that had nothing to do with magic. This

was the power of the Realm of Light, the power of money and influence.

Cowards! She thought fiercely, but she kept her expression cool and impassive.

‘Madam.’ One of them spoke, ‘We are pleased that you answered our invitation. Apologies for the strangeness of the hour, but we thought it best that we assembled out of sight.’

‘It is an honour to be in such auspicious company,’ she said in a low voice as she dropped into a slow, careful curtsey.

‘We have been following your progress at the medical faculty here with great interest. Your intellect coupled with your other talents makes you truly unique.’ He paused for a moment. ‘A most extraordinary achievement. And a woman too!’ He gave a little chuckle.

‘Thank you,’ she said simply. A shiver of arousal passed through the room as the men reacted to her, but Clothilde felt nothing but contempt for them. For the last few years, she had been working as a researcher here at the medical faculty at the university. It was lowly, menial work, but it provided her with a small income and a roof over her head. In the past, she had taken to harlotry. Her pale perennial beauty and ability to arouse men had seen to it that she was the mistress of more than one wealthy aristocrat over the years, but she had grown bored with them as they withered and died under her ministrations and then on had the bother of finding someone new. After a while, people talk and they noticed as men died in her arms. She has grown weary of travelling from city to city, always in disguise, always hiding. Here at the university life was meagre and miserable, but at least she was left alone to be herself, unmolested.

The chairman cleared his throat. ‘As mentioned in our letter, we believe that you are ideally suited to the task we have in mind.’



‘I am flattered by your praise,’ she said. None of the other masked members moved. The staring masks were somewhat disconcerting.

‘It is correct that you are familiar with spark monasteries?’

‘Yes, I lived in one as a foundling many years ago.’ The electromancers had found her in the forest in the days before the men of the Realm of Light had found ways to use the spark they made to power their machines – many years ago now. They had taken her in and they had fed and clothed her. In those early years she had even known affection from the monks, until the day they had caught her feeding and realised what she was. Once her secret was out, she had been packed off to a convent. She had tried to be good, living with the sisters, learning about the body and the healing arts, but in the end she could not deny her true nature and she had claimed her freedom.

‘Splendid,’ said one of the masked men, bringing her back to the present.

‘I live to serve.’ Clothilde murmured the mantra of the electromancers and inclined her head. ‘Forgive me for asking, but your letter was not very clear. Why am I here?’

The letter she had received from these men had promised her a sizeable payment for her expertise. In fact, it was enough money to guarantee her freedom for many years. It was why she had answered their call.

One of the men cleared his throat. ‘Well, we are interested in the experiments you have been conducting in the field of galvanism. Most scientists had dismissed the theories as impossible, but you have persevered in your research.’

‘I am not most scientists,’ she said with a little smile. ‘I have always been interested in the way spark electricity behaves when applied to flesh... and the

reanimation it brings.’

‘Well, yes, and we understand that your findings have been most extraordinary.’

‘Thank you,’ she said again.

One of the masked men motioned to a leather attaché case that lay on the table before them.

‘Inside you will find a full set of instructions. Please read and memorise them. There is also a folder with the necessary letters of introduction you will need to complete your task. You are to show these to the abbots on the enclosed list who are designated to assist you. And most importantly, you will contact us with news, by means of the method described in the instructions once each stage of the process is completed. Once each stage is completed, we will ensure prompt payment of your fee as well as advancement of any funds you may need for the next stage. You will also burn all documents once you have memorised them.’ He paused. ‘Mademoiselle Le Blanc, the need for secrecy and the utmost discretion cannot be underestimated.’

‘I understand,’ she said.

‘And you are to follow these instructions to the letter. No exceptions, is that clear?’

‘Clear, sir.’

‘And Mademoiselle,’ he cleared his throat. ‘We are aware of your ahem. . . weaknesses when it comes to men. We’ve heard rumours...’

Clothilde felt a slight tightening of her chest, her mouth suddenly dry.

‘We have our misgivings about your character, and for hiring a succubus such as yourself - make no mistake,’ he said.

Clotilde felt a flash of anger. So they knew she was from the Realm of Shadow, but how *dare* they call her a filthy succubus? True, they had the same habits, but she was a far more evolved creature than that. In response to her anger, a peal of thunder rolled across the sky outside.

‘You are the only one who can do what we require, Mademoiselle, so in order for us to succeed, we will insist that you will exercise temperance and self-control at all times. We expect that you conduct yourself with the utmost decorum. Do you understand.’

‘As you wish,’ she said through gritted teeth. There was no point in arguing with them.

‘The weather...,’ he continued, ‘Well, there is not much one can do but apologise for that.’ He gave a nervous little laugh as lightning flashed outside.

Clothilde smiled sweetly at his attempt at humour. ‘Indeed so,’ she said.

One of the Consortium motioned to the young man who had been waiting discreetly in an inconspicuous corner. He stepped forward with a writing tray complete with pen and ink.

‘Then sign the contract please.’

Clothilde picked up the pen. A thick contract lay before her on the tray.

The young man flicked the pages over and showed her where to sign.

She scribbled her name without even looking at the document. Paper pacts meant nothing to her and besides, there was no point, for there would be no negotiation with the Consortium. They needed her and she needed their money. It was as simple as that. They would both have to play the game to get what they wanted.

She inclined her head in a gesture of subservience when she put the pen

down.

‘Very good,’ the man who had spoken first said. ‘You are to leave for London without delay. We have booked you a first-class passage on an airship that leaves this evening. Our last dispatch from London advises that the factory is installed and ready to start up so you should have no problems getting to work promptly once you arrive.’ He motioned to the young man who stepped forward and handed her a wallet that was thick with bills.

‘You should find enough in there to cover expenses. Let us know if you need more,’ the member of the Consortium said.

‘Thank you,’ Clothilde said as she slipped the wallet into the folds of her cloak. It felt thick and heavy in her hand.

‘The war between Russia and Japan has created an opportunity for us to move our plans forward sooner than we had envisioned. This venture is therefore an imperative. The emperor is awaiting his first consignment as per the specifications in the papers.’

‘War with Russia and Japan?’ Clothilde frowned.

Someone laughed. ‘Yes, we expect war to be declared at any moment. And we look forward to it with great anticipation. We are awaiting dawning of a new era. A time when finance and industry rules the world.’

‘I am honoured by the faith you have placed in me,’ she said, hoping it’s what they wanted to hear.

‘It has nothing to do with faith, Mademoiselle. We will be watching your every move. There is no room for error. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, perfectly,’ she said.

The man in the mask gestured again and the young man stepped forward

with a wooden case. As she took and opened it. Inside, wrapped in cloth and nestled in straw. She thought she could hear a faint ticking under the cloth.

‘All the instructions relating to the devices are in your dossier. Be sure to find suitable candidates for these. They need to be strong in order for our plan to work. One of our members known as the Clockmaker will ship the devices to you as soon as you have settled in.’

‘I will do my best,’ said Clothilde.

The men at the table grew silent. ‘We do not want your best. We demand your complete and utter compliance with our every request. Any questions?’

‘No. I understand completely,’ she said. Outside, more lightning flashed, followed by another rumble of thunder.

The masked man reached into his pocket and pulled out a brass key on a piece of string. He presented it to her with an air of reverence. ‘The master key for the hearts,’ he whispered. ‘Guard it well.’

As she touched the key to put it round her neck, she felt a tremor of energy pass through her. The strangeness of it made her shiver. The key contained very strange magic. She wasn’t sure that she liked it.

‘Very well then, you may go,’ one of the men said.

Clothilde gathered up the satchel and case.

She bowed to the Consortium in a rather low, old fashioned curtsy pausing for an alluring moment before rising. As she turned to walk away from them, she kept her face turned to the floor in order to hide the slow smile that spread across her face.

These men had made their first mistake in the game they were playing. They had underestimated her. Enlightening them when the time was right, was going

to be exquisite.

## Chapter Three

### London

Elle was still smiling when Neville drew the car up alongside the house in Grosvenor Square. The townhouse was an imposing Georgian building with carved sandstone pillars on the facade. A row of camellia trees grew near the black railings outside the front steps. At the moment they looked dark and bare, but Elle knew they would be glorious in spring when they bloomed.

Marsh was waiting for her at the front door when she reached it from the street.

‘I’m home!’ Elle kissed her husband as he helped her out of her coat.

‘Did you have a good flight, my darling?’ he said.

‘Oh Hugh, it was simply wonderful. And I have such exciting news!’ she said over her shoulder as she went into the house.

Elle flung herself into the leather Chesterfield in the library with a sigh.

‘Oh, it is good to be back. I could murder a nice cup of tea right now. Ring the bell, would you?’

‘Well, what is it?’ Marsh said as he rang the bell-pull and sank into one of the wingback chairs opposite her, his long legs stretched out before him.

The fire had burnt down in the fireplace, but the room was lovely and warm after the crisp cold of the February afternoon. The library was one of Elle’s favourite rooms in the house. Full of light, it smelled of books and leather and Marsh.

She smiled at him with glee. ‘I got a new ship.’

Marsh frowned. 'How on earth did you do that?'

Elle sat forward in her seat. 'I won her in a card game. The same game we played with Loisa when we visited on the way back from the honeymoon.'

'You gambled?' She watched her husband's expression darken. 'I knew I should have come with you. What if you had lost?'

'I wouldn't have. The captain of the ship was cheating. He had an amulet around his neck which made him able to see what cards the other players held. But I stopped him from seeing my cards. When I had a good enough hand, I made him think I had worse cards than I really had and so I won. Serves him right for trying to cheat,' she said in one excited breath.

Marsh's frown deepened. 'So you cheated too. And you used Shadow magic,' he said. 'What if you had been discovered?'

'Oh, don't be such a worryniny. I was very careful and the captain of the ship didn't guess who – or should I say what? – I am. Besides, I was with Ducky, so I was perfectly safe. By the way, I hired him to pilot her home. He's busy berthing the *Iron Phoenix* in Croydon as we speak. We need to book her into Farnborough for an overhaul though. She's a bit rickety.'

'Eleanor!' Marsh thundered.

Elle jumped. Marsh only called her Eleanor like that when he was angry with her and they were about to have an argument.

'What?' she said, squaring her shoulders.

'I will not have my wife gambling with ruffians. Do you not understand how dangerous that is? You promised you wouldn't take any unnecessary risks.'

'They were not ruffians. Well, not terribly bad ones. It was only an innocent



card game in the pilots' mess. I told you I wouldn't leave the airfield, and I didn't.'

Marsh ran his hand through his dark hair, worn just a little too long for society. 'Innocent card games do not end up with people losing their ships to one another.'

'Don't you think you are overreacting ever so slightly?' she said.

He strode up to his desk and grabbed the newspaper that lay neatly folded on its broad leather-topped surface. 'Look!' He thrust the newspaper at Elle.

She took the paper and opened it.

'There.' He jabbed at the news report in the right-hand corner of the page, right underneath the headline that spoke of the trouble between Russia and Japan.

The heading read: SKY PIRATES SPOTTED OVER THE ENGLISH CHANNEL.

'I have been worried sick, waiting for you to come home safely.'

'Oh,' said Elle. 'We saw no pirates. In fact the crossing was perfectly ordinary.'

'There could very well have been. I can manage the thought of you flying the *Water Lily* because she is small and not worth bothering with. But with two ships you are a – a fleet!' he spluttered.

'Oh Hugh, you are being ridiculous,' Elle said.

Marsh sighed. 'I love the fact that you are so bold and fearless, my darling, but you really do need to be more careful.'

'I was careful,' she said. 'Hugh, you can't wrap me in cotton wool. I need to take risks if I am to turn this charter company into a success.'

Marsh closed his eyes in exasperation. 'How do you suppose I can allow

that?’

Elle felt herself grow angry. She hated it when he condescended to her. She rose to her feet. ‘Hugh, flying and airships is my business. I flew on my own for years and I was perfectly fine before you came along, so please stop telling me how to do my job.’

This was not a new argument. It had taken all her powers of persuasion to stop him from coming along to watch over her on each of her flights.

‘Elle, you can’t keep the ship. You have to return it to the airfield in Amsterdam. Surely you of all people must know that.’

She didn’t want to admit it to Marsh, but Captain Dashwood had looked awfully angry the last time she had seen him. And yet, despite her rather rickety short-comings, the *Iron Phoenix* was a beauty. She was a big freighter, with a hull almost seven hundred feet long. With it, Elle would be able to take in bigger, longer charters for larger fees. And with larger fees she would be able to pay back the money Marsh had lent her to start the company.

*His money*, the voices suddenly whispered out of nowhere. That was enough to make her decide.

‘No. I am keeping the *Iron Phoenix*. My mind is quite made up. The captain knows he lost the bet fair and square. And I am hiring Ducky to pilot her for me. I could use the help, to be honest.’

‘I think that is a tremendously bad idea,’ Marsh said.

‘Well, I don’t.’ She crossed her arms over her chest. ‘The situation would have been very different if you had been the one doing the winning.’

‘I am not going to change your mind, am I?’ Marsh rubbed his face in resignation.

She smiled and put her arms around his neck. ‘No, you are not. I want my charter business to grow and be successful and an extra ship is precisely what I need.’

‘You know I would have bought you another ship. All you had to do is ask,’ he said.

‘But that wouldn’t be the same,’ she said. ‘It would have been *your* ship. Not mine.’

Marsh put up a hand in defeat. ‘Do you have any idea how hard it is to stay here and wait for you to come home every time you take to the air on some adventure?’ His dark eyes pleaded with her in a way that told her he was serious.

Elle felt a rush of affection for him and kissed his cheek. ‘Marsh, you know flying is something I must do on my own. We are both strong-willed people and if we do not allow the other a measure of freedom to be who we are, then in time, we shall end up despising one another. You have to let me be.’

‘I don’t like it,’ he grumbled. ‘Sometimes I think I shall go out of my mind with worry.’

‘Well, now you know how the wives of soldiers and sailors have felt for centuries,’ she said.

Just then, Edie the maid rolled in the tea trolley.

Elle clapped her hands in delight. ‘Ah, just what I need. And with strawberry tarts as well!’ The little tarts filled with jam were Elle’s favourite.

‘I think I need something stronger than tea.’ Marsh walked over to his cabinet. He selected one of the decanters. It was filled with bright green liquid that could only be absinthe.

‘Speaking of which, where is Adele?’

‘Oh, she’s in the greenhouse. No one is allowed in there. She is driving the staff to distraction with her demands. Who knew that one so little could make so much trouble?’

Elle laughed. ‘Well, she *is* an absinthe fairy.’

Marsh turned and smiled at her. ‘So, could I perhaps persuade you to forgo your tea and join me in a drink?’ he said.

Elle gave him her most alluring smile. ‘You might. And if you’ll bring mine to me upstairs in a little while, who knows? I might even invite *you* to join *me*.’

Marsh gave her a crooked, knowing smile. ‘Invitation accepted, but don’t blame me if Mrs Hinges is annoyed because we’re late for dinner.’

## Chapter Four

An almighty crash followed by a high-pitched scream greeted Elle as she came downstairs one morning, a week or so later. Edie came tearing up the stairs.

Elle caught her by the upper arms and brought her to an abrupt halt that almost made them both tumble back the way the poor girl had come.

‘Edie, what on earth is wrong?’ Elle said.

‘Begging your pardon, my lady, but it’s the fairy. She’s absolutely impossible!’ Edie rubbed her tear-streaked face. ‘I cannot attend her anymore. I simply cannot.’

‘What happened?’

Edie started sobbing into her apron. ‘His lordship is downstairs,’ she said between sobs. ‘I think you had better ask him, my lady.’

Elle drew the girl’s face out of her apron. ‘Why don’t you take a few moments to calm yourself? And once you’ve washed your face, go and ask Mrs Hinges for a sweet cup of tea. Tell her I sent you. It is the best remedy after an upset.’

‘Yes, my lady.’ Edie bobbed a quick curtsy and wiped her nose with the side of her hand. ‘Thank you, my lady.’

Elle watched the maid hurry downstairs before continuing on her way.

She stopped at the door to the breakfast room. The place was in a complete uproar. Chairs lay overturned. The tablecloth had been dragged off the table and lay in a heap on the floor amidst the broken breakfast crockery.

In the conservatory the stacked terracotta pots had toppled over. Shards of pot and soil were spilled all over the floor. Someone had trodden mud all over the black-and-white chequered marble floor and Turkish rug of the breakfast room.

On the table in the midst of all the chaos, stood Hugh, holding what looked like the extended ribs of an umbrella stripped of its canvas. The ribs were attached to a cascade of copper wires, which snaked all the way to the floor where they fed into what looked like a very poorly sealed tank of spark. Globbs of the bright blue liquid had sloshed on to the carpet and were creating alarming sparks and acrid puffs of smoke.

Adele hovered at the entrance of the conservatory with her arms crossed, blocking the way of anyone who dared enter her domain.

And, if that wasn't enough, someone had strewn enough sugar on the floor to sweeten the waters of the Thames.

'Hugh, what on earth is going on in here?' Elle said, surveying the whole muddy, sticky, smouldering mess.

'Elle!' Hugh turned and smiled at her. 'I think I've devised a machine that will allow humans to converse with fairies. Adele has been helping me. Look.'

He put the umbrella down and dusted some sugar off a set of rough-drawn plans. A few scrunched-up balls of paper, also flecked with sugar, rolled off the table and landed on the floor.

'I see you have been busy,' she said drily. 'You do know that Mrs Hinges is going to have an apoplexy when she sees this.'

The copper wires started buzzing from lying too near the spark and they set a bit of the tablecloth on fire.

Marsh ran over and started putting out the flames with his hand.

‘Don’t you mind Mrs Hinges. I will handle her,’ he said between pats.

Elle crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. ‘Good heavens, I think I’ve married my father,’ she murmured. Since Marsh had given up his power and become an ordinary mortal, he was becoming more and more like the professor by the day. It was most alarming.

‘Adele and I have invented a new game,’ Marsh said, entirely unperturbed by Elle’s icy stare.

He picked up one of the balls of paper and threw it into the air.

‘Go on, fairy, fetch!’ he said.

Adele dashed into the breakfast room and started zooming around at a speed almost faster than the eye could follow. Round and round she went in an attempt to create enough updraft to keep the paper afloat in the air. Her flight path made everything in the room rattle and even more sugar and paper scattered across the table and floor.

‘Oh, and before I forget, your father telephoned to say he is coming down to London this evening for dinner. I have some questions to ask him about aether conductors.’ He jumped off the table and swept her into his arms. ‘I never knew how much fun inventions were. I would have given up my position on the Council years ago had I known. I thought that binding my Warlock power would be difficult, but it’s the best thing that ever happened to me. Apart from you, that is.’ He planted a kiss in her hair.

‘Oh, Marsh, you didn’t invite my father, did you? We are supposed to be going to the opera with Lady Mandeville and her daughters tonight. I cancelled a charter especially so I could go.’ Elle closed her eyes in frustration. This

husband of hers was so disorganised.

‘That’s no bother. You go with the ladies and I’ll stay here with Adele and your father. Mrs Hinges will look after us.’

‘What makes you think that I want to go to the opera with the Mandevilles by myself? I only accepted the invitation for your sake and because we were obliged to go. Did you not think to ask me first?’

‘You weren’t here to ask,’ he said. ‘You, my dear, were too busy stealing airships from other pilots while I, your poor husband, was left alone to my own devices.’

Just then the doors of the library burst open and Professor Charles Chance, followed closely by the housekeeper Mrs Hinges, burst into the room. ‘Ah, Eleanor! There you are, my girl. Couldn’t sleep, so I took the early train. Hope you don’t mind. Thought I’d catch one of those moving pictures at the cinema theatre while I’m here.’ He kissed her cheek.

‘Oh, I say, is that a display of supra-kinetic energy? You and the little green one have been hard at work, I see.’

‘Papa . . .’ Elle started to say, but the professor was staring at the paper balls, which Adele had now managed to suspend in the air in a pattern that resembled a solar system.

‘Wonderful, dear boy. Simply wonderful,’ the professor said to Marsh as he shook his hand.

‘Good heavens! Look at the mess. It’s like the gates of the underworld have opened up in here,’ Mrs Hinges exclaimed.

‘Mrs Hinges—’ Elle started saying, but Mrs Hinges also pushed past her and started waving her arms at Adele. ‘Put those papers down, you little green



minx. Don't make me fetch the broom!'

In response, Adele screeched and started aiming the paper balls at Mrs Hinges like missiles. Mrs Hinges, unused to random aerial attacks by absinthe fairies, let out a most undignified squeal of surprise before setting off after the fairy while waving her hands in the air. Adele simply darted up and perched on the chandelier, out of harm's way.

Mrs Hinges stopped before Elle, slightly out of breath. 'Eleanor, my dear, we really need to talk about . . .' She stared pointedly at Marsh. 'It's too much for the staff to cope with. And my nerves cannot take it. They cannot, I say.'

'I know, Mrs Hinges—' Elle started to say, but just then Adele dashed off to one side, knocking a vase of flowers and the row of bric-a-brac from the mantelpiece. The whole lot came crashing to the floor in a cloud of papers and grains of sugar and dust.

And all the while, the professor and Marsh continued their discussion about the umbrella carcass, utterly oblivious to the pandemonium that was unfurling around them.

'*Enough!*' Elle shouted at the top of her voice.

Everyone stopped and stared at her. In the silence, a small porcelain dog, the last ornament standing, slid off the edge of the mantelpiece and smashed on the floor where the bits rattled for a moment.

Elle walked up to the cabinet and pulled out the bottle of absinthe. She yanked the cork out and held the bottle aloft. 'Adele. Inside. Now.'

The fairy obeyed and wisped into the bottle. Elle fastened the cork, sealing the fairy inside with a tad more force than needed.

She took a long, deep, steadying breath. 'Hugh. Go upstairs and ask Neville

to go to town to see if he can get us an extra ticket for my father for this evening. I'm sure Lady Mandeville would love to meet him.'

She turned to the housekeeper. 'Mrs Hinges, take my father to the drawing room. Prepare the blue guest room for him and ask Neville to see that the professor's tails are pressed. He is going to the opera.'

'Yes, my lady,' Mrs Hinges said, for once without comment.

Elle turned to Neville who had appeared in the doorway, but, on seeing the commotion, had tried to be as inconspicuous as possible by hiding behind one of the ferns which stood in copper pots on stands by the doors. This was proving to be an impossible task, given that Neville was almost as tall as Marsh, with a shock of dark-blond hair that stood up no matter how much he combed it.

'Neville, there you are,' she said. 'Please go and find Caruthers. Ask him to assemble the staff. Volunteers for the clean-up get an extra half-day wages as compensation.'

'Yes, my lady.' Neville nodded and disappeared from the room as quickly as he could.

'And Mrs Hinges, I was going to wait to discuss this with you already, but I think you should go back home with my father. He needs you more than we do at the moment.' She gestured at her father who appeared to be dressed in an unstarched collar and shirt that, despite his best efforts to hide the fact behind his waistcoat, had clearly not been pressed. Judging by the angle of the collar, it looked like he had done his buttons up wrong.

Mrs Hinges put her hand to her throat in shock. 'I do say,' she started mumbling, 'I've never been spoken to like this in all my life. If there is anything wrong with my work, I would that you say so, but to be dismissed

like that—’

Elle turned on her, eyes blazing. ‘Oh no you don’t. You know very well that this has nothing to do with the quality of your work.’

Mrs Hinges closed her mouth, sealing off whatever she was about to say.

‘And you two!’ Elle turned and pointed at Marsh and the professor. ‘No more spark experiments in the house.’

Neither of them answered and Marsh guiltily kicked a stray ball of paper under the table.

‘I am going upstairs,’ Elle said in a low voice. ‘And when I come down again, I don’t want to see a single thing out of place. Do I make myself clear?’

Everyone mumbled various forms of the affirmative.

And with that, Elle set the absinthe bottle down on the top of the cabinet, turned upon her heel and marched upstairs.

## Chapter Five

Later that evening Marsh came to her as she was putting the finishing touches to her hair and face. She was, at this stage, still in the process of looking for a proper lady's maid as befitted her new rank and station. She had been so busy with her new business venture, that hiring a maid to dress her had been fairly low on her list of things to accomplish. Elle had always prided herself on her self-sufficiency, so with the exception of enlisting Edie to help her with her laces, she managed quite well on her own.

'You look lovely,' Marsh said. He rested against the doorframe of Elle's dressing room.

'Thank you.' She smiled at him in the mirror. 'Although I always did think it a little silly to get this dressed up only to sit in the dark for a few hours.'

'You have such a strange way of looking at the world,' he said. 'It's one of the things I like most about you.'

He sauntered over to where she was sitting and produced a flat velvet box from behind his back. 'I have something for you. To wear in the dark.'

She gasped. Nestled inside the velvet interior of the box was a diamond-and-emerald necklace along with a pair of matching earrings. 'Oh Hugh, they are magnificent. But aren't they a little much for an evening out with the Mandevilles?'

He laughed. 'And don't forget dinner at Simpson's. Everyone is going to be looking at the breathtaking Viscountess Greychester this evening. What kind of

a husband would I be if I didn't drape my wife in the most extravagant jewels money could buy?'

She touched one of the earrings and it twinkled back at her.

'I asked the bank to withdraw my mother's jewels from the Greychester family vault when we got back from our trip. I was planning to give these to you at breakfast, but you were so cross this morning that I thought better of it.'

'I'm sorry about that,' she said. 'I may have overreacted a little.'

He shrugged. 'You were right. Things had gotten a just tad out of hand by the time you arrived. Seeing you so angry this morning made me pause to think. It has been a very long time since there has been a Lady Greychester in this house and even longer since anyone wore these jewels, so I thought it was high time to do something about it.' He set the box down on the little table behind him and lifted up the necklace. 'I asked Edie what you were wearing tonight and when she said that it would be this dress . . .' He motioned to the ludicrously expensive Worth creation she was wearing. It was layer upon layer of gold and ivory silk and lace with a subtle floral pattern woven into the fabric. '. . . I thought the emeralds would be perfect.' He draped the necklace around her neck and gently placed a kiss on the back of her neck, just below the clasp.

Elle felt a shiver of pleasure at his touch. 'They're beautiful,' she murmured.

'Better keep away from Adele when you are wearing them, though.'

Elle laughed. The last time Elle had worn diamonds, Adele had used them to escape from the café in Paris where she had been forced to work.

'Shall I help you with your gloves?' He raised an eyebrow at her.

She gave him a knowing look and handed him the long ivory-coloured gloves with the satin-covered buttons. Who was she to deny a gentleman his pleasure?

‘Is my father ready?’ Elle asked as she slipped her hand into the first glove.

‘Yes, between Neville and Mrs Hinges, they have worked miracles. The professor is a new man,’ he said as he slid the fabric up her arm, sending little shivers through her.

‘Sometimes it is hard to distinguish who is the parent and who is the child when it comes to my father. It was wonderful fun when I was a child, but as I grow older, I do worry about him,’ Elle said, trying to keep her thoughts on mundane matters, but finding it increasingly difficult.

‘The professor is quite capable of looking after himself. You worry too much about other people, my darling,’ Marsh said as he started doing up the tiny buttons.

Elle sighed with pleasure and she felt herself flush as his fingers brushed the soft skin of her inner arm. He closed the last button and placed a kiss on the delicate skin that was left exposed on her upper arm between the sleeve of her dress and the top of the glove.

‘And you spend far too little time on yourself,’ he said in a low voice that suggested that they were definitely going to be late for the opera.

Elle cleared her throat. ‘It takes so much work to run a household. Life was so much simpler when—’ She broke off her sentence when she realised what she was about to say.

Marsh paused and frowned.

‘It’s just that I never considered the possibility of getting married, let alone

all this.’ She gestured at the opulence of the room around her. ‘I’m still getting used to it all.’ The words were coming out all wrong and she watched the hurt spread across his face as she said them.

‘I’m sorry you feel that way.’ He lifted the second glove, his touch suddenly perfunctory and matter-of-fact.

‘Oh Hugh, I didn’t mean it like that,’ she said, trying to mend the damage she had done.

He looked away. ‘This life. The one I offer – it isn’t enough for you, is it?’ He finished buttoning the second glove. ‘What more do I need to do, Elle. Tell me?’

‘Nothing, Hugh. I love you. I want to be here and be your wife, but I also want to fly and be my own woman. It’s so hard to explain. I want it all. I need both to be happy.’

He ran an exasperated hand over his face.

Elle stood and put her hand on his arm. ‘I’m sorry for ruining the moment. I didn’t mean to do that. Marriage is a lot harder than I thought it would be. That has nothing to do with how much I love you or want to be your wife. I was just trying to make you understand.’

He pressed his lips together. ‘Fair enough. Let’s not argue then. Lady Mandeville and her daughters are fine gossips and the last thing we want is for them to start spreading rumours.’ He gave her a tight little smile and offered her his arm. ‘Shall we?’

She picked up her fur-trimmed opera cape and stood. ‘Monsieur Puccini’s *La Bohème* awaits,’ she said, doing to quell the tight little knot of sadness that had formed in her stomach.

The light from the Royal Opera House spilled out of the brightly lit windows and on to the cobbled street below, illuminating the evening fog and rain until the air looked like a fine sheet of spangle.

The streets around Covent Garden were congested with carriages and steam cars attempting to deposit their occupants as close to the entrance as possible.

Footmen with large umbrellas stepped on to the cobbles to help glittering ladies in evening gowns and furs negotiate the puddles. Their evening dresses stood out in the gloom like exotic pastel-shaded flowers. London society had come out in full force to see the world's greatest soprano, Miss Nellie Melba, perform Monsieur Puccini's exquisite work.

'Good heavens, how do you think she manages to breathe between sentences?' Elle whispered to Marsh, below the relentless chatter of Lady Mandeville. She had Professor Chance quite pinned down in conversation, as they made their way through the gold trim and red velvet of the grand foyer. Lady Mandeville was a rotund woman in her late forties with a bosom like the prow of a ship, thanks to the work of valiant corsetry.

'I honestly don't know,' Marsh murmured back. 'I think your father is starting to regret his decision to join us.' They both watched the professor with amusement as he tried to stem the tidal wave of verbosity aimed at him.

'Just look at the diamonds on the duchess,' Miss Mandeville the elder whispered to Elle.

Elle looked over to where she was indicating.

'Paste,' she whispered back. Elle was an expert at spotting costume jewellery.

'Are you sure?' Miss Mandeville looked scandalised.



‘Almost as sure as I am that we are both standing here,’ Elle said. The big diamond draped round the neck of the lady in question was most definitely polished glass. It was a very beautiful copy, and most people would never know the different. The real diamond was in all likelihood far too valuable to wear out in public like this. It probably lived in a locked vault somewhere in a bank of the Duchess’s mansion, but she did not bother explaining that to Miss Mandeville, who was at that moment whispering furiously at her sister.

She smiled up at her husband. Marsh was every bit the handsome viscount in his formal top hat and tails, and Elle had caught more than one lady studying him surreptitiously from behind a strategically placed opera programme or fan.

‘Everything all right?’ he said, close to her ear.

‘Everything is more than all right,’ she said with a rush of pride.

‘Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?’ he murmured. ‘I keep thinking about dragging you into one of these dark little recesses so I can have you all to myself,’ he said. ‘We have some unfinished business that started with those gloves of yours.’

Elle felt herself blush. ‘Behave, or else I might take you up on the offer.’

He made a strange growly noise, which made her feel all warm inside.

‘Now that is a very tempting offer, my Lord, but perhaps one that I might defer until a bit later when we are alone,’ she said in a low voice, close to his ear. ‘I think we had better save my father first.’

The Professor was staring at her and Marsh, a look of hopeful desperation in his eyes.

At that moment, the bright chandeliers illuminating the foyer dimmed and then lit up again, dimmed and lit up signalling to everyone that they needed to

take their seats.

‘The performance will force them into silence for a little while. Until intermission that is.’ Marsh chuckled and placed his hand on the small of her back. ‘Let’s escape while we can. I believe our seats are this way.’

‘Thank goodness for that. I thought she’d never shut up,’ the professor muttered a little too loudly in the moment of silence before the orchestra started up.

Elle heard Marsh snort and shudder with laughter, which he did his best to disguise as a cough.

Then the music filled the theatre. Elle pulled her new brass opera glasses from her reticule and slowly adjusted the gears in order to bring into focus the famous tenor who had just stepped on to the stage for the first act. She sat, enraptured by the sad story of Mimi and Rudolpho. Marsh took her hand in his as they sat together in the dark. She felt the reassuring, solid warmth of him next to her and she gave his hand a little squeeze. Everything felt perfect. Everything was going to be just fine. She closed her eyes and let herself drift away with the music.

Suddenly, the world shifted. Elle gasped as she felt the barrier between Shadow and Light lurch violently.

‘What is it?’ Marsh asked, concerned.

‘It’s nothing,’ Elle whispered back to reassure him.

She felt the shift again. This time, the lurch of energy was so strong it had made her feel quite out of breath. It was almost as if someone was manipulating the divide between Shadow and Light right here, in the concert

hall. And they were not being particularly careful or discreet about it either.

She sat forward and scanned the rows of seats below with her opera glasses, carefully adjusting the gears that regulated the optics. She could see nothing out of the ordinary. The audience sat, entranced by the beautiful music that filled the air. Everyone was quite oblivious to the strange workings of the Shadow Realm that was happening right below their noses. But where was the culprit? Who was doing this?

She felt the movement again and this time she followed it, as one would do with sound. Her gaze fell on a woman who sat in one of the seats below. Despite the fact that the theatre was quite warm, she wore a dark cloak, the hood drawn up over her face. All Elle could see was the side of her fine white cheek.

The woman must have sensed her presence, because she suddenly turned and looked straight at Elle.

In that moment, Elle felt a gush of energy surge through her. She gasped in shock and almost dropping her opera glasses. This woman was channelling power, in a public place, without even trying to hide it.

Elle rose from her seat, her heart beating wildly.

An expression of surprise briefly crossed the woman's face and, in that instant, Elle felt the flow of power cease quite abruptly. The shock of the sudden void that followed, sent Elle backwards and she sat down heavily.

'Elle, what is it?' Marsh said urgently.

The woman rose and slipped out of her seat. She moved silently down the aisle and melted into the shadows cast by the velvet drapery.

'What is it?' Marsh said again.

‘I’m not sure,’ Elle whispered. ‘I need a bit of air, it’s very close in here. I won’t be a moment. Stay and make sure the Mandevilles don’t follow.’ She was out of the box before Marsh had an opportunity to stop her.

As quickly as she could in hitched skirts, Elle made her way down the stairs.

*Watch out, dear heart. Beware!* the voices of the Oracle urged.

‘You are not helping,’ she said to them.

The voices did not reply. Elle was not sorry, for she needed all of her concentration to run down the red-carpeted stairs in her evening gown

Behind her she heard Puccini’s aria rise to a dramatic crescendo.

She reached the side entrance staircase and paused for breath. A soft flutter of fabric caught her attention as the hem of the woman’s dark cloak disappeared around the corner.

‘Wait! Stop! I want to talk to you!’ Elle called, but the woman did not stop. Fortunately, her escape was conveniently halted by one of the door ushers. Elle caught up with her as she struggled to push past the usher barring her way.

Elle put her hand on to the woman’s sleeve. ‘Wait! Who are you?’

The woman swung round and glared at her.

Elle took a step backwards as she took in the sight of her white hair and stark sea-green eyes.

‘Leave me!’ the woman hissed in what sounded like a heavy French accent. She turned and smiled at the usher. The man went all cross-eyed and swept the door open for her. With the grace of a dancer, the woman slipped out of her grasp and disappeared into the dark night and the rain.

‘Elle!’ Marsh came running up behind her.

‘Did you see that?’ she said to him still looking at the dumbstruck usher.

The usher slowly shook his head and blinked at her. ‘May I help you, Sir? Madam?’ He blinked at them in confusion.

‘Um, no. Thank you. Sorry for the trouble,’ she murmured. ‘I just needed a breath of fresh air.’

‘Would you like me to escort you back to your seat?’

‘Thank you, that’s very kind, but we can manage. Good evening,’ she said politely.

‘What was that all about?’ Marsh whispered as they walked away.

‘I don’t really know, to be honest. I thought I recognised someone, but I was mistaken,’ she said.

‘I know I no longer have my powers, but even *I* could sense the Shadow back there, Elle,’ he said urgently.

‘She got away before I could speak to her,’ Elle said.

‘She was probably just a rogue. A stray. Sometimes a few of the lesser Shadow creatures accidentally manage to cross the barrier. They end up stuck here in the Realm of Light. They need to feed or they need to do what is in their nature and more often than not it gets them into trouble or they end up dead. We should report the incident to the Council,’ he said sounding very much like the Warlock he used to be. ‘I will write to them - anonymously of course.’

‘Perhaps we should just leave her be. She was just a poor retch, as you said. I’m just amazed that she managed to get into the opera house,’ Elle said. She did not say anything about the amount of power this creature exuded, because she knew the moment she did, he would become all overprotective and try to smother her. She also definitely did not want to involve the Council of

Warlocks in any way. Her last tangle with them did not end well.

‘No, something definitely needs to be done about this,’ he said.

‘Marsh, it was nothing - just an unfortunate stray. I am sorry I overreacted. I am not used to these sorts of encounters. Let’s enjoy the rest of the performance, shall we?’

He gave her a long look but said nothing. Instead they made their way back to their seats and the remainder of the opera.

## Chapter Six

The Black Stag was not very big or impressive as far as public houses went. It was a squat wood-framed building that had been clinging to the bank of the Thames since Tudor times, much in the same way a tick clings to the side of a beast. The place was mostly frequented by dockworkers. They were hard men with big hands and unwashed bodies who poured mother's ruin into their pints and drank to forget the bleakness of their existence.

Only the toughest bangtails and gin fairies survived here and they clung to the crooked beams and low-slung doorframes, where nothing escaped their gaze.

'Did you bring the money, sir?' Art said.

Henry gave a small nod. 'Under the table.'

Art leaned over and eyed the portmanteau at their feet. 'Very good, sir.'

Henry lifted his hat as if to put it on his head but changed his mind. He placed it back on the ring-stained table in front of him. The fine beaver felt appeared very much out of place against the cheap sticky wood.

'There is no need to rush now, my lord. We've got the whole evening yet. They'll be along any time now.' Art took a sip from his glass.

'Are you sure we have the right place?' Henry said.

'I am sir. The Black Stag. Two hours after sunset. I'm sure they'll be along soon.' Art sounded slightly annoyed. He spoke as if he were placating a

petulant child.

‘Sorry,’ Henry said. He took a deep gulp from his own glass. The ale was thin and tepid and he was sure he could see a fine greasy film over the top. He shuddered quietly and looked around him. What a squalid place. Was that a real Nightwalker brooding in the corner? This certainly was not the type of establishment he would normally frequent, but desperate times called for desperate measures. And he was a very desperate man indeed.

Art sat with his hand round his glass, his eyes trained on the door.

Henry noticed for the first time that the stubble on his companion’s chin was tinged with grey. How old was he? Did he have family? Henry realised that in spite of the fact that Art had been in service with his family for as long as he could remember, he knew almost nothing about the man who before him. Thinking back, he couldn’t recall a single incident where the two of them had been alone together for any extended period of time. He wondered if he should make small talk to pass the time, but somehow it seemed inappropriate.

Just then, a man walked in and went up to the counter. The peacock feather in the band of his hat drew a few hostile looks.

‘Bloody travelling folk. Bringing the Evil Eye in ’ere. Take that thing out of here!’ the landlord growled. He gave the counter an extra wipe in the direction of the man with the feather almost as if to wipe the bad luck away.

Someone near the counter cursed and spat on the floor.

The man with the peacock feather in his hat ignored them. Instead, he scanned the room until he spotted Art. His dark eyes rested on them for a moment. Then he nodded and walked out.

Art let go of his glass. ‘Come along then, sir,’ he said to Henry as he stood



up from his chair.

Henry took a deep breath and smoothed his hands down his waistcoat. 'Right then,' he said. He gathered up the bag from under the table and stumbled after Art, tripping over a loose floorboard along the way.

Outside, it was really dark. Henry paused under a spark light for a moment to find his bearing. In this part of the East End streetlights were few and far between, but this one flickered bravely against the inky fog.

'Art,' he said looking about in a moment of panic, not sure why he was whispering.

A hand gripped his upper arm. 'It might be best to get out of the light, sir. We don't want to attract too much attention to ourselves, do we? The fellow went that way.' Art's breath was sticky and strangely intimate against his neck.

'Right. Of course.' Henry said.

They walked along the alley that led off from the pub. A miasmic stench rose up from the river tainting everything within a half a mile from the water. It was so thick and potent that not even the relentless drizzle seemed to be able to quench it. The streets were clogged with mud and dirt, and the patina of squalor stuck to everything.

Someone moved up ahead and Henry caught the slight movement of a peacock feather bobbing up and down as the man they were following passed through a patch of grimy light that spilled out from between a set of ill-fitting shutters. His footfall sounded on damp wooden planks that had been thrown on to the squelchy street to serve as walkways.

'Hurry. Don't lose him,' Art whispered. They walked on in single file for a while. The buildings turned to dockyards and the fog grew thicker. Henry

shivered inside his good wool coat.

Art stopped and gripped his arm again. 'Wait a moment, sir,' he whispered. Henry felt his heart thump against his chest as he strained to see, but his efforts were in vain. The fog had him almost completely blinded.

Near them, someone struck a match and a lantern flared into life. The form of the man with the peacock feather took shape in the flickering light.

'Come,' was all the man said. He pointed at Henry and the illuminated side of his face curled into a smile. 'This way.'

Henry took a step back and bumped into Art, who gripped his shoulders with his large hands. 'Steady on, sir. I think they want you to go in alone. I'll be waiting right here if you need me.'

'Don't leave me here on my own,' Henry said to Art with an imploring look.

'Steady on sir,' Art murmured. 'Remember who you're doing this for.'

Henry swallowed and straightened his hat. He turned and followed the man with the peacock feather round the corner.

A horse snorted. The light of the lantern revealed the shape of a covered wagon. The only sign of life that could be discerned was a thin strip of orange light that leaked out from underneath a crack in the door.

Henry stumbled again, this time over uneven cobbles under his feet. 'Sorry. I'm sorry,' he mumbled under his breath.

'No need for sorry,' the man with the peacock feather said smoothly. Henry started. He had walked right past the devil and he'd not seem him.

'This way, please,' the man said, gesturing to the wagon. They climbed the steps and entered through the little door of the caravan.

Inside it was very warm. Glass-covered candles whispered a gentle welcome to those who came in from the cold, and strange flickering shadows flittered around the inside of the wagon.

Henry took off his hat.

‘This is Florica,’ the man with the peacock feather said.

Florica looked up and smiled at the man. She was a small and pretty. They had the same eyes, Henry noted, the colour of ripe juniper berries.

She said something in a language Henry did not understand. The man with the peacock feather smiled and rested his hand on her shoulder for a moment before he sat himself down in the corner.

He took a hunk of half-dry meat that sat wrapped in a piece of cheesecloth from the shelf next to the stove, pulled out a long knife and started carving small slivers from it. The man offered him a piece of meat, which he held out to him between thumb and blade.

Henry did his best not to shudder. ‘N–no, thank you. I’ve already eaten,’ he said as politely as he could. The ruby-dark meat looked dubious and he was not about to take any chances.

‘Please, make yourself comfortable,’ Florica said. ‘Excuse my brother. Emilian watches over me while I work.’

So Mr Peacock-Feather has a name, Henry thought as he sat down on a wooden bench. He clutched his hat and the portmanteau on his lap.

The inside of the wagon was lined with floral-print curtains which seemed inappropriately cheerful in the circumstances.

Florica’s heavy brass earrings rattled as she lifted her shawl from her hair. Henry stared in fascination as some of the fronds of the shawl caught on one.

She shook her head to free the shawl and met his gaze. ‘So you seek my help.’

‘I—I brought the money,’ Henry nodded and held up the bag.

Emilian leaned over and took the bag from him with surprising speed. He unclipped the latch, peered inside, and smiled.

‘Good,’ Florica said. ‘Now. I can tell that you have come about a woman, no?’

‘Yes. They say you are able to heal people,’ Henry said.

‘You have something that belongs to the woman?’

Henry reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver locket. ‘My fiancée. Emily. Her portrait and a lock of hair.’

Florica ran the silver locket through her fingers. ‘And she has been ill for how long?’

‘Six months. We became engaged just before she became ill. Now, we don’t know . . . we don’t know if we’ll ever . . .’ Henry’s voice trailed off.

‘Ah. Yes. Love. You fear it slipping through your fingers,’ Florica said.

She opened the locket and tipped the curl of blond hair into her palm. She held her hand to her face and sniffed.

‘I can feel it. Your love for this woman is strong.’

‘Yes,’ Henry said. His breath caught in his throat. ‘Please say that you will be able to help her.’ Sweat beaded on his forehead as he spoke. ‘The doctors say that there is nothing that can be done. Her heart is dying. I’ll do anything, give anything, to have her whole and well again.’

A slow smile spread over Florica’s face. ‘Anything is a very heavy price to pay,’ she said. ‘Are you sure you can afford it?’

Henry leaned forward, his eyes bright. ‘I love her. Please do something.

Anything.'

Emilian grinned from the corner and sliced off another sliver of meat.

'So it shall be done,' Florica said.

'You mean you will be able to help her?' Henry said.

Florica nodded slowly. 'That I will do. But it will cost you. Are you sure this is what you want?'

Henry nodded. 'I'm sure. Just do it, for heaven's sake.'

She leaned forward. 'Swear it,' she hissed.

'I swear,' Henry said.

Florica reached behind her and picked up a battered tobacco tin. Carefully she measured out a fine powder, weighing it into her hand, before tipping some of the contents into the candle before her. The caravan filled with a fine fragrant haze. It made Henry's eyes water and his head swim.

'First you need to relax. Close your eyes,' she whispered.

'Very well, then. I am relaxed.' Henry straightened his spine and slouched again in an attempt to convince her.

She laughed softly. 'No. Not like that.' She looked at her brother. 'Lie him down on the bench.'

Emilian gripped Henry's arm and pulled him round so he was lying on his back on the bench. The wood was hard and the edges dug into Henry's shoulders. Before he could protest, he felt cold manacles click around his wrists. Emilian pulled them tight and suddenly Henry found himself trussed up like a Christmas goose.

'Wait. Hang on a minute. This can't be right . . . stop!'

'Hold still,' Florica said.

‘What do you mean “hold still”?’ Henry said. ‘I demand that you explain the meaning of these shackles right now.’ Henry struggled against his bonds.

Emilian laughed. It was only a little chuckle, but it sent cold shivers down Henry’s spine.

Florica rested her head on Henry’s chest. ‘You have a good one. Not very brave, but loyal. It beats strong. I will do this thing for you because I pity you, poor man. You give your heart to your lady and *our* Lady will give you one of hers.’

‘What on earth are you talking about? Stop this right now or I shall call for help!’ Henry said.

‘Silence!’ Florica hissed. ‘The bargain has been struck and there is no going back now. You are one of the lucky ones. One of the special ones. The Lady’s army needs leaders and you shall be one.’

She looked up at Emilian. ‘The box,’ she said.

Emilian handed her a polished wooden case.

Henry watched with growing horror as she lifted a metal contraption out of it. It had gears and a handle that made the mechanical bits whirr. The front bit clawed and rattled as she turned the handle.

‘N–no, please,’ Henry tried to say, but Florica placed her hand over his mouth with surprising force. Large tears started running out of the corners of Henry’s eyes.

‘Better round the servant up from outside. We can add him to this evening’s catch. They can deal with him along with the others at the factory. The Lady will like it if we bring her more than she asks for, I’m sure,’ Florica said.

Emilian nodded and disappeared out the door.

Florica turned and looked down at Henry. ‘Now, hold nice and still and this will only hurt a little,’ she said.

‘Promise me she’ll be better,’ Henry wheezed from under her fingers.

‘I promise by the Shadow that the strength that lies in your heart will go to hers this very night, and she shall be healed,’ Florica said. For a moment her eyes filled with compassion for him. ‘I am very sorry,’ she murmured.

Henry closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. ‘Anything to save her – just be quick about it.’

The last thing he remembered was the sensation of someone unbuttoning his waistcoat, which was also the last thing he felt, before he screamed.

The Clockmaker sits hunched over, eyes trained on the tiny cogs and gears before him. Around him the walls are alive with faces and pendulums that tick and click and whirr. Carefully, with the measured precision that comes only from years of experience, he lowers a small brass part into the heart of the casing. He raises up the tweezers he holds and caresses the spring as the little piece falls into place. The tiny counterweight pauses, fighting momentum as it strains to slip into motion. And then, soft as a breath, the device clicks and comes alive.

Gently the Clockmaker eases the casing over the finely machined innards and with a deft twist of his screwdriver he tightens the little screws.

The clockwork heart whirrs and shivers as it lies in his palm. At the centre of his little miracle lies a tiny crumb of carmot, no bigger than a grain of sand. No more of the alchemical material is needed to give the heart life.

The Clockmaker smiles. 'You will be special,' he murmurs. He lifts a key that hangs from a string around his neck and eases it into the heart. The clockwork heart jolts and starts ticking.

The Clockmaker smiles again. 'Yes, you will be special.'

Then he lowers the heart into a wooden case that lies before him. The box is already half full of ticking hearts, each one nestled inside a little hollow lined with purple satin.

Satisfied, the Clockmaker turns back to his workbench. With infinite patience, he selects a new casing and one by one he selects cogs and springs and eases them into place.

'Special,' he murmurs. And the clocks on the wall tick along in applause.



## Chapter Seven

Elle sat up in bed with a gasp. The sight of the strange woman in the opera house and the roar of power that surrounded her had upset her more than she cared to admit. She had spent the night wrapped in nightmares from the darkest recesses of the Shadow Realm. Elle had found herself running through a labyrinth of dark passageways, with the terrible sound of clocks ticking all around her. The memory of hit made her shiver and she pulled the covers up around herself.

It was still dark outside and she could just make out the soft clinking of people at work in the kitchen as the staff readied the house for the day.

‘What is it?’ Marsh mumbled beside her.

‘Nothing. I think I just felt something shift. It’s probably nothing, but I had better make sure.’

She slipped out of bed and walked over to a slim brass lever set in the wall next to the mantelpiece. She pulled it and, with the sound of carefully greased cogs and gears, a panel slid open to reveal a hidden chamber behind the fireplace.

She lit one of the thick candles that were held in a sconce by the entrance and lit it. The flickering light revealed a small secret room with a mosaic floor, set with lapis lazuli, jade, red jasper and onyx.

Elle looked at the finely inlaid pattern of maidens and ancient symbols with mixed feelings. This was a Delphic circle, the type used by the Oracles to

divine and speak. Marsh had built it for her as a gift, so she could attend to her duties as the Oracle without the need for her to leave the comfort and safety of their home. She knew she had no choice in the matter and despite her efforts to make the best of things, these duties remained something she was still not entirely happy about.

‘Anything?’ March said from the other room.

‘Not yet. I won’t be a minute,’ she said with a little smile as the panel slid shut.

There was no fireplace in this room and the floor beneath her bare feet felt cold.

She took a deep breath to ready herself before stepping on to the mosaic. This circle was sacred; it was a portal – a place where one could access the barrier that held the two realms of Shadow and Light apart. The multitude of layers that made up the universe lay before her.

She closed her eyes and focused her attention, reaching into the metaphysical space that opened up before her to reveal the great divide. It unfurled in sheets of golden, gossamer light. The realms of Light and Shadow lay like mirror images of one another: Light and Dark; Yin and Yang; Alpha and Omega. The divide had been placed there by the Council of Warlocks centuries ago in an attempt to restore harmony to the worlds in order to put an end to the terrible wars that became people now called the Dark Ages. When the barrier was created the Warlocks had decreed that the world of man would be on the side of Light. It was a place of progress, enlightenment and science: the modern world. The Shadow side was the world of ancient magic, where creatures who were now only spoken about in myth and folklore dwelled for

evermore.

Like the spine that holds the many pages of a book together, she – Eleanor Marsh, née Chance – was the binding force that held everything together.

Gently she reached out to touch the sheets of energy on either side of her. Right for Light, left for Shadow.

Elle closed her eyes and allowed her mind to run along the divide. It was barely half a year since she had ascended to this strange place of power, but she found that she did her duty with practised ease. It was like running one's hands along sheets of finely woven silk, all the while keeping an eye out for any knots or snags that might cause trouble for those who dwelled on either side of the barrier. All seemed smooth and peaceful. There certainly was no sign of any clocks or clockmakers.

Elle considered stepping across into the Shadow, to make sure that nothing bad was lurking close, but decided against it. She always seemed to run into inconvenient and troublesome things when she did that and it was far too early in the morning for that. Besides, her knowledge of creatures of the Shadow was far from perfect. There was always a bit of a risk that she might run into something unfamiliar and she did not have time for taking risks this morning. She had work to do.

Carefully, she shifted out from between the worlds and opened her eyes with a sense of relief. All was well with the barrier. The strange images of clocks and things were just a dream.

‘Everything all right?’ Marsh asked as she stepped out of the secret chamber and bundled herself back into the warmth of the bed.

‘All is well,’ she said, snuggling up against him.

‘Good grief, your feet are like icicles.’ He flinched, but kissed her again, running his hands over her shoulders, willing her to sink into the covers for a little while longer.

‘I had such a strange dream this morning that I actually thought something was amiss in the Shadow, but it was nothing.’

‘Then stay,’ he said.

Elle moved out of his embrace and sat up. ‘There will be plenty of time for that later, oh amorous husband of mine. I have to get to the airfield before they ship the *Phoenix* out.’

He sighed. ‘Yes, I know. Flying always first.’

She slipped out of bed and walked across to the darkened doorframe that led to Elle’s pride and joy: their newly installed, state-of-the-art, spark-powered en-suite bathroom. It was a miracle of copper pipes and brass taps over inlaid marble. Designed to create maximum comfort and pleasure, the bathroom even had a built-in lavatory installed beside an imported Huber’s Gegenstrom rain bath unit that blasted out a cascade of heated water to bathe under.

Mrs Hinges called the rain bath apparatus the work of Beelzebub. No good could come from dousing oneself with hot and cold water. It was a practice that would lead one to catch one’s death. It was extremely Continental in her view.

‘Stay with me,’ Marsh said, leaning against the door-frame. ‘Forget about the new ship. We can take the day and do something fun.’

‘I can’t. I promised Ducky I would oversee the estimates for the repairs. The engineers are coming out specially to see the *Phoenix*. You know I need to be there.’ She turned on the taps of the Huber.

He looked disappointed and Elle felt her resolve falter. Marsh had sacrificed so much to marry her and the thought of abandoning him made her feel churlish. She sighed. Marsh could be very persuasive when he put his mind to it and if she gave in now, today would become tomorrow and the next and, before she knew it, flying would be something of the past. And as much as she adored her husband, Elle needed to fly more than anything in the world. Her passion for taking to the air was so intrinsically part of her, that the thought of not flying was as impossible as the thought of not breathing.

Besides, she thought with just that tiny bit of resentment that never quite seemed to go away, she had to make sacrifices too. She certainly did not volunteer for the cursed position of Oracle.

Marsh ran his fingers through his hair. 'Very well then, you win. But get Neville to collect you from the airfield in the motor. I don't want you out in the dark hours of the morning all by yourself. It's not safe.'

Elle sighed as she slipped out of her nightdress. 'Oh, for goodness' sake, Hugh. When are you going to stop acting like I'm some delicate flower? I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.'

His gaze darkened. 'You are my wife. And you are the Oracle. That makes you vulnerable to all manner of threats. I will never stop worrying about you, as long as I live.'

'But don't you see? Those are exactly the reasons why I must carry on as before. If I allow myself to become a shrinking violet, then they will have won. And I absolutely refuse to do that. Ever,' she said as she secured the belt of her silk bathing kimono and tied her hair up.

The room was filling with delicious billows of steam. Elle closed the tap.

Her ablutions would have to wait until after this discussion. They needed to talk about this. The truth be told, Elle did not like to think about the Alchemists and their vortex of evil or the fact that she had been chained to a wall in that dark dungeon in Constantinople just months before. She still woke up in a cold sweat some nights, dreaming about it.

Marsh pressed his lips together and she could see the little muscles in his cheek flicker as he clenched his teeth. She hated to admit it but had Hugh and her father not arrived in that underground amphitheatre when they did she probably would have died there.

This was a discussion that they never seemed to be able to resolve. Perhaps it was because neither of them was entirely wrong about the matter.

She turned away from the shower and put her arms around her husband. 'I will be careful. I promise.'

'You know as well as I do that they are still out there, Elle,' he said in a low voice.

Elle sighed again. Her husband had the most annoying habit of being completely and utterly right at the most inconvenient points in her argument.

'I know, but we haven't heard a word from the Council since you saw them in Venice. That was months ago. They have no reason to come after us as long as we keep our side of the bargain.'

He put his arms around her and kissed her hair, but she could feel the tension in his body. 'I do not like it. And I definitely do not trust the silence. We cannot let our guard down, Elle, not for a single moment.'

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‘Good morning, Adele,’ Elle said as she sat down opposite Marsh at the table in the morning room.

At the sight of Elle, Adele shucked up her shoulders and turned away in displeasure.

Elle grimaced. It was going to take a lot of apologising before she was restored to the good graces of the fairy. She still had not forgiven her for trapping her inside her absinthe bottle the other day.

Eddie appeared, carrying a small tray with a telegram, which she set down on the table.

‘Thank you, Eddie,’ Elle said.

The maid gave Adele a wary look and the fairy hissed at her.

Eddie retreated as fast as decorum allowed.

‘I see it’s war on all fronts then,’ Elle said to the fairy as she opened the telegram. Her eyes flickered over the message and, in an instant, her face opened up with excitement. ‘I have a telegram from Mr De Beer. I have a new charter. To Singapore!’

Marsh folded the paper up carefully and put it on the table. The headline read,

BATTERSEA ELECTROMANCERS HALT SPARK PRODUCTION,

SHORTAGES FEARED.

‘I think I shall take the *Iron Phoenix*,’ Elle said.

‘Are you sure that’s wise? What about the urgent repairs that could not wait this morning?’

‘Oh, I’m sure we can squeeze in one run and make do.’

‘So the repairs are not really that urgent?’ There was an edge to Marsh’s voice.

Elle felt herself blundering into dangerous territory, but this was not the time to back down. He was not going to talk her out of staying home. ‘Well, they are but...’

‘So you’re planning to rush off to Singapore which is half-way across the world in a strange ship, that needs urgent repairs?’ He paused for a moment. ‘And while all this is happening, I’m to sit here at home and wait for you?’

‘Hugh, you’re making this into something it really doesn’t need to be.’ Elle rested her chin in her hands in exasperation.

‘All right. I’ll grant you that perhaps taking the *Phoenix* is not the best plan. I’ll take the *Water Lily* instead and keep the other in the docks. Would that assuage your concern?’

Marsh stared at her.

‘And you like to come along!’ Elle said brightening. ‘We could do with an extra crew member. It will be fun.’

‘I thought this was something you had to do on your own,’ he said stiffly.

‘And I thought you just said that you were bored and worried waiting for me while I am away.’

His face tightened. ‘I wouldn’t want to be in the way or anything.’

‘Oh, Marsh. When did you become so boring and cowardly?’ she said.

‘Where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘Excuse me?’ Her husband’s face darkened.

Adele fluttered off the table and settled herself on the mantelpiece.

‘Boring. And cowardly,’ Elle said slowly, leaning forward slightly. ‘You



promised that you and I were going to have a life that soared high up in the sky. Instead, you lurk in your study by day and when you emerge, it's only to wreck the house with one of your insane inventions. Every time I step out the front door, I have to negotiate this quagmire of fear and apprehension that surrounds you. Just because you believe it's not safe, does not mean it always will be. We cannot live our lives this way. At least, I cannot.'

Marsh grew very still.

'Is that what you really think?' he said in measured tones.

'Yes, it is. You have changed, Hugh. You are not the man I married.'

'I have only changed into the man you wanted me to be, my dear,' he said with a sarcastic edge.

Elle felt herself grow angry. 'Have you now? Perhaps the man I thought you were was a lie. Shall we look at all the lies you've told me in the time we've known one another?' Elle felt a shiver of apprehension. This was precarious ground, for her husband had indeed been somewhat economical with the truth about her status as the Oracle and all it entailed when they had met.

'I am sorry you are so disillusioned and that life with me is such a disappointment for you,' he said.

'And I am sorry you did not keep your end of the bargain. You said that we would go on as before. You said that we would be free. You promised, Hugh.'

His face went very still. 'Well, forgive me for being the only one to take this marriage seriously,' he said. 'Why does everything always have to be about you, Elle. One moment, it's "Oh Hugh, I have to do this by myself". The next I am supposed to come along as if I am a lapdog. Shall I stay in my kennel and come running when you whistle?'

‘That’s not true,’ she said.

‘Hundreds of years of my life, gone,’ he snapped, ignoring her. ‘All so I can be with you and then you are never here,’ he was almost shouting now.

That comment hurt, for Marsh had indeed made a huge sacrifice to save her. It also made her angry because she had given a lot too.

‘Do you think I haven’t made sacrifices?’ she shot back. ‘This closeted and constrained life, my duties as the Oracle; it’s everything I chose not to become in life, yet here I am.’ She waved her arm in a gesture that encompassed the room, her life. ‘You lied to me in Venice to get what you wanted. And now,’ her breath caught in in her throat, ‘Now you have broken your promises to me...’

‘Stop it!’ He held up his hand. ‘Just stop it. I cannot bear any more of this fighting, Elle.’

Elle bit her lip. She hated the arguments too.

‘Do I really make you that unhappy?’ he said. ‘Is this what marriage has done to you? Tell me, Eleanor, I need to know.’

She shook her head. ‘Please try to understand,’ she whispered. She loved him with all her heart, but he was smothering her with his overprotectiveness.

‘No. I think you are the one who needs to understand. There is a vast difference in our ages. I have lived more than one lifetime. Time for me moves at a pace most people cannot comprehend. I accept that. I have made allowances for that. But you need to meet me halfway. I cannot maintain this marriage on my own. Not while you run around hell-bent on proving yourself.’ He ran his hand through his hair in exasperation. ‘I wish you would realise that you don’t need to prove yourself to me. Why can’t you just be yourself and

happy, here. With me.'

'I wish you would stop trying to control everything I do, Hugh,' she said softly. 'You're smothering me.'

'You need to decide where your priorities lie, Elle. Are you with me, or are we to be like all those other couples who live separate lives?' Marsh stood up from the table and walked over to the door of the conservatory.

She did not answer him.

He stared at the plants, as if to draw strength from them before he spoke. 'I must be clear on this. I am not happy about the way you acquired your new ship. You were irresponsible and impulsive in your actions and conduct and I will not have my family's name associated with gamblers and cheats. I have done my best to accommodate your eccentric whims, Elle but you go too far.'

Eccentric whims? Elle felt her chest tighten. He really thought her business and her career was just a whimsical hobby.

'A woman's place is beside her husband,' he continued. 'Wherever that may be. It is her duty. It is a duty borne of the sacred vows she made when she married. In a virtuous woman honour and duty should prevail over and above all the passions that may drive her. Husband and family come first.'

'It doesn't have to be that way! Just because I value my freedom, does not mean I am not virtuous or honourable. Why must I stop being my own person so I can be your wife?' she said. 'You've already taken my name. Shall I simply cease to exist? Shall I just become an empty doll? An accessory to be manipulated and controlled as you decree?'

He stared at her for a long time before speaking. 'If you cannot find it within yourself to understand and accept how I feel, then you and I are heading

for some serious difficulties in this marriage.'

She swallowed. 'Are you asking me to give up flying?'

'Yes.' The words sliced down between them, like the blade of a guillotine.

The silence that followed ticked along between them as they stared at one another from opposite sides of the breakfast room.

'I-I think I need some time to think,' she said.

'So do I.'

Elle felt her throat constrict. So it would boil down to a choice between being happy or being dutiful. A deep sadness filled her.

'Then I shall go to Singapore and fulfil the charter,' she said slowly.

She saw him stiffen, but he stood very still, eyes trained on the lace-fine heads of angelica plants before him.

'You are welcome to join me,' she said again.

'No.' His answer was so final that it left no room for compromise. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I have some correspondence to attend to,' he said.

She swallowed down the lump in her throat that was threatening to cut off her ability to breathe.

'Will you be here when I get back?' she said.

He frowned. 'Of course I will. I am your husband. I will always be here for you.' Then he picked up his newspaper and walked from the room.

*Fairies have long memories. We are a people slow to forget when we are wronged, but we are not without compassion.*

*The girl sat down at the table and covered her face with her hands. She sat like that for a very long time, not moving.*

*I fluttered down from my place on the mantelpiece to sit next to her. I could not help her with this problem, but I could show solidarity. And so I did.*

*'I'm sorry I yelled at you for making a mess,' she said to me.*

*I nodded.*

*'I'm making a right mess of things myself too, aren't I?' she said.*

*I nodded again. There was little I could say to deny it.*

*'Will you stay here and look after him while I'm gone?'*

*Then, in a gesture that surprised even me, I rose and put my cheek against hers, embracing her.*

*The fizz of my small absinthe magic met with the roar of the force that was the Oracle. She did not realise this, but I was but a tiny twinkle compared to her shining light. In my own small way, I hoped that she was comforted.*

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## Chapter Eight

Clothilde shrugged her shoulders to loosen the stiffness that was building between them. She had been meditating on the roof of the monastery in the soft drizzle for most of the night. She spent the time in a deep trance, absorbing tiny fragments of energy off everything around her. She dared not seek to reach into the void for nourishment. The encounter at the opera house had been far too close for comfort.

She was an elemental born of air and water – always drawn to music... much like the sirens and kelpies of the sea – and so she had decided to treat herself to a performance. While she was listening, the urge to feed from the barrier had come upon her and so she had indulged herself. Most Shadow creatures would consider such blatant and brazen behaviour extremely dangerous, but Clothilde did not care. She had been doing it for years. Most Light dwellers were completely oblivious to such things. The fact that there was someone present who could tell what she was doing had shocked her. She knew nothing of the young woman who had spotted her in the crowd, except that she was extremely powerful. Revealing herself had been a silly mistake to make, one that the Consortium would be deeply displeased to hear about. She would have to be careful from now on.

Dawn was breaking and there was so much work to do. She sighed and stood to climb the narrow stairs off the roof.

The Battersea Spark Monastery lay before her in the mauve light of the

dawn. This was a place where the electromancers dwelled. Here, much in the same way that bees worked in a hive, they harvested lightning and other forms of static electricity which they combined with their shadow magic to turn into spark: the blue liquid that powered the steam engines, which in turn ran the world.

She let out a cynical laugh. When she had arrived at the monastery she had expected discipline and devotion as she had seen in the monks of her childhood. Her childhood had been a time when spark had been used for healing and light. It was before the brothers had sold themselves into servitude to the Light. A time before the greasy steam clouds billowed out by of huge engines covered the earth. The industrial revolution had come, and it had changed everything. Now she found nothing within the monks but laziness and repose while machines did all the work. These little men had become complacent. They had allowed themselves to be lulled into a life of luxury, paid for by those they serve. They were no longer interested in the power they held. That was all about to change though.

Emilian was waiting for her downstairs with a dry set of robes. The peacock feather in his hat bobbed as he inclined his head when she stepped out of the shadows.

‘Everything all right, *madame*?’ Emilian was not one for airs and graces and his ‘madame’ had a touch of impertinence about it.

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’ Her voice held a deep throaty resonance that men found irresistible. All men except Emilian, that was. ‘How was last night’s catch?’

‘I think you will like what we brought you.’ Emilian flashed her a satisfied

smile as if he was harbouring a special surprise for her.

‘And why would that be, pray tell?’

‘Big fish. I think you will be pleased.’

‘Is that so?’

Emilian nodded. ‘We prepared him, like you said we should if we found a special one.’

Clothilde was immediately intrigued. She smiled at Emilian. ‘Well, then we had better go see this fish of yours.’

The monastery lay quiet in the early morning cold as she strode across the courtyard. The monks had been highly affronted by the Consortium’s directive. Even though the Consortium owned and financed the running of the monastery, the monks had protested at her arrival. Two of them – the abbot included - had to die before they had yielded to her command, which was unfortunate. In truth, she did not like the idea of mutilating a monk, but sometimes examples had to be made. Fortunately the abbot had made an excellent test subject – the first of her special ones. Since then, the monks had obeyed her, but she could tell that they did not approve of what she was doing. Some things never changed, she thought bitterly. Even as a child they had showered her with disapproval. Now they just stared at her in cold condemnation, which made her hate them even more. She wished she could feed them all into the machine, but alas, she needed them. She shuddered with pent up frustration. It had been too long since she had held a man utterly and completely in her thrall. The need for power and seduction made her ache inside.

A single novice held the door for her as she swept inside. His hands



trembled as he took her damp outer wool cloak from her.

‘Bring the special one to my laboratory when you have herded the others into their pens,’ she said over her shoulder to Emilian.

Clothilde wrinkled her nose as she walked along one of the narrow corridors that led off the main hall. Acrid spark magic seemed to ooze out of the very walls of this building. The pure energy that bonded high up in the clouds and struck the earth as lightning flowed through this place. It made everything smell like the metal and burn. She found the crude thaumaturgic amalgamation of static electricity and Shadow magic crude, somehow distasteful, and she hated it.

In the middle of the monastery was a cavernous space the monks called the spark turbine hall. It was in this hall that the Consortium’s machinery had been installed. A wide conveyor belt ran along half the length of the hall and into a huge machine. The machine was connected to giant spark tanks that supplied it with energy. The whole system was operated from the console in the mezzanine level that overlooked the hall.

She noticed a few bloodstains on the brass pipes that ran alongside the India rubber of the conveyor belt and she curled her lip in disgust. Those lazy little men were slipping in their cleaning duties. She flicked her long hair over her shoulder and walked on, resolving that there would be words about the matter later.

From the control room, she had a clear view of the entire processing operation.

Behind the machine was an array of blue-black metal and shiny brass pipes that ran from the machine to the lighting collection chimneys. This hall was the

place where the electromancers took static electricity and combined it with power from the Shadow Realm to make the spark.

Spark, she thought. Whoever held control of one of these machines, held control over the world – a world she would command someday. But right now, it was wise to keep her plans to herself. She would bide her time, but it was not going to be for too much longer that she would need to bend her head to the Consortium, she thought. Soon she would be in control and then no one would be able to stop her.

Clothilde revelled in the frisson of power that surged through her at the thought. She flicked the switches and the machine hummed to life, emitting a crackle of blue sparks that ran from the metal pipes and into the machine in the middle of the floor.

The dials on the machine started dancing and great puffs of steam rose up from its diabolical pistons. It took a few moments until all the dials on the console were at the right level. As soon as they did, she gave the signal. It was time to begin.

The double doors at the end of the hall opened and a group of people were ushered inside by her strongmen, each armed with a spark prod.

These were the dregs of humanity – drifters, prostitutes and vagrants. People taken off the streets after dark or harvested from prisons and workhouses. For a small fee their minders were only too happy to be rid of them. These were the members of society that no one cared about. The ones no one would miss once they were gone. They were also the people who would change the world forever.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ She spoke into the speaking tube that made her

voice boom across the cavernous room. The people below her looked around nervously. Many would not have heard a voice broadcast like this before. ‘You have been selected for a very special task. Today your meaningless lives will be transformed into something useful. You should be grateful for this gift!’

The shifted nervously, blinking in the bright lights that shone on them. Some of the women were crying and a few of the men who had not quite been subdued by the spark prods were still struggling with the shackles that held them.

Clothilde held out her arms. The resonant notes of her voice filled the room and everyone turned to look up at her. She felt their awe as they took in the sight of her shimmering white resplendence and she smiled as she watched her magic take control of those before her. It did not matter if you were male or female, because very few people were immune to the magnetic power of seduction that her kind could wield.

Electromancers entered from one of the side doors. Their grim faces contorted with anguish when she clenched her fist to tighten the spell that held them to her will. Their resentful acquiescence gave her even more pleasure.

‘Brothers in lightning! We have work to do,’ she said.

The electromancers turned to her and bowed. ‘We live to serve,’ they said.

‘As do we all!’ she answered. It was the mantra these men had used for centuries.

She gave the signal and, in unison, the electromancers raised their arms in the air.

‘I give you the lightning you need!’

Outside, thunder rumbled and lightning cut through the sky, linking up with

the fine metal rods posted across the roof like poisonous spines. The very air around the electromancers started crackling as they commenced with the ritual they called simply, 'The Making'.

Clothilde dropped her arms and in response, the cloud above her rumbled. Giant bolts of lightning struck the roof of the monastery.

The monks started humming. It was a deep sound emanating from the back of their throats. Energy surged up through the metal pipes in the console. The gargantuan glass receptacles in the hall started filling with blue spark.

'Begin!' Clothilde gave the signal.

The prisoners were pushed and shoved into a row. There were no objections. Most of the people had vacant, almost rapturous expressions on their faces as they stared at her. She pulled a lever and a row of what looked like black metal meat hooks started moving in a circular motion from an overhead trolley that fed into the machine. Her henchmen started attaching the straps and shackles that held the prisoners to the hooks. In some cases, where the prisoners were unshackled, they simply allowed the hook to catch on the flesh of shoulders and necks.

In a swift move, each startled individual was hoisted in the air. A woman started screaming as the hook slipped into her shoulder and a hot iron that branded each with a number sank into her flesh. One by one each person was laid flat on to the conveyor belt, completely immobilised, ready to be fed into the machine. The air filled with the smell of blood and burning skin.

Clothilde threw back her head and the air filled with her laughter. She was the Lady in White. A witch; a ghost. That most malignant of beings that haunted men in their dreams. She could control lightning, and storms followed

her wherever she went. Standing at crossroads, her kind had seduced and enslaved the unwary for centuries – gorging themselves on the life force, leaving only husks. But she was different. For Clothilde was ambitious. Merely taking one or two victims at a time was not enough for her. So she had used her intellect and her abilities. She had studied science and medicine. She had read about the art of seduction and how one should manipulate. She had become the most powerful of her kind.

She gave a satisfied smile. Physically these people were entirely under her control, yet she allowed them one small mercy. She allowed them to scream as soon as they realised what was about to happen to them. Right now the factory was filled with the agonised cries of her quarry.

She leaned over and pulled another lever, and the giant piston in the middle of the machine started stamping up and down. Each time it came to rest on the chest of a person. In one swift move it extracted their still-beating heart and replaced it with a mechanical one. The hearts were deposited into glass jars filled with the liquid formula she had invented. In a swift move, the machine sealed the jars and gently placed them on another conveyor belt that took them to her laboratory.

There the hearts would be kept in rows on shelves, neatly catalogued.

On the other side of the machine, each new soldier for Clothilde's army was fitted with a brass muzzle, and a chest plate was riveted in place to cover the clockwork device that newly beat inside the bleeding chests. In the centre of the chest plate was a keyhole. A universal key was inserted which wound the newly installed clockwork device before each soldier was deposited and left to wait in neat silent rows for her to command them.

The entire factory huffed and hissed as network of tubes and vents that would put any cathedral organ to shame conveyed the fumes to the outside. Clothilde watched until every last one of the new recruits were complete. Once the conveyor belts were bare, she turned off the machine. The factory fell silent before her.

‘Take them to the holding stalls and see that they are fed,’ she said to her strongmen. ‘Electromancers, you may commence the clean-up. And make sure you polish every bit. I don’t want to see streaks of blood on the machine. Do I make myself clear?’

‘We live to serve,’ they mumbled.

‘As do I,’ she said, suddenly feeling weary.

She wanted to retire to her rooms for a rest, but there was more work to do. For in her laboratory was a young nobleman, a special new recruit awaiting her attention.

## Chapter Nine

They come in the night when the fog is at its thickest. They shuffle along softly in broken shoes while the city sleeps. For the most part, they are silent. The only thing that can be heard as they pass is the ticking of their insides and, to those who know how to listen, the soft insistent hum that comes from the hunger that drives them.

These creatures have a new type of hunger, unlike anything seen or created in the world of Shadow. The stench of the strange new power that oozes from them causes the very barrier between the two realms to shiver. For these are amalgamations of science and magic that should not be.

And yet the new creatures come, bringing death to those who encounter them on their way. They are abominations, who carry within them the very essence of greed and destruction that will bring the world, as we know it, to an end.

And far in the distance, the Clockmaker sits back and watches with glee. He does not care about the horror and misery he has created. To him these creatures are his children. And as he gazed upon them, he saw that they were good.

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Elle snorted rather inelegantly and sat up in her seat with a start. She'd fallen asleep at the helm. She rubbed her eyes and checked the panel of dials and levers before her. The ship was on course, all was fine except the thrum of the

left engine which sounded out of time. They were high up in the sky and thousands of miles from anywhere.

Around her, the *Iron Phoenix* creaked and groaned as if she were struggling to stay afloat. She had once been magnificent, but years of neglect had turned her rickety. Not for the first time, Elle tutted at Captain Dashwood's failure to keep a tight ship.

'It's a good thing I rescued you from that oaf when I did. Just look at what he's done to you.' Elle said, running her hand over one of the rails. She had the odd habit of speaking to her ships as if they were alive. 'Don't worry. We'll make you glorious again.' One thing of beauty the *Phoenix* still possessed was her iron figurehead. She had the body of a shapely, bare-chested woman and the head of a fierce bird. The spirit of the phoenix sat proudly at the prow, her long wings spread open, trailing down the side of the ship behind her, as if she was about to take flight. She had fully intended to take the *Water Lily* on this charter – as she had promised her husband she'd do, but the more she had thought about their argument, the angrier she had felt. By the time she'd reached the airfield, the temptation to fly her new ship had been too great. Sod Marsh. Might as well be hung for the horse as well as the cart.

Elle sighed, again running the last conversation she'd had with her husband through her mind. How could he expect her to stop being who she was like that? Of course marriage was a compromise, she knew that. But to expect someone to give up who they are was just too much. She knew he cared. She knew he worried about her, but sometimes that care and worry made her feel like she could not breathe. The ultimatum he had given her, was breaking her heart. What was she going to do?

Elle wiped angrily at her eyes which had filled with tears and she rolled her



neck to release the tension. She felt tired, sore and anxious. She and Ducky had been flying for almost three days now, taking turns in shifts at the helm, but somehow the journey wasn't getting any shorter.

Around her, a carpet of cloud stretched as far as the eye could see. All you could hear was the whisper of the wind and the gentle thrum of the engines. With all this time and silence to do nothing but think, a dark feeling of dread had settled over her. It was relentless. When she was awake, she worried about her marriage and every time she closed her eyes, dreams those awful things haunted her.

'Ah, you're awake,' Ducky said, coming up from the galley below.

'Ducky, how could you let me fall asleep at the helm? That's so irresponsible of you.'

'Oh, don't be silly. I had the old girl well under control,' he said. 'I'd just popped down to get us a cup of tea. And besides, you looked like you could do with a nap.'

He set a hot mug of tea beside her and sat down in the worn leather seat next to her. He opened the tin of Mrs Hinges' excellent biscuits she had brought along for their journey.

'What's wrong, Bells?' Ducky said, dunking his biscuit in his tea. 'What's that husband of your doing to you? You are not the kind of girl who goes about sighing with woe like you have done since we've been on board. What are those dark shadows under your eyes all about?' He gestured at her with a half-eaten biscuit.

Elle smiled at his use of her nickname. He used to call her *'ells Bells* or, later, simply Bells for short when they did their training.

‘It’s nothing.’ Elle rubbed her face and looked away. ‘It’s- We’ve just been fighting a lot. Since... since the wedding.’ Ducky had a way of seeing straight through her. There was no hiding the truth when he was around.

‘Do you need me and the boys will give him a jolly good thumping?’

‘No- of course not.’

‘Well, something has spooked your horses up into the hedges. I’ve been watching you for three days now and in all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you this out of sorts. Come on, out with it.’ Ducky put the biscuits down, sat back in his seat and pulled out a cigarette.

Smoking inside the ship was a habit Elle disapproved of most strenuously and she gave him a look of displeasure.

Ducky carried on tapping the end of the cigarette against the tin. ‘Spill the beans or I’m lighting this in here,’ he said.

‘I- I haven’t been sleeping well lately,’ she admitted.

‘And why is that?’

‘I’ve been having these strange dreams. I can’t really explain them, but they feel so real. It’s like I’m watching things happen.’

‘Hmm,’ he said. He stood up and opened one of the windows. A cold woosh of air filled the cabin as he lit his cigarette. He took a long satisfied draw and blew the smoke out into the freezing air.

Elle shivered. ‘Each time I close my eyes, the dream comes. Each time, it’s the same thing, but in different aspects.’

‘Sounds serious,’ he said, his eyes narrowing.

‘I think it’s a message and I am supposed to do something about it, but I don’t know what it means or what to do. But when I’m dreaming I feel like I

am there.’ She wondered briefly if she should confide in him, tell him the truth about her newfound abilities, but she decided against it. She did not want to put Ducky in the middle of all the danger and turbulence that the Shadow world inevitably brought.

Elle wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her shoulders against the draught that came in from the open window.

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you,’ Ducky said. ‘The Eleanor I know would not be daunted by a few silly nightmares. Try again,’ he said.

She sighed. ‘...and it’s Marsh.’

‘I knew it. What’s he done?’

It’s – it’s not him. It’s me,’ she said in a soft voice.

Ducky flicked his cigarette butt out the window, shut it, and sat down opposite her. ‘Tell me. We’ve been friends for a long time Bells. Your confidences are safe with me - you should know that.’

‘He wants me to give up flying,’ she said.

Ducky burst out laughing. ‘Oh, come on, Elle. Really?’

She nodded. ‘We had a big argument before I left. He says a wife’s duty being beside her husband. He’s desperately unhappy about me acquiring this ship... about the gambling and how I am bringing his name into bad repute. We had a frightful row over it.’

Ducky opened the cubbyhole and pulled out Elle’s half-jack of brandy. He opened the bottle and handed it to her.

‘He does have a point, you know. Gambling with degenerates is not what you should be about my dear.’ He looked around the ship ‘And I’m not so sure that this rusty bucket was such a good idea either.’

‘but why do I have to be the one who blinks out of existence just because I have a ring on my finger? Why do I have to give up everything I am?’ Elle said.

‘And what has he given up for you?’ Ducky said. ‘From where I’m sitting, that husband of yours has been remarkably progressive when it comes to your career my dear. He bought you your own flight charter company and financed your business. The man even put his name on the board outside. Surely that should count for something.’

Elle shook her head. ‘He may have, but he’s changed his mind. He’s asking me to choose between flying and my marriage.’ She took a shuddering breath, and two big tears spilled unguarded over her lashes. ‘He gave me an ultimatum: Flying or him and I chose this charter.’

‘Oh dear,’ Ducky took a swig from the brandy bottle. ‘Surely he didn’t mean that?’

‘I- I was angry. We both were. I was rash. The argument escalated. We both said things... Oh Ducky, I think my marriage might be over and it’s all my fault.’

The *Phoenix* suddenly bucked and groaned as they hit a pocket of aether turbulence. Elle felt her stomach do a backflip as the thrusters righted them.

‘Ducky, I have this terrible feeling of dread. I shouldn’t have taken this charter,’ Elle said once the rattling of the ship had died down.

‘That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all day.’ Ducky put the cork back into the brandy bottle and strode over to the helm of the *Phoenix*. With a deft hand, he spun the wheel and the *Phoenix* groaned and tilted to the side as the thrusters kicked in. Slowly, the ship creaked and started coming about.

‘What are you doing?’ Elle said.

‘I’m changing course,’ he said.

‘But we’ve only just cleared the Arabian Desert.’

‘Exactly! And if we hurry, with these prevailing winds you can be back in London the day after tomorrow.’

‘What about the charter? I made a commitment.’

‘Sod the charter. They can wait for their goods. Or we can transfer the freight to someone else who is heading this way. We’ll send them a message to say that we were experiencing mechanical difficulties and had to turn back.

Which, by the sound of things, isn’t that far from the truth.’

Elle stared at him, not sure if she comprehended.

‘I am taking you home, Lady Greychester, whether you like it or not,’ he said. ‘You and your husband need to sort this out. By talking, not running away. Some things are more important than a charter and I am not going to help you make bad choices.’

‘I did rush off without thinking things through properly,’ Elle admitted. ‘But he was mean to me. I was perfectly within my rights to be angry.’

‘And look at what you got for your troubles?’ He said gesturing at her.

‘Nightmares and puffy eyes.’

Elle gave a little laugh.

‘You, my dear, need to find your place in the world beside your husband. You two need to find a way to make things work for both of you.’

‘But...’ Elle started to say.

‘No ifs or buts. You need to get this right, lady. Otherwise you will spend the rest of your life regretting it.’

*He's right. You must go home...* the voices of the Oracle suddenly spoke in her mind.

As if on cue, the *Phoenix* bucked and did a little nosedive.

‘This bucket of bolts and rust sounds like she needs more than just a few minor repairs. I think you did Dashwood a favour by taking her off his hands, if the sound of that engine is anything to go by.’

As if in answer, the *Phoenix* listed slightly to the starboard side and two of her engines backfired, releasing a greasy cloud of spark-laced steam into the air. ‘I mean, honestly Elle.’

‘I think I’m going to have a word with Captain Dashwood the next time I see him.’

Ducky just laughed as he kept his eye on the horizon.

*Listen to your friend. He speaks the truth...* The voices said again.

Elle sat back in her seat. ‘I am outvoted, it seems,’ she said drily to herself.

‘Not for long, Bells. Not if those Suffragettes get their way,’ Ducky said, oblivious to the other presence on board.

‘When did you suddenly become so wise?’ she said to him.

‘Oh, I’ve always been a fount of wisdom. You’ve just never noticed.’ He set the steering lock into place once they were back on course and came to sit next to her. He handed her his handkerchief. It was impossibly white and smelled of vertiver. She dabbed her eyes with it.

‘I’ve seen the two of you together and if there is one thing I know, it’s that Lord Greychester loves you.’

‘And I love him too, Ducky. Very much,’ Elle said.

‘Well then, don’t mess it up, you silly thing.’

Elle rubbed her face. Ducky was right. She was childish. There had to be a way to make things work and running off without talking things through was not the way to go about things.

‘I need to think things through a bit,’ she said.

Ducky smiled. ‘Well, don’t look at me. Up here there is very little else to do but think. Perhaps this is why I am so wise.’

Elle rose from her seat. ‘I am going to wash my face. Would you like anything from below deck?’

‘A nice sandwich with some of those pickles your housekeeper makes would be lovely,’ Ducky said with a cheeky smile.

Elle shook her head and went down below. As she splashed cold water on her face, the cloud that had been hovering over her lifted a little. She would apologise to him for being so immature. They would talk things out and they would find a way. She was sure of it. Everything was going to be all right. She just needed to get home.

And so the *Iron Phoenix* trundled and backfired her way on a high-altitude course back to England.

## Chapter Ten

Marsh drummed his fingers on his upper lip as he contemplated the letter he had just opened. Around him, the Greychester house was as quiet as a mausoleum. The only sounds that reached him here in his study were the relentless patter of rain against the window casements interspersed with the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall. It had been four days since she'd left in the airship. Four days of worrying and waiting and the silence was slowly grating away at his nerves. He was constantly surprised at how she filled his life with noise and activity. For one so small, his wife certainly had a way of making a large impression. He cursed his own stubbornness again for not going with her on the charter. It's not as if he had anything better to do with his time. It had been unfair of him to put her on the spot like that. For the hundredth time he cursed himself for being so hot-headed and stubborn. Forcing his wife to choose between him and the thing she loved doing more than anything in the world was selfish and stupid. It only served to drive her away from him. He wished she was here so he could talk to her.

He glanced at the letter in front of him on the desk. Police Commissioner Willoughby had invited him to luncheon at his club. The invitation was flattering but the sudden gesture of friendship was somewhat odd. It was true that he had met the commissioner on a few occasions, but he certainly would not count the man within his circle of acquaintances. What could Willoughby want with him?



He shifted in his chair to release the crick that had formed in his back. Giving up the Shadow was proving to be more difficult than he had thought. He was certainly not enjoying the twinges and aches that were starting to plague his body. It reminded him daily of his new mortality and the fact that time was ticking. Most Warlocks were oblivious to time, for they lived lives that were ten times longer than those of mortal men. They went through life in a state of perfect fitness and health until the end. Then their powers simply faded until they blinked out of existence. That was no longer his chosen path. He was going to have to endure the slow, steady decay into a gout-ridden rheumatic old age.

An ember popped in the fireplace sending a burst of sparks up the chimney. Marsh stared at the glowing coals as he thought things through. The Council of Warlocks had not been amused when they received his resignation. Threats and admonishments had flown; it had taken all of his control and influence to walk away from them. But he did not mind, because he was doing it for her.

For Elle.

Marsh felt his heart constrict at the thought. She was slipping away from him. He could feel the distance between them widening – every day a little more. No matter how hard he fought to keep things as they were when they had first met – the way she smiled at him in Florence when they stood huddled in a doorway to take shelter from the rain – it was like trying to hold on to desert sand.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes at the thought. He should never have let her go off to Singapore like that on her own. And with Richardson of all people. The chap was decent enough but he could not fight his way out of a paper bag. What on earth could he do to protect her if they ran into trouble?

He sighed with frustration. Why did she have to go running off at every opportunity? He knew the answer to that, for he too was driven by the same passion for adventure. But at least he was able to control his urges. Suppress them for her sake. Why could she not do the same for him?

Marriage. Him. It wasn't enough for her, and the thought made his insides ache. Perhaps it was because she was so young, but even after all they had fought for and all they had survived, she simply refused to acknowledge how vulnerable she was.

He had nearly died a thousand deaths when she had run off after whichever Shadow creature had been in the audience at the opera the other night. The very thought of it made him grow cold.

He sighed. Sitting alone in this house brooding in the gloom was not going to help anyone. Perhaps Elle was right. Perhaps he needed to get out of the house more. In fact, she was entirely correct. No vibrant young woman wants to live out their days with a grumpy old recluse.

It was time to take action. He would meet Willoughby for lunch. See what the man had to say.

He knew it would take almost a week for Elle to get to Singapore and that she would be unable to contact him until then, but he found the silence was almost unbearable, but he would surprise her. When she walked through the door, he would be a new man.

He picked up Willoughby's invitation from his desk. Yes, he would go. He picked up his pen and scribbled a quick note of acceptance to be sent out post-haste.

Willoughby's club was a small obscure Georgian building hidden in an alley off Dean Street in Soho. Marsh hitched the collar of his grey wool coat up higher to keep the drizzle off his neck and knocked on the door.

An elderly footman with extremely old-fashioned powdered hair greeted him. 'May I help you, sir?' he said raising an eyebrow at the scuffed and slightly frayed top hat Marsh wore. He had deliberately dressed in his simpler street clothes today. They were the ones he had worn when on Shadow business for the Council. He liked the anonymous, comfortable feel of the worn fabric. It made him feel unobtrusive, as if he blended into his environment.

Marsh handed him the invitation and his visiting card.

The doorman scanned the card and glanced back up at Marsh. The only indication of surprise the man gave was another slight rise of his carefully plucked eyebrow. 'Please, do come in from the rain, my lord. May I take your lordship's coat?'

The doorman snapped his fingers and a footman appeared from behind the counter to assist.

'Thank you.' Marsh shrugged out of the soggy wool and handed it to the man.

'Right this way, my lord,' the footman said as he led Marsh up the narrow stairs that led into the main sitting room of the club.

Commissioner Willoughby looked up from a table where he was reading the newspaper near the window. His spider-veined cheeks rose into a smile when he saw Marsh. 'Lord Greychester, so good of you to come.' He half rose from his chair in a gesture that was somewhat clumsy.

'Police Commissioner, how do you do?' Marsh said.

‘Please, sit. Do make yourself at home. Would you like a drink?’

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ Marsh said.

‘A brandy to banish the cold perhaps?’ Willoughby said as Marsh sat down in the leather-covered opposite Willoughby.

‘It’s perhaps a little early for brandy, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Good brandy is just the thing for a day like today.’ Willoughby nodded at the waiter who had appeared by their side. ‘Bring us two brandies to warm us up before lunch,’ he ordered.

‘As you please,’ Marsh said drily as he observed the poor waiter’s startled expression.

I am pleased you decided to join me.’ Willoughby said as soon as the waiter had departed. His smile did not quite reach his eyes as he spoke.

‘I thank you for the kind invitation,’ Marsh said. ‘But I must admit that I was somewhat intrigued by your letter.’

‘Yes. I thought we might meet here where we could speak in relative privacy as the matter is a delicate one.’ Willoughby picked up his pipe and set about preparing to smoke it. At last he spoke. ‘I am in need of a man with your unique talents,’ he said slowly.

‘And what talents are those?’ Marsh said lightly.

‘We at the Metropolitan police make it our business to know other people’s business, my lord. We know of your history with the Council of Warlocks.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Let’s just say that you were recommended to me as a man who might be able to offer the kind of help I need.’

‘And who, may I ask, would be making such recommendations?’

Willoughby gave him an oily smile. ‘Oh, I don’t think I’m at liberty to say.

But they spoke very highly of the excellent work you did for the Ministry while in service of the Council. How is your lovely wife, by the way?’

‘The viscountess is well. Thank you for asking.’ Marsh kept his expression neutral. Willoughby knew more about his personal business than he liked, but Marsh was a seasoned negotiator and he would not allow this man the pleasure of seeing his discomfort. ‘With such a recommendation, how could a man refuse?’ he said. ‘But first tell me what this is about and then, perhaps, I might be able to confirm whether rumours about my work are true.’

Willoughby gave a little short bark of laughter. ‘Well that is quite the conundrum then, my lord.’

Marsh inclined his head slightly.

The waiter served the brandies. Marsh picked up his glass and swirled the brown liquid, feeling it warm in his palm.

Willoughby took a sip of his drink and wiped his moustache. ‘Lord Henry Alcott, the heir and seventh Earl of Mallory, disappeared four nights ago.’

Willoughby struck a match and held it up to his pipe. ‘His family have been beside themselves with worry. We have commissioned a search, but my men have found nothing. The boy has simply disappeared into thin air.’

‘I see,’ said Marsh.

Willoughby sucked on his pipe. ‘We’ve had word that the newspapers are going to publish news of his disappearance any day now and they are not going to be kind about the police.’

‘And how is this my business? I’m sure young Alcott will turn up. He’s probably off with his friends having a jolly old time.’

‘Yes, well, this is where the problem arises. The earl does not want news of

his son's disappearance to be made public.' Willoughby looked uncomfortable.

'Let's just say that the lad was last seen in less than polite company.'

'Who hasn't gone missing for a few days after a night out at his age?'

Marsh said.

'Quite so, my lord, but this is an entirely different sort of young man. He was entirely devoted to a girl who was a most unsuitable match. Granted, she was quite well-bred, but she was poor, weak and sickly. The earl did all he could to discourage the affair, but the lad was hell-bent on finding a way to save her. He was in search of a cure for one of her many ailments when he disappeared, along with the earl's valet.'

'I see,' said Marsh.

'And well, we suspect that Shadow creatures were involved. He was last seen following one of those gypsy folk out of the Black Stag. It's in the docklands. I don't expect you know it.'

Marsh flinched inwardly at the commissioner's use of what was a rather pejorative term, but for the first time since he sat down he felt his interest piqued. 'The travelling folk are not necessarily connected to the Shadow,' he said carefully. 'And besides, creatures of Shadow can only cross into the Realm of Light if they speak a binding oath to do no harm.'

Willoughby nodded. 'Yes, that may be so, but there are reports of strange things going on in the dark of night.'

'Such as?'

Willoughby reddened and took a quick sip from his glass. 'Perhaps another time. We are here to discuss the business of the Mallorys.'

Marsh frowned. 'In almost all cases, a broken oath would mean instant

death to the creature in question. Of course the Nightwalkers, wolves and other half-shadow creatures who were created on the Light side are the exception, but surely you are not insinuating that someone from the Shadow Realm has found a way around the oath?’

Willoughby held up his hands. ‘No. Not in so many words. I am simply sharing my suspicions.’

The last sip of Marsh’s brandy burned his throat as he swallowed it down. He was starting to see why Willoughby had called on him. It was true that Shadow creatures did no harm in the Light, so their usual modus operandi was to abduct victims to the Shadow side where anything was possible. Usually these attempts failed, but if someone or something out there had found a way around the barrier, there could be trouble. He wondered about the Shadow creature he’d seen at the opera.

‘This is really a matter that should be reported to the Council of Warlocks,’ he said. ‘They are more than equipped to deal with situations such as these and you know well enough that I am no longer a member of the Council. I am finished with the Ministry. Retired.’

Willoughby coughed. ‘We were hoping that we wouldn’t have to create an international incident by notifying the Council. Matters are so delicate politically at the moment. What with all that business in the Crimea. We were hoping that you might agree to make a few discreet enquiries. See if there are Shadow creatures out there that are up to no good. At least that way we will know what we are dealing with before we sound the alarm.’

Marsh nodded slowly. He felt a profound sense of worry unfurl in him. Had the incident with the alchemists in Constantinople upset the balance of things

that much? But Elle had said that there was nothing wrong with the divide. She performed her duties as Oracle when they arose as she had promised and he knew she did them well.

‘Tell me what you know.’ Marsh sat forward and spoke in a low voice.

Willoughby nodded. ‘We’ve had an increase in complaints from people who have had loved ones go missing over the last fortnight or so. One or two of the workhouses have been found empty. Not a single person to be found inside. It was as if someone had gone into the building and cleared everyone out overnight. These people had simply disappeared, leaving everything as it stood.’

‘Is that so?’ Marsh said.

‘It only happens when the fog is thick. People go out into the night and simply never come back. It’s a most curious state of affairs. And then there are the rumours . . .’

‘Rumours?’ Marsh said.

‘Something about creatures people are calling the Tickers. Apparently groups of two or three of these so-called Tickers are prowling the streets at night. But none of my men have ever seen one, so it might just be a case of mass hysteria. You know how people can be when there’s a good story doing the rounds.’

Marsh pressed his lips together. ‘All right, Willoughby, you have my interest,’ he said. ‘I will have a look round for you. If I find evidence of the involvement of Shadow creatures, I will let you know. If that is indeed the case, we will have to report this to the Ministry, and they will in turn refer the matter to the Council of Warlocks. If there is no Shadow involvement, then



you may rest assured that I will treat the circumstances of Mallory's boy's frolic across town with the utmost discretion.'

Willoughby's face lit up with relief. 'We would be ever so grateful, my lord,' he said.

'But I work alone. And I do not want people bothering me at home about this. You will hear from me and not the other way round. Is that agreed?'

'As you wish. But you need to start your investigations without delay, my lord. We cannot afford to wait.'

'Agreed,' Marsh said.

Willoughby inclined his head and smiled. 'You might find, my lord, that this is the beginning of a most rewarding mutual arrangement. Our department is at the forefront of the world when it comes to investigating crime and I can see that a man like you would be most useful to our endeavours.'

'Perhaps,' Marsh said with a tight smile. 'Now let's have some lunch. I am starving.'

Downstairs in the foyer, after a good solid lunch of beef and potatoes, the doorman held up Marsh's coat and hat, which had both been dried and brushed while he had been upstairs. Lunch with the commissioner had actually been quite enjoyable. The man was an odd fellow, but he was quite genial once he'd had a bit of claret in him and he regaled Marsh with some interesting police anecdotes. He made working with them sound like fun.

Marsh lifted his collar and stepped back into the relentless rain. The mud in the streets was making life miserable for both men and the poor carriage horses who clopped through the city. He stopped and dropped a handful of coins into

the hat of a clutch of shivering children who were sat huddled together in a doorway. London was truly gripped in the misery of what was surely the wettest, coldest February in living memory.

Marsh bunched his hands inside his coat pockets and walked on. Despite his congeniality, he knew there was something that Willoughby was not telling him. It may be a clever ploy because not knowing everything only made him want to investigate the matter more. Or was it something more sinister? He had not considered Willoughby to be a particularly a cunning man, but then again, he could have been wrong.

Not for the first time, Marsh felt himself yearn for the piece of mandrake root bound in linen that was buried under the ancient yew tree in the gardens on his estate. It would be so useful for him to have his powers right now. He'd not realised how much he had relied on them. Not until they were gone.

It had been in that sacred place and in the light of the full moon where he had performed the ritual that had sealed away his powers. On that clear, cold night shortly before his wedding day, Marsh had become an ordinary man. At the time it had seemed like a good idea, for he would rather die in one lifetime having loved Elle, than spend centuries on his own. That was the sacrifice he had made. Yet again, he felt his insides twist with anxiety as he thought about his wife.

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*Outside the front door of the house, the fog swirled. It parted briefly like stage curtains for the Warlock to slip through and out into the waiting night. He left alone, without telling anyone where he was going.*

*I really did not want to go after him - out into the dark of the night where it was cold and raining, but I had promised my lady that I would look after him. A promise is a promise and so I followed, for I could tell that there was an ill humour in the air. It spoke of darkness and demise. It was a foulness that the Warlock with his new blunted senses did not notice.*

*In spite of the weather, he chose to walk through Hyde Park. The trees sighed as he passed. They always lamented when they sensed magic that was lost. I've often wondered if there were trees that wept for me somewhere.*

*In the darkness I could sense them waiting. They were many – an army, completely silent, but for the synchronous ticking of their hearts.*

*Outside the Serpentine gates, the Warlock paused to hail a cab. A sleepy steam cab driver, perched atop his converted hansom, trundled up.*

*'The East End,' the Warlock said.*

*The cabbie grunted and I could tell that he, too, was unhappy about being out on a night like this, but the cab shuddered to life and, under cover of the noise and steam of the engine, no one noticed me slip on to the back of the parcel rack.*

*We travelled for quite a while through the gritty rain-slicked streets. The only signs of life were yellow and orange lozenges of light that shone from*

*unshuttered windows. Those with any sense were safely indoors, sheltered from the cold – doors locked. For only the very stupid or desperate would brave the wet and the unexplained things that roamed these streets at night.*

*The Warlock told the cab to stop near a public house. It was an old, shabby place with very little that was beautiful about it. I do not like these places, for they remind me too much of the servitude I had left behind in Paris.*

*No matter where one goes in the world, there are the places where Shadow creatures ply their trade. I knew I would not be welcome here, for Shadow creatures do not like competition.*

*But I held my nerve and followed the Warlock inside, unseen.*

*The Warlock ordered a pint from the counter and sat down at one of the tables. He took a resolute swallow of the ale, grimacing as he contemplated the rings that stained the wood. I made myself as small as possible and found a place to sit on one of the grimy sconces near the ceiling.*

*The Warlock did not wait long before a man wearing a hat with a peacock feather strode up to the table.*

*They spoke and the man nodded.*

*The Warlock pulled a portrait photograph from his breast pocket and slid it across the table. ‘This man. Have you seen him?’ he said.*

*‘I might have. It’s hard to say,’ the other said.*

*The Warlock narrowed his eyes and slid a coin across the table. ‘Perhaps this might help you remember.’*

*His companion picked up the shilling and held it up to the light. With nimble fingers and sleight of hand, he made the coin disappear. ‘I seem to recall seeing someone of that description. But it is not safe to speak here. You will*

*have to come with me.'*

*'And where might we be going?' the Warlock said.*

*A small smile flickered on his companion's face. 'To see someone who remembers better than I do.'*

*I strained to listen more, but my attention was drawn away, for I sensed the danger moments before it materialised next to me.*

*Gin fairies. I could smell the perfume of juniper on them.*

*'Oi, Frenchie. You ain't got no right to this corner. This here is our place,' one said. He had beautiful eyes, the colour of summer at midnight.*

*'I'm not here looking for business. I am just watching over a friend,' I said.*

*The biggest of them snorted. 'I can't say as I care. Business or no business, we don't like your kind round here.' The three fairies circled around me in a rather menacing way.*

*One of them caught my eye. He was a handsome fellow with a face that was gentler than the others. He gave me a long, sad look that spoke of regret and the hope that things might be different.*

*'I'm sorry. I'm . . . ' I started to say, but I glanced over to the table where the Warlock and the peacock-feathered man were and I gasped with dismay. The table was empty.*

*'Forgive me, I did not mean to offend,' I said as I pushed past the fairies and flew out the door before we could come to blows. I wish I could have made friends, for I do miss others of my kind. But I could not dwell on that now. A promise made is one to be honoured and my path lay in pursuit of the Warlock.*

*Outside was only the street in all its ordinariness. I could see no one through the swirling mist.*

*At a dark lamppost I paused, looking left and right. The Warlock's scent clung faintly to the cold metal, but it was melting in the mist. It would not be long before all traces of him would be gone. I flew in the direction his scent drifted from, but the buildings in this place formed a labyrinth that was almost impossible to navigate.*

*I flew this way and that, ever more confused until I was completely and utterly lost. I became very afraid, for London was a dangerous place for someone as little as me. And all the while, the rain sifted down, soaking into my wings with an iciness that was almost debilitating.*

*Eventually I came to a small clearing that sat dank and forlorn beside a bridge. In the darkness a small fire burned. I could smell the scent of incense and horses. Travelling folk. These people were usually sympathetic to creatures of Shadow. I was sure they would let me rest here a while until the sun came up.*

*I sighed with relief as I settled on the steps of the wagon. I was sure the good mistress who lived here would not mind.*

*And, true to my predictions, it was not long before I sensed someone behind me. I looked over my shoulder, just in time to feel a large bell jar clamp down over me. I screamed and fought throwing myself against the glass, in the hope of escape. There were few things in the world I hated more than being captured in glass jars, et once again, here I was ...at the mercy of someone who did not understand who I was or what I could do.*

*The face of a woman appeared outside the glass. She lifted the jar and placed it on the table inside the wagon.*

*'Hello, sweetling,' she murmured. Her voice was gentle but sound was*

*hollow, oddly distorted by the curvature of the glass. 'I am honoured that you have come to my doorstep. Please feel welcome here.'*

*I shook my head and started throwing myself against the sides of the jar again, but my efforts were in vain, as they always seemed to be. For it is the lot of my kind to be forever bound. Never free.*

*The woman laughed. 'Oh, not so happy then, I see.' I noted that she was far younger than I had first thought. Her face was fresh and unlined. Her cheek held a blush, firm with the plumpness of youth. But it is so difficult to tell the age of mortals, they die so quickly.*

*'If you don't want to be in the jar, you should simply agree to behave,' the woman said. 'This will only take a moment.'*

*She reached for her sewing basket and drew out a skein of bright red silk – the kind fine ladies used for their embroidery.*

*She started singing in a soft, low voice as she unwound the thread. As she sang, I felt the amber tendrils of her magic surge up and envelop me. It was so thick and strong, like wood smoke from a damp fire, that it almost suffocated me.*

*Hoping to find a means of escape, I looked about frantically for any bottles of liquor. Brandy, whisky, even gin – anything that might help me slip into spirit form so I may leave this wagon. But I found none, for the wagon was spotlessly clean and furnished simply with no signs of any vice.*

*Very slowly, the woman lifted the lid off the glass jar. She dropped the silk inside and slipped the little noose she had knotted around my ankle. I wanted to protest, but the thick suffocating magic had made my limbs go limp. I felt the magic tighten around me with sickening certainty. I was caught, like a*

*rabbit in a snare with a bright red bit of silk*

*'There you are. Now you are mine. It really wouldn't do for you to go wandering about in the night like that. It's dangerous out there and you are almost half frozen. You should be glad that I found you and took you in.'* She unrolled the silk and tied it to a brass ring that was set in the wood of the inside of the wagon.

*Then the woman opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of absinthe and a bowl of sugar. It was the cheap, rough kind that they drink in the gutters.*

*'With this silk you are bound to me now, but there is no reason for me to treat you cruelly.'* She set both down in front of me.

*'Please. Eat, rest.'* She uncorked the bottle. *'I am very sure that you and I are going to have wonderfully sweet dreams together. I really do mean you no harm.'* She smiled warmly at me. *'I hope you will be my friend.'*

*I tried to fight it, but the lure of the liquor was too strong. I knew I had to keep searching for the Warlock, but my kind never really has much of a chance resisting the call of absinthe. And so against my better judgement, I slipped back into the cool green oblivion that would forever be my prison.*



## Chapter Eleven

Elle hopped out of the front seat of the motor and bounded up the stairs to the front door before Neville could walk round to open the door for her.

He had been uncharacteristically quiet on the way home from the airfield, but she had not really paid him much heed because she was too excited to see Marsh.

She hoped he had received the telegram she had sent from the airfield in Dieppe, just before they made the crossing over the Channel.

The spark lights outside the front door cast a welcoming glow for those coming out of the early February darkness.

Elle paused under them to smooth down the skirts of her new dress. She had purchased it on impulse on her way back from the telegraph office. It was a pretty shade of the lightest blue and trimmed with lace. It softened her features and highlighted the colour of her eyes.

The thought of seeing Marsh again sent a flush across her cheeks and a cloud of butterflies swirling up and down her insides. She had missed her handsome husband more than she had thought possible.

She had done a great deal of thinking on the way back. She and Ducky had spent hours talking – at least she had talked and Ducky had listened. He had helped her sort through her feelings and she felt so much the better for it. In fact, she had a proper plan. She smiled. There was so much she wanted to tell

Marsh.

She threw open the front door and dumped her holdall next to the mahogany table with the China vase in the entrance hall. Today it held a large bunch of white lilies and the cloying sweetness of their scent made her nose prickle.

‘I’m home!’ she called up the stairwell as she took off her oversized hat and dropped it on top of her holdall.

Only silence greeted her.

‘Mrs Hinges? Caruthers?’ She strode through to the library, sure that Marsh would be sprawled on the sofa, but the room was empty and dark. The fireplace was cold.

She turned and walked through to the drawing room. The wooden heels of her smart new shoes made a hollow sound on the old floors.

Just outside the drawing room, she ran into the butler. ‘My lady, welcome back.’ He looked somewhat flustered.

‘Oh, hello, Caruthers,’ she said.

The butler gave one of his solemn bows. He was a tall man in his early sixties with a stern face that came from years of following proper decorum. But Elle was not fooled by his restraint. Below those bushy eyebrows were fiercely intelligent bright blue eyes.

The butler looked away and coughed.

Elle frowned. Caruthers was a man who smelled of silver polish and peppermint; a man whose fierce scrutiny missed nothing; a man so steadfast that she thought him as unfaltering as an oak tree. She regarded him carefully. Why was he looking so flustered? In fact, the man looked positively upset.

Something was very wrong. Elle felt her stomach tighten.

‘Where is everybody? Why is the house so quiet?’

Caruthers coughed. He had a pained expression on his face. ‘Perhaps your ladyship should come into the drawing room and sit down for a moment.’ He opened the door and gestured for her to enter.

‘What’s happened?’ she said.

‘Please, this way, my lady.’

Inside the drawing room, Mrs Hinges was perched at the very edge of one of the occasional chairs. She rose the moment Elle entered, her hands fluttering to her throat in the way they did when she was upset.

‘Mrs Hinges, what’s wrong?’ Elle said.

‘I’m so sorry. We have been out searching all night,’ she said.

‘Searching for what?’ Elle felt her heart race.

‘Eleanor.’ The professor spoke in a quiet voice behind her. He had been sitting so still in one of the wingback chairs that Elle had not noticed him until now. He looked tired.

‘Papa, for heaven’s sake. What on earth is going on? When did you get here?’

The professor rose from his seat and took his daughter’s hands. ‘My darling, I have bad news and there is no easy way to say this. Hugh is missing.’

Elle felt the air leave her lungs. ‘What do you mean Hugh is missing?’ she said.

‘He went out yesterday evening, after sunset. He didn’t say where he was going and he hasn’t returned.’ The professor paused and took a breath. ‘Mrs Hinges contacted me and I took the first train here. I arrived about an hour

ago.'

'Missing?' Elle said.

'I'm so sorry, my dear,' Mrs Hinges said as gently as she could. 'I saw him take his carriage cloak and a rather frayed-looking top hat.'

'I tried to recommend that he take his good hat, but he was out the door before I could finish my sentence. He went out alone and did not say where he was going or when he was to be expected back.' Caruthers added. He looked drawn and worried.

Elle felt herself grow cold. The carriage cloak and a frayed top hat were the same clothes he wore in Paris on the day they had met. Marsh wore those clothes only when he did not want anyone to recognise him; when we was about his business as a Warlock for the Council.

'I don't think we need to worry quite yet,' the professor said. 'Perhaps he went out and was detained or something. He might have slept at his club.'

'Errands don't take all night, Papa,' Elle said. 'Where is Adele? Perhaps she knows something.' Elle rose and walked to the conservatory.

In the atrium the ferns waved a gentle hello in the air she stirred up as she strode into the glass room. Everything was silent. Today there were no bees droning against the glass. Adele liked to invite lost bees into the atrium where she offered them sanctuary in return for visits to her plants. Where she found willing bees in the dead of winter was one of the many mysteries that shrouded the fairy.

'Adele?' Elle said.

There was no answer. She started peering through the plants, lifting fronds out of the way. At the back of the atrium was a pretty wooden fairycote they

had bought for Adele shortly after they moved to the house. It was a miniature dollhouse, complete with wooden doors and shutters. Each room was decorated with exquisitely crafted miniature furniture. The outside of the dollhouse was decorated with intricate fairy patterns. Marsh and Adele had spent hours copying these from a book he had found in his study. Adele was one of the few absinthe fairies in the world who had her very own townhouse.

Elle peered in through the doors and windows, but all the rooms of the dollhouse were empty.

‘We haven’t seen the fairy either. She seems to have disappeared too,’ Neville said. The whole household – the professor, Mrs Hinges and Caruthers – were all with Neville in the breakfast room behind her.

‘Shall I send someone to draw you a bath, ma’am? You must be cold and tired from your journey,’ Caruthers asked.

Elle shook herself out of her reverie and blinked at the concerned faces who were watching her closely.

‘Yes... N-No. I’m all right for the moment,’ she said flatly. ‘If you’ll excuse me for a moment... I need a moment to myself to think.’ She turned and headed up the stairs. In the privacy of the bathroom, Elle sank to the floor. She buried her face in her hands. Big tears spilled from her eyes as she sobbed. They had been so harsh with their words the last time they had spoken. Where was he? Had he gone back to the Council? And if he *had* gone back to the Council, where did that leave her?

‘Oh, where is he?’ she asked the voices of the Oracle, but they were silent.

After some time, Mrs Hinges tactfully tapped on the bathroom door to enquire whether she needed anything.

‘May I come in?’ Mrs Hinges asked.

Elle opened the door.

‘Elle, my dear, why don’t you sit down?’ said Mrs Hinges

Elle sat down in the wingback chair in the corner of the room. She felt cold and numb.

‘I know it might not be my place to interfere, but I have noticed that things haven’t exactly been perfect between you and his lordship.’ Mrs Hinges picked up one of her hairbrushes and started brushing Elle’s long auburn hair, like she had done when Elle was a little girl. ‘I’m only mentioning it because I care about you both as if you were my own children,’ she said.

Mrs Hinges was the closest thing to a mother she had and her concern was touching.

‘I know, Mrs Hinges, and now he’s not here. What if he’s left me?’ Elle felt her throat constrict at the thought.

‘Now, don’t go finding thoughts which have no right to be in your head. He has only been gone a little while. Men sometimes need a little bit of space. And there may be a very good reason for his absence.’

‘And what if I’ve given him too much space?’ Elle said. ‘I’ve been such a horrible wife to him. I’ve been so selfish.’

‘Oh, his lordship does not strike me as the kind of man who would just abandon his wife and home,’ Mrs Hinges said.

Duty. There it was, all ugly and constrictive.

Elle rested her hand against her forehead, suddenly very tired.

Mrs Hinges put her hands round Elle’s shoulders. ‘I think you should get into bed and get some rest. I will bring you some dinner in a little while.’

Neville has gone out to look for him. If anyone knows all of Lord Greychester's haunts, it is Neville. I will let you know as soon as I have news.'

For once in her life all the went out of Elle and she allowed herself to be tucked into bed like a child. The cup of warm milk Mrs Hinges fed her later was laced with nutmeg and something bitter she could not quite put her finger on. She felt shocked and numb. She knew she should be doing something, but she couldn't quite manage to get her body to work. Their bed seemed so huge and empty without him. She shivered and pulled the covers up around her. She lay like that, numb and staring for a long time. Eventually the house went quiet as lights were turned out and everyone went to bed and still Elle lay there, starting into the dark.

She must have drifted off, but the morning brought no relief. Elle glanced back from the window when the maid brought in her morning coffee.

She had been sitting on the windowsill in her nightdress watching the street below.

She poured herself a cup and continued her vigil at the window. Outside, the relentless drizzle sifted down, turning everything outside into a state of mushy dampness. In fact, the morning was so grey that it was hard to tell where the low clouds ended and the fog that rose from the ground began. So much for an early spring, she mused.

Sighing, she left the window seat and wandered across to Marsh's wood-panelled dressing closet. This was her husband's inner sanctum, a place she almost never entered and never on her own. The dressing room was immaculately clean and tidy. Neville was a good valet and he kept Marsh's things in excellent order.

Elle ran a hand over a cufflink box. And the row of neat brushes Neville used on his coats.

Then, quite on impulse, Elle opened Hugh's clothes press. Inside, his jackets, coats and trousers hung in neat rows. She wrapped her arms around the clothes and buried her face in the cloth in order to inhale the scent of sandalwood and him.

The familiarity of the fabric against her skin brought both anguish and comfort in equal measures and she buried her face deeper inhaling the scent. Something rustled against her cheek.

Elle looked up from the clothes with a little frown. There was something in the pocket of one of the coats she had just gathered up. She started feeling about in the pocket until she found a folded piece of paper. She drew it out and took it over to the window where she opened it. The paper was crumpled and had disintegrated in one of the corners as if it had somehow become wet, but the neat copperplate writing was easy to read. It was a letter from the Office of Police Commissioner Willoughby inviting Marsh to meet him at his club. It gave little further information, but it was dated on the day before he disappeared.

Elle's forehead crinkled with worry. What had Marsh been up to? He had been adamant that he wanted nothing more to do with the Shadow politics, but here he was being summoned to meet with the police commissioner. Unwelcome thoughts of their argument sprang to mind once more. Had he really been bored and frustrated enough to go back to warlocking?

Elle stared at the letter in her hand. She couldn't just sit here staring out the window. She needed to do something.



Still holding the letter Elle strode over to her bureau and pulled out one of the telegraphic message transfer forms she kept there for emergencies. Quickly she scribbled a note, pausing only to make sure that the message conveyed the urgency but gave away no information to prying eyes.

She put the folded form into an envelope and rang the bell pull. When Edie appeared, she thrust the note into the startled girl's hand. 'Take this to Caruthers. Tell him to go to the post office immediately to transmit the message. It is urgent.'

'Yes, my lady.' Edie bobbed a curtsy and headed for the door, looking somewhat alarmed.

Elle looked at herself in the mirror and let out a startled laugh. Dressed in her nightdress with her hair escaping wildly from her braid, she did look rather like a female version of her father when he was in one of his intellectual frenzies. But none of that mattered right now. She finished her coffee in one gulp and set the cup down with determination. She was going to find her husband and get to the bottom of things.

But first, she needed to get dressed.

## Chapter Twelve

'Here is fine,' Elle said to Neville as they pulled up outside the red-brick buildings of New Scotland Yard.

'I will take a cab home. There's no need to wait,' she said as she disembarked from the car.

The police station was crammed with people of all shapes and sizes thronging just inside the main entrance.

The distinct miasma of unwashed bodies and gin hit Elle square in the nose as she collided with a gaggle of women who were shouting at the hapless police officer who was trying to round them up.

Elle sidestepped the women and walked straight into a wall of muscle that belonged to a very determined-looking man. He growled at her and stepped on the hem of her dress. Elle heard a most worrying sound of ripping fabric as he pushed past her, shoving her to one side. Elle was suddenly most grateful that she had decided not to wear one of her wide-brimmed hats this morning. Instead, she had opted for a dainty trilby sat at a jaunty angle on her head. Defiantly, she shoved the man aside and wrestled her way into the thronging queue of people waiting to be served at the counter.

Behind the counter a harassed constable was doing his best to help those in the queue. Judging by the redness of his nose, which at that moment he was wiping with a grubby handkerchief, the poor man looked like he needed to be

in bed with a basin of soup and a rubber hot water bottle rather than here, fighting the surging tide of humanity before him.

‘Next!’ he shouted hoarsely.

Elle fought her way forward and righted herself against the wooden edge of the counter. ‘Viscountess Greychester. I would like to see the police commissioner please,’ she said in a low voice.

The clerk’s eyebrows shot up as he took proper notice of her. She was dressed in a fine charcoal wool skirt and jacket, which she had paired up with a velvet-trimmed coat. She lifted the little black net veil attached to the hat that covered the top half of her face. ‘It’s extremely urgent, sir,’ she said.

‘Um. Perhaps you should come this way, my lady,’ he stuttered as he opened the fly door to the side of the counter. A few of the people in the queue voiced their objection to the constable abandoning his post but the man ignored them steadfastly.

‘Make way, please,’ he croaked as he ushered Elle into a waiting room that was situated down one of the little corridors that led off from the main entrance. ‘Would your ladyship please wait here while I go to find someone to assist?’ he said. ‘I will send someone along to collect your ladyship in a moment.’

‘Thank you,’ Elle said.

‘We are extraordinarily busy this morning, so please excuse the delay,’ he said apologetically before he scooted off, closing the door behind him.

The waiting room consisted of two wooden chairs and a table. Grateful for the respite from the crowd, Elle breathed in the institutional smell of carbolic and floor wax, willing herself to remain composed.

Minutes ticked by and no one came to collect her, so she waited.

And waited . . .

. . . and waited.

Elle was not a woman blessed with unending reserves of patience, and after what seemed like a respectable amount of time, she opened the door and peered out.

Outside the door, chaos continued unabated. In fact, it looked like the crowd of complainants had grown thicker.

The cold-riddled constable was back behind the counter, trying desperately to direct people to various areas, but without much effect. Some of the people were waving portraits and photographs in the air. Others were shouting at the top of their lungs, demanding action.

To add to the general mayhem, a gaslight troll was actively resisting arrest for fighting in the street. Not known for their intelligence, trolls could be relied on for brute strength and the ability to perform repetitive tasks without growing bored, no matter the weather. Because they were tall and had long arms and knobbly elbows, trolls were especially gifted at lighting lamps. The only problem with them was the fact that they had very short tempers when provoked, they were also extraordinarily strong and judging by the look of the three officers it took to subdue the current troll in question, the charges against him were not unwarranted. The creature was braying at the top of his lungs and thrashing wildly as he was shackled and led away.

Elle frowned. She was not in the habit of waiting at police stations, but even she could see that something very strange was going on here. The question, though, was what?

She sat down on one of the chairs and glanced at her little silver pocket watch. She had been waiting for nearly two hours and midday was approaching. As if in answer, her stomach growled in protest. If the police commissioner was anything like most gentlemen she knew, he would be departing for lunch soon. And if lunch was followed by cigars and brandies, there was no way of knowing when he would be back, if at all.

She needed to do something. Waiting here in this pokey little room was not helpful at all. If there was one thing Patrice had taught her, it was that you had to seize opportunities when they presented themselves. To hesitate is to lose, he always said.

*You must forget about Patrice, the voices interrupted her. To him, you were nothing but a means to an end. You should never have trusted him in the first place.*

‘Oh, not this again,’ Elle hissed. She was tired and irritable and at that very moment, the voices of the Oracle were making her very annoyed.

*Control your emotions, Elle. This sort of anger simply won’t do...*

‘Is that so?’ Elle said through gritted teeth. ‘My husband is missing. I have been sat here for hours and all you can contribute is to criticise me for being irritable.’

There was no answer from the voices.

Elle sighed. ‘That’s just typical. You are never there when I need you, but when I don’t then you’re right there with your constant whispering. I have no privacy. No room to think. Even when I’m with my husband, I feel like you are peering over my shoulder. I wish I could banish you away forever. It’s enough to send anyone mad. Why don’t you do something helpful and tell me where

my husband is?’

*If you ask us, we will go . . . we had wanted to wait to tell you this before, but we were afraid. The power to command us lies within you.*

Elle felt a surge of anger-fuelled energy rise up within her. They were always there, watching and whispering their riddles – never making any sense; judging her every thought and action. In fact, she had lived her life constantly aware of the being watched since they appeared almost half a year ago. She had even heard them whispering on her wedding night.

‘Fine!’ she thundered as she felt her anxiety and frustration turn to rage. ‘If you’re not going to help me find Marsh, then please do me a favour and go away. Leave me in peace. You are no bloody help at all.’

The voices did not answer.

The silence was the last straw. The large bubble of frustration and resentment that had been building up inside her finally burst. Before she could stop herself a stream of words formed in her head. *‘Voices of the Oracle. You are hereby banished from my presence, you meddling old witches.’*

It was the strangest sensation, because it was as if she was speaking to them inside her own head.

*You have ordered us and so we must be away. Are you sure? For when we are commanded to go, we may not return.*

‘I just want you to either make some sense and help me or just leave me alone!’ she wailed.

*But you need us . . .*

‘Do I?’ Elle hissed. ‘All you seem to do is make me look like a ranting madwoman.’

*If that is your wish, we will obey. Farewell, our dearest one. You are forever in our hearts . . .*

Elle didn't answer the voices as they faded from her. Annoying, useless things. They were always too melodramatic anyway. They would be back soon enough. The interfering busybodies would not be able to resist for long. She felt cold whisper over her skin and she shivered.

Elle smoothed her hair and straightened her jacket. It was time to take action. She was not going to allow herself to be treated like a problem that might go away if ignored for long enough.

Carefully, she opened the door and slipped out of the little room into the corridor. To the left was a flight of stairs that led to the upper floors. If she knew anything about official buildings, the commissioner's offices would be upstairs and as far away from the hubbub as practicable.

The inside of New Scotland Yard was a maze of corridors and offices and there was no more time to waste. After a few false turns she eventually found a door with a brass plaque that read COMMISSIONER on it.

She was wearing a pair of black kid leather winter gloves and she rapped on the door sharply with her knuckles.

'Come!' a voice said from within.

Oh good. He *was* in, she thought as she opened the door.

Police Commissioner Willoughby was a man with highly impressive whiskers. They sat on the side of his head like a pair of stately caterpillars, all combed and trimmed in their luxurious and silver glory. He looked slightly surprised as she entered, but good manners won out and he rose from behind

his desk.

‘Madam,’ he said.

Without giving him a chance to enquire, Elle held out her hand to greet him.

‘Lady Greychester. How do you do, sir?’ she said.

‘How do you do, my lady? Please do sit down. And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?’ he said smoothly.

The hair on the back of her neck rose as she noticed his gaze narrow ever so slightly when she sat. She would have to play her part carefully if she was going to get anything out of this man, she realised.

‘It’s my husband. The viscount,’ Elle said.

Willoughby shifted in his chair. He looked like the kind of man who was not entirely at ease when it came to dealing with women. Perhaps that was the best approach. Appeal to his gallant side.

Elle fished out a small lace handkerchief from her reticule. ‘You see, he’s been missing for almost two days now. And I really don’t know whom to turn to,’ she said, keeping the pitch of her voice slightly higher than normal.

‘Well, we are here to assist, my dear... but perhaps it might be better if I called for one of our inspectors to take down a statement.’ He gestured towards the brass speaking apparatus on his desk. It was the latest aetherographic voice transmission set. It was a private telephony system that connected to other handsets in the building via its own spark-powered telephony exchange. It involved a series of high-frequency wires inside ribbed rubber tubing that ran through the building. Elle was not an expert on these things but it seemed like a frightfully expensive system and she wondered how the police might afford such things.



‘My inspectors are much better equipped than I for this kind of situation,’ he said.

Elle grabbed his hand, suddenly grateful that she had not taken off her gloves. ‘No. Please, Commissioner, this matter must be handled with the utmost discretion. You see, my husband and I are often the subject of gossip in the society pages. People might start rumours that my husband has deserted me. And I would not be able to bear the shame of it,’ she said. Somehow Elle managed to muster just enough emotion to make her bottom lip tremble.

‘But of course, my dear. You may rest assured that the matter will be dealt with most discreetly.’ He rose and made a gesture at the door, which looked suspiciously like he was trying to herd her out of his office.

‘And there is also the other matter,’ Elle said, this time more firmly. It was time to call his bluff.

Willoughby’s eyebrows drew together in a frown. ‘And what other matter would that be?’

‘I have the invitation you sent my husband asking him to meet with you at your club on an important and delicate matter. Were one of the last persons outside of our household to see my husband before his disappearance. Should I tell that to one of your officers?’

Willoughby gave a short bark of laughter. ‘My dear lady. Surely you can’t be serious? While it may be so that I met with your husband on Tuesday at my club, I can assure you that he was quite well when we parted company. Hugh Marsh is an old acquaintance of mine and there was nothing untoward in us meeting.’

Elle sat back in her seat as she regarded the commissioner for a few long

moments. ‘Mr Willoughby. Forgive me for being blunt. I know my husband was working for you. I know that after your meeting, he set out on the following evening on what I can only assume was the business you discussed.’ She folded her hands in her lap. ‘What I don’t know is why. I would also like to know what he was sent to do. I can’t start looking for him until I know these two things. So could we please dispense with the niceties so you can tell me what I need to know or do I need to go to the newspapers?’

Her gamble to be direct seemed to pay off because, in response, Willoughby turned very red. ‘Your allegations, madam, are quite preposterous. The viscount was not working for this police department. And even if he were, I would not be at liberty to disclose such information. Especially not to a . . . a lady.’

He stepped out from behind his desk and took Elle by the upper arm, lifting her out of her seat. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, there is a rather urgent crisis developing downstairs.’ He hauled Elle to the door. ‘I regret that we simply do not have the resources at the moment to deal with recalcitrant husbands. I’m sure he will turn up. So I shall bid you good day, madam.’ With that, he shoved her out of his office and closed the door firmly in her face.

Elle gasped with indignation when she heard the lock click as he turned the key. She started banging against the door with her fist. ‘This discussion is not over, Commissioner. I am not leaving until you tell me what I need to know!’

‘My lady?’

Elle spun round. Behind her stood a slightly embarrassed-looking constable. He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Apologies, madam, but could you please come with me.’

She held up her hand. ‘Tell your commanding officer that this matter is far from over. She shall hear from me further.’

‘This way, please.’ The constable gripped her by the elbow and started marching her down the stairs. At the bottom, he turned right instead of left, leading her away from the direction of the entrance.

‘Isn’t the entrance that way?’ she said pointing in the opposite direction.

The constable blushed. ‘I’m sorry, my lady, but you have to go this way.’ They started walking along a long intimidating corridor that was painted white and green. The walls became barer and more uninviting as they went along.

‘Hang on just a moment. Where exactly are you taking me?’ she said.

The constable did not answer but instead he started walking faster, dragging Elle along until they came to a metal door. The constable pulled out a bunch of keys and opened the door.

‘Are you arresting me?’

‘Could you step inside, please,’ the constable said, ignoring her question.

‘But I haven’t done anything,’ she shouted.

‘Charges are inciting civil unrest, threatening a police officer and conspiring to commit acts of violence with the Suffrage movement,’ the constable mumbled. ‘Commissioner said not to charge you with breaking into his office, but I am at liberty to do so if you continue to resist. If you would come along quietly, then things will go better for you.’

‘Suffrage?’ Elle felt the first vestiges of panic rising up within her. ‘What on earth are you talking about? I came here to speak to the commissioner about my missing husband.’

‘I’m sure you did, my lady,’ the constable said without conviction. ‘Every

woman we bring in here has a story like that.’ They had reached another heavy metal door. The constable rang a bell and another guard appeared and opened it for them.

‘Put this one in with the others. No special treatment. Orders from the top,’ he said as he passed Elle through the gate.

‘You can’t do this. I’ve done nothing wrong,’ she said as the new guard took hold of her.

‘Nobody ever does, madam,’ he laughed as he dragged her down the corridor.

‘Wait! This is a mistake.’ Elle tried to struggle as he turned the long key in the lock of what definitely looked like a cell door.

The guard, however, seemed quite adept at keeping hold of reluctant prisoners with only one hand while negotiating locks and keys with the other, and before Elle could protest much more, she was shoved into the gloom of the cell. The door shut behind her with a resonating clang.

‘Let me out of here this very minute, you brute!’ She banged on the door with her fist, but the iron was so thick that her protestations were largely ineffectual. All she heard were the receding sounds of footsteps down the corridor. Undeterred, Elle kept knocking.

‘There’s no point in shouting. You’ll only end up hurting your throat. Best to keep up your strength,’ a soft voice said behind her.

Elle spun round. There were four other women in the cell, each of whom was watching her gravely.

‘Please, do sit down and join us.’ A slender young woman in a grey dress spoke. She gave Elle a small smile and gestured at the other end of the bench.

‘There is space enough for one more.’

Elle abandoned her attempts to gain the guard’s attention and sat down on the bench. ‘Thank you,’ she said. The shock and mortification of being slung into the clink had made her knees a bit wobbly.

‘I like your hat,’ the woman in the grey dress said. She gazed at Elle’s outfit with open admiration.

‘Thank you,’ Elle said. She righted the little net veil that had suffered the brunt of her scuffle with the guard and held out her hand. ‘Eleanor Marsh. Call me Elle. How do you do?’ she said.

‘Christabel Pankhurst. How do you do?’ the woman in grey said. ‘And these are my fellow Suffragettes,’ she said as she introduced the other women.

‘How do you do?’ Elle said politely.

‘And there really is no need to pretend with us.’ Christabel said.

‘I went to school with the Mandeville girls and my father knows your husband. We’ve all seen pictures of you in the paper,’ Elle shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to create false pretences. It’s just so hard to know whom to trust these days,’ Elle said.

The other women all murmured in agreement.

‘Quite right.’ One of the older women spoke. ‘We understand your fears, sister.’

‘And I’m still getting used to using my new title. Nobody seems to understand that I don’t like the fact that it feels as if I blinked out of existence the moment I tied the knot.’

Christabel smiled and took Elle’s hands in her own. ‘*We* understand. All of us object to being treated as if we were nothing more than chattels.’

Elle shivered. Christabel's hands felt like ice. She suddenly realised that the poor girl had on nothing more than a thin linen dress and she was doing her best not to shiver from the cold.

'How long have you been here?' Elle said, trying to take her mind off the awful situation she found herself in yet again.

'A few days. But my mother and sister will be along to collect us soon, I'm sure.' Christabel bit her lip. It was blue with cold.

Elle took off her coat. It was good wool, finely woven in a grey tweed pattern with a fine thread of purple and green running through the fabric.

'Would you mind looking after my coat for me for a little while? I'm dressed for outside and this cell is so close, I feel like I can hardly breathe in this old thing.' She handed the coat to Christabel.

The girl hesitated.

'Please. I insist,' she said. 'And feel free to borrow it if you wish.'

Christabel took the coat and wrapped it round her slim shoulders. She gave Elle a grateful smile. 'This is the first time I've ever been arrested. I shall remember to dress more warmly next time.' She looked at the sleeve. 'These colours are lovely.'

'Well, then ladies, I suppose I had better do my best to settle in. There is no way of telling how long I might be here.' Elle fished around inside her reticule and pulled out a tin of her favourite lemon-flavoured boiled sweets. She always carried a small tin with her. Preparedness was the mark of a good pilot. She opened the tin and handed them round. 'Nothing like a lemon drop to keep one's spirits up.'

'We are supposed to be refusing all food. On principle,' said one of the

women. She stared at the tin of sweets longingly.

‘Oh, don’t be silly. Lemon drops are not food. And besides, no one will ever know.’ Elle gave her a conspiratorial smile. The Suffragettes gratefully accepted her offer and soon all the women except Christabel were chatting and licking the white powder from the lemon drops off their fingers.

After what seemed like hours, there was suddenly a loud clang and the crunch of metal on metal as the door opened. Elle grabbed the sweets and shoved them into the pocket of Christabel’s apron just as the heavy door swung open.

‘Someone’s come to collect you, Lady Greychester. Time to go,’ the guard said.

‘Well, ladies, it has been delightful to meet you all. I wish you all the best in your endeavours.’

As Elle stood to go, Christabel reached into the other pocket of her apron and pulled out a flyer. ‘Do join us. Deeds, not words,’ she whispered as she pressed the pamphlet into Elle’s hands. ‘And if you ever need anything, just ask.’

Elle inclined her head. ‘Take care of yourselves. Stay strong.’

Christabel gave a brief, brave nod as the guard escorted Elle from the cell.

‘Best stay away from that one, my lady. She may look all innocent, but she is nothing but trouble,’ he said as they walked along the corridor.

Elle refrained from giving the officer an acidic retort. She’d spent quite enough time on the wrong side of the law today and insulting the police officer that held the keys to one’s freedom was not wise.

Outside, Neville was waiting beside the car. ‘Thank goodness you are safe,

my lady.’ He looked utterly relieved to see her. ‘When you didn’t come home for lunch, I came back. Mrs Hinges made me. They told me you had been arrested. I then went home and we had to tell the professor. He called your uncle, Lord Geoffrey Chance, who managed to sort things out. Now I’m back.’

Elle groaned and slumped her shoulders. Calling Uncle Geoffrey was never a good idea and she could just imagine what he was going to say the next time he saw her.

‘I didn’t know what else to do.’ Neville shrugged apologetically.

Outside, it was dark - the cold fog was starting to curl through the streets.

‘Not to worry, Neville. You did the right thing. Let’s go home, shall we?’

Elle shivered and rubbed her arms to warm herself, suddenly missing her lovely warm coat.

‘Right away, my lady.’ Neville touched the brim of his hat and opened the door for her.

With a sigh of gratitude she sat back against the leather seats of the car. The afternoon behind bars had left her feeling tired, hungry and chilled to the bone. She did not want to think how wretched things were for the poor Suffragettes who were still in the cells. Rumour had it that when they refused to eat, the guards force-fed them cold semolina with a funnel and a rubber tube. She shuddered at the thought. She also resolved that she would make enquiries about joining the movement as soon as she found Marsh and all the misunderstandings were cleared.



## Chapter Thirteen

Clothilde had not been in her chambers for ten minutes when Emilian knocked on the door.

‘What is it?’ she said without bothering to conceal her irritation.

‘We have kept the big fish separate for you,’ he said.

‘Oh yes, I almost forgot. The surprise. Another big fish,’ she said somewhat sarcastically.

‘He is powerful, this one. He wouldn’t submit like the others. Has magic in him, my sister says.’

Clothilde turned to Emilian in surprise. ‘Magic, you say?’ She pursed her lips.

‘That’s what we think. But go and see for yourself. He’s downstairs, in the jar room.’

‘Please wait. I won’t be a moment,’ she said as she stepped behind the painted screen that stood in the corner of the room. Disregarding the risks, she closed her eyes and slowly reached out through the barrier. Gently, she eased open another pocket of energy and allowed herself to drink from it, indulging in the sheer luxury of the power as it washed through her. The effect was almost immediate and she instantly felt stronger. She had to admit that the intensity of the energy in London was far stronger than anything she had ever experienced. Once this task was over, she was considering settling here permanently.

Emilian who was waiting for her in the hall.

‘Let’s go and have a look at your new fish, shall we?’ she said. ‘Might as well check on the new batch of hearts while we are there.’

Her footsteps made almost no sound as she descended the stone stairs that led to her laboratory.

In the room at the bottom of the stairs, Clothilde stopped and stared. Before her was a man chained to a chair that was too small for him. His dark hair was a little long in the front and flopped down over his forehead. But it was his eyes that held her transfixed. They were alive with a passion and intelligence. He glared at her with a rage so smouldering that she almost felt a frisson of heat was over her.

‘Leave us, she said to Emilian.

Clothilde swallowed as she felt a shiver of anticipation run through her. Emilian’s pathetic little sister had, for once in her life, been right. This was no ordinary man.

‘Let me go,’ he growled as soon Emilian was gone.

She smiled at him. ‘He speaks.’ She leaned forward and brushed his hair out of his eyes. He jerked away from her touch.

‘Letting you go wouldn’t be any fun at all, would it?’

‘Who are you?’ he croaked. His broad shoulders flexed as he strained against his bonds and Clothilde felt her mouth go dry at the sight of all that muscle and pent-up anger.

He was tall, too. She could tell from the way his legs folded underneath the chair. Had she finally found the one she had been looking for all her life?

‘Speak, I say!’ he barked.

Clothilde gave a little start but managed composed herself. She was the one who was in charge here, after all.

He was definitely dangerous. She could smell very old magic on him. It was faint and intermingled with the smell of sweat and sandalwood, but it was undeniable.

She sashayed over to the man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Defiantly he tried shake her off.

‘Be calm,’ she murmured, allowing a few moments for her manipulative powers to wash over him.

He resisted and shoved her power back at her with a jolt. ‘I said unhand me, witch! Right now. Before I become really angry.’

She let go of him. He really *was* strong and there must be knowledge of how to use that power within him too. Apart from the travelling folk, she had never encountered anyone who could resist her influence like this.

She resumed playing with his hair, gently probing his mind for information with her touch.

He pulled his head away. ‘Don’t touch me, Shadow-whore,’ he spat.

The insult stung and she lifted her hand away. He was making her angry. Angry and excited. She felt the darkness starting to swirl inside her. ‘I would be careful about how you address me,’ she murmured.

The man met her gaze. ‘And if I were you, I would start running, because once I am out of these shackles, you will regret ever having crossed paths with me!’ He yanked against the wrist manacles that bound him and the wood of the chair made an ominous cracking sound. ‘This breach from the Shadow Realm will not go unpunished. Mark my words.’

Could it be-?

‘You’re a warlock...’ she said with growing amazement.

He glared at her but did not answer.

Clothilde felt a slight frisson of fear. This man would surely overpower her. Images of them wrapped in an embrace flooded through her mind, both fearful and thrilling at the same time. Could she afford to take such a chance to see what he would do? She bit her lip in a moment of indecision.

‘Release me,’ he growled.

Clothilde hesitated. This fish was a bit bigger than she had anticipated. There was the wrath of the Council to consider. Did she need to tell the Consortium about this one?

No, she decided.

He could be hers forever. Once he submitted to her will.

Almost in answer to her thoughts, the man roared and yanked at the chains again. One of the spokes of the chair gave way and shattered.

The violence of his struggle galvanised her into action. Yes, he would be hers. She would keep him all to herself. He would be her little secret.

Another chair spoke broke as the man struggled and Clothilde watched on, her mind whirling with possibilities. He needed taming. Allowing him free rein while her plans were still forming would not do. But later might be a different matter. Yes, later, when all she had set out to do had been achieved, this man would rule by her side. That was certainly why he had been sent to her like this.

Quickly she stepped up to him and placed her hands on the sides of his

temples. She was suddenly grateful for the little bit of extra power she had taken before coming down here.

‘Now hold still and this will all go better for the both of us,’ she said. She summoned all she had within her and plunged her energy into his head. The impact of their spirit-selves colliding was like running face first into a rock wall. She gasped and reeled but took a breath and plunged back into his psyche again.

He roared and she felt him straining against her. Another chair spindle cracked and they both fell to the ground.

Then quite suddenly, she broke through his defences. And in an instant, they were both swirling inside his mind, but this was no gentle, graceful dance. Everywhere she looked, he slammed against her, blocking her view.

He was protecting something, hiding it from her, and it was taking all his strength to do it, she realised with a growing sense of excitement.

She peered past his swirling barriers, deeper and deeper into the dark recesses of his mind. She had never encountered a man whose psyche was so layered. It was utterly breathtaking.

So he really *was* a Warlock, she noted, with equal measures of apprehension and excitement, but there was something odd about him. She probed further and gasped with surprise. His power seemed to be bound and tightly strapped down by a very strong spell.

Clothilde gasped as she watched him struggle to release his power from the spell. At the same time he was fighting her with every fibre of his being, straining with raw effort of will against her.

It’s was effort to hold him with his power bound. What would happen if he

freed himself? And why would one so powerful seek to do this to himself? It was a mystery she had no time to unravel.

The remainder of the chair cracked again and he rolled over, partly covering her with his body. She wasn't going to hold him for much longer. But she wanted him. The thought of him belonging to her was utterly irresistible.

She wanted to lose herself inside his mind where he would reveal all his secrets to her, but she daren't wait any longer.

She let go of him and returned to her physical consciousness to gather herself. Outside, thunder rumbled and bolts of lightning coursed through the building.

Clothilde reached up for the lightning, which had been steadily building up in the clouds high above them. She closed her eyes and focused on the warlock.

There was an almighty flash of purple light. She felt the Warlock's mind fill with the darkness she sent. Black and viscous, like hot tar, it slid through him, obliterating all thoughts and memories before it. And then, just before everything inside his mind went dark, Clothilde thought she caught a glimpse of an image of a woman, but it was gone before she had time to take it in.

His body went limp; all that had made up this man was extinguished.

Gently she rolled him on to his back. His handsome face was pale but relaxed, as if he were asleep. The only detectable sign of life was the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

'Hush now, my dearest. It will all soon be better,' she murmured against his cheek.

'Emilian!' she called.

He was in the room within moments, as if he had been waiting just outside the door.

‘Help me get him on to that table,’ she said.

Emilian helped her lift the unconscious man on to her operating table.

‘Make sure he is strapped in properly,’ she ordered. She was not going to take any chances. Not after what she had just seen.

‘Leave us now,’ she said to Emilian as soon as the warlock was securely strapped to the table. ‘I don’t want to be disturbed. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, mistress.’ Emilian bowed and closed the door after him as he left.

Clothilde found herself humming softly as she started unbuttoning the man’s collar and shirt. As she had hoped, the wall of chest that was revealed under the layers of waistcoat and shirt was broad and strong. Gently she ran her fingers over the fine sprinkling of chest hair that adorned it. Yes, it was a fine chest that would hold its new heart beautifully.

She allowed herself one more lingering look at the beautiful angles of his face before setting to work.

‘You were made for me, dear one,’ she murmured. ‘And yet, I do not know your name.’ The man did not – could not – answer. ‘Once this is all over we can both choose new names for ourselves. Just you wait and see.’

She walked up to one of the cabinets and unlocked it. Inside was the polished case that the Clockmaker had given her. She opened the case and carefully selected one of the clockwork hearts nestling within the purple velvet.

Back at the table, Clothilde carefully lined up her surgical instruments in a row on the table next to her. For once, this was going to be a labour of love and she wanted to take her time. She would make sure that all the incisions were

perfect.

‘Yes, you will be beautiful afterwards. Not like the others,’ she murmured.

Slowly the scalpel slid through skin and muscle, separating bone and cartilage. And as she worked she started humming to herself. It was a lonely, sinister tune from her childhood.

‘Just think of all the beautiful dark magic you and I will make together one day, my love,’ she whispered. ‘All we need to do is free you. And once you are free, we will be together forever,’ she said as she raised her bloodied hands in order to complete the next step. ‘I will be the only one who holds the key to your heart.’

And all the while, the thunder and lightning roiled outside.



## Chapter Fourteen

Elle sipped the nutmeg-laced milk Mrs Hinges had brought her as she stared into the fire. Outside, the rain sifted down in soft relentless sheets into the inky blackness. Tonight's storm was fiercer than usual. The skyline of the city was illuminated each time the lightning flashed across the sky.

She shivered as the draft from one of the casements whispered against her skin. There was something ill in the air tonight. It was something dark and ominous. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but it was there all right.

'Is anything the matter, my dear?' the professor said. They were in the small drawing room.

'You mean apart from the fact that my husband is missing and that I was arrested today?' Elle said with a little more force than was necessary.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' the professor said.

'Sorry, Papa. It's been a fraught day. I did not mean to be short with you.'

'Never you mind, my dear. But do tell me what is on your mind.'

Sometimes it helps to discuss a matter. You know, two minds are more likely to find a solution than one.'

'Police Commissioner Willoughby is definitely hiding something,' Elle said. 'And there is nothing as dangerous as a powerful man with a secret.'

'You are not wrong on that count. But was it really necessary to antagonise him enough to arrest you?' the professor said gently.

‘That’s exactly my point, Papa. I did nothing to provoke him. Locking me up was nothing more than a warning. He wants me to understand that he won’t stand for me interfering in his business.’

The professor sighed and puffed on his pipe. ‘Your uncle was not amused.’

‘Well, I am not amused by Uncle Geoffrey either. He’s so . . . so judgemental,’ Elle said. ‘And if the truth be told, I don’t even really care about the commissioner’s business. The only thing I am interested in is finding Marsh.’

‘It’s possible that Willoughby may really know nothing,’ the professor said.

‘I very much doubt that.’ She set her cup down on the mantelpiece. ‘I have some business to attend to. Please excuse me, Papa.’ She kissed her father’s cheek.

‘Where on earth are you going at this time of night?’ the professor said with a look of alarm.

Elle smiled. ‘I shan’t leave the house, I promise.’

‘That is exactly what I was afraid you might say.’

‘I have to look for him. I cannot just sit here doing nothing,’ she said.

The professor sighed. ‘Very well. Go and do what you must. Just remember that we are all here to help. Don’t shut us out.’

‘I won’t, Papa. I promise,’ Elle said, pausing at the drawing-room door.

‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight,’ the professor said.

Upstairs, Elle opened up the secret room and set about lighting the candles in the chandeliers and sconces. Soon her sanctum was glowing in a soft warm light. She picked a velvet cushion off one of the benches and placed it inside

the mosaic circle. No one said anything about discomfort being a requirement for being an oracle and the pillow would help against the chill of the stone floor.

She stepped out of her kid leather slippers and into the circle.

The voices were silent. The voices of Oracles past were clearly not happy with her. ‘Well, you are simply going to have to join the queue of people who are displeased with me. Right behind my uncle Geoffrey,’ she said.

There was no answer.

She took a deep breath and focused herself as she settled down on the cushion. She concentrated for a moment until she found the barrier that divided Shadow and Light. Her breathing slowed and she felt the first stirrings of her Shadow-self separating from her physical body. She frowned and concentrated on maintaining the connection, but she was apprehensive, skittish even. She had never done this completely on her own before. Marsh had always been just outside the door, keeping guard over her while she was vulnerable. He always seemed to be there for her. Wasn’t it strange that she had never noticed that about him?

The last thought fled from her mind as she was met by a sudden rush of aether. Quicker than a thought, she was propelled through the barrier and into the Realm of Shadow.

Around her was only darkness. She concentrated on imagining the place she wanted to visit and she felt herself shift with alarming speed until she landed with a thump on the ground.

The last time she was here, she had not been alone.

On their wedding night, once they were alone in the dark, Marsh had pulled

her into his arms and together they had slipped into the Shadow. A golden meadow had risen up around them almost instantaneously.

‘I’ve been wanting to come back here for the longest time,’ he said to her.

She felt her heartbeat accelerate. ‘So have I,’ she whispered.

‘And this time, there is no need for restraint. What do you say, Mrs Marsh?’

She gave him a wicked smile. ‘I should say that I agree.’ The last time they had met in this place, they had not been married. And there were many things that held them apart. This time things were very different.

‘I have something for you.’ Marsh raised his hand.

Elle looked up at him in surprise. On his palm lay a wedding band. ‘I thought you said that we were to wear no wedding bands,’ she said.

‘I may have told a small lie there. I know it’s not quite the fashion for men to wear wedding rings, but I want the whole world to know that we belong together, so I have one too.’ He opened his other hand and there, on his outstretched palm was a second larger ring, almost identical to the first.

Both rings appeared to be made from a white metal that shone brighter than silver. When she looked more closely, she saw that his ring was actually made up of many fine strands, intricately woven together to form a band. The smaller ring had tiny sparkly stones threaded on to the metal.

‘It’s beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it,’ she said.

‘I asked for one of the wyrd-weavers to give me a strand of silk. Yours has flowers from this glade woven into it. I thought they would be pretty.’

‘Wyrd-weavers?’ she said.

Marsh laughed ‘The three sisters. Three women; half maiden, half spider.

One weaves the future, one the present and one the past. Together they weave

and spin the intricate web that determines the fate of each and every living thing. Adele helped me find a goldsmith who would forge these for us. You would be amazed if you knew some of the acquaintances that fairy has.'

'Nothing about Adele would surprise me,' Elle said.

'These rings are forged from the same strand of silk. Even though they are two circles, they are forever joined as one. Just as our fates are. Look.' He held up the two rings and Elle saw the fine strand shimmering between them.

'When worn with intent, the wearers are joined together and nothing, save their decision to be severed, can ever break that bond.' His expression grew serious. 'I never want to lose you,' he said.

She smiled up at him. 'I never want to lose you either.'

'This is to show you that no matter where we are in the world, we will always be able to find one another. What do you say?'

Elle lifted the ring off his waiting palm and slipped it on to the ring finger of her left hand. As it slipped over her knuckle, she felt the faint tremor of Shadow magic move through her as the ring fastened itself to her. 'Together forever,' she whispered. 'I love you.'

Marsh slipped the bigger ring on to his finger and as he did so, Elle felt the strange sensation of something locking into place.

'The bond between us is now sealed. And it is more permanent than any promises that may have been made in the Realm of Light.'

Elle simply nodded, for she was too caught up in the moment for words.

'Forever,' he whispered as he lifted her hand and kissed it.

'For as long as we both exist,' she answered, finally finding her voice. Then

she lifted her mouth to kiss him...

Elle's entire body shook from the sudden pain she felt at the memory of that night. It ripped through her with a physical force that dragged her back to the here and now.

She sat up and blinked. The candles had burned out and she was lying on the floor with her arms around the velvet pillow.

She sighed and rubbed her face. So much for her search efforts. Somehow she had managed to direct her powers into the past rather than into the future. This was certainly something new. New, but not very helpful, mind.

Somewhere deep inside the house, she heard the clock chime. She counted the sounds silently until it reached seven. Was it really seven o'clock in the morning? She felt as if she had closed her eyes only a few moments before.

Elle stood up and slipped out of the secret chamber, taking care to close the panel behind her. She was cold and her muscles ached from lying on the cold floor.

Outside, the darkness had made space for the first murky light of dawn. This morning the swirling fog was so thick that she could hardly see the street down below.

But through the shadows, she spotted a funeral carriage with two perfectly matched black stallions pulled up outside the house. Elle squinted through the murk. The doors of the carriage bore the red insignia of two dragons facing one another with a sword between them.

Elle let out a little exclamation of delight and ran to her dressing room to find some clothes.

Thanks be to the wonders of speedy modern travel. The Baroness Loisa Belododia had arrived in London.

A commotion had already erupted outside the drawing room by the time Elle reached the bottom of the stairs.

‘Madam, I must insist that you go to your rest now,’ she heard Caruthers say.

‘What nonsense! Do you see any sunlight? Yes? No? Because all I see is fog and rain in this place. Now get out of my way before I lose my temper and decide to have you for my lunch,’ a woman said in an accent that was a tad heavy on the Rs.

Elle opened the doors to find Loisa Belododia standing in the middle of the big drawing room, hands on her hips. She was dressed entirely in the most exquisite black crêpe de chine. The hem and sleeves of her dress were artfully ragged with wisps of delicate handmade lace. The ensemble was completed by a long black veil of the sheerest chiffon that covered her from head to toe.

‘Loisa!’ Elle rushed up to her and hugged her friend. ‘You came! But at this time of day? How on earth did you get here so fast?’

Loisa waved a dismissive hand that made her veil ripple. ‘Yes, it is disgustingly late, but here I am. I was *en route* to Paris to do a bit of shopping when they telegraphed your message to me on board, so I took the first berth to London that I could find. It was third class too.’ She shuddered. ‘See, these are the things I do for my friends.’ The baroness pressed her shrouded ruby lips against Elle’s cheeks, once on each side. Then she looked over her shoulder at the maid who was hovering by the windows. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, girl. Close those drapes. Do you want me to turn to ash? If I do, you are the one

who will have to sweep this beautiful Aubusson.’ She tapped the rug with her fine silk slipper.

Poor Edie quailed. Elle let go of Loisa and set about orchestrating the closing of the heavy drawing-room drapes to seal out the faint light of the drizzly morning outside.

She lit the spark lamps just as Loisa raised her veil. The Nightwalker looked tired and there were smudges under her beautiful dark eyes, but she was smiling.

‘So what is so urgent that you bid me to come to London at this most wretched time of year? That infernal passenger airship nearly went down over the channel with the high winds.’ Loisa took off her gloves and hat and handed them to Edie who curtsied and left the room as fast as she could. Loisa’s eyes narrowed a fraction as she took in her friend. ‘Darling, you look pale. Have you been sleeping properly? And where is Hugh?’

‘It was so good of you to come,’ Elle said. ‘I didn’t know who else to turn to.’ Elle sat down on the divan before the fire. ‘Let me ring for refreshments. There is much I need to tell you and most of it is not good news.’

Loisa settled herself in the chair opposite Elle and folded her perfect white hands in her lap. ‘I’m listening,’ she said.

Elle took a deep breath and proceeded to tell Loisa everything that had happened, pausing only to pour the tea, which had arrived shortly after she had rung the bell pull.

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ Loisa muttered. ‘This is dark sorcery indeed.’

‘He has now been missing for three days and so far I have not been able to find even the slightest clue as to where he might be,’ Elle said.



‘Then we have no time to lose. Where shall we start?’ Loisa looked around the room as if for inspiration.

‘Dearest Loisa. You must be exhausted. Perhaps you should get some rest. I will have something sent up to you for your dinner. Your coffin should be upstairs now, so perhaps you should go to ground.’ Elle put her hand on her friend’s arm and smiled. ‘Mrs Hinges has Caruthers and Neville out looking by day. I will call you if there is any news. As soon as the sun sets tonight our search can begin in earnest.’

Loisa pressed her hand to her mouth and stifled a yawn. ‘Perhaps you are right. But what are you going to do all day while I rest?’

Elle smiled at her. ‘I think I have an idea. I’ll tell you whether it worked when you rise.’

## Chapter Fifteen

Back in her room, Elle got out of her morning dress and slipped into a set of comfortable silk robes. She had given instructions to Mrs Hinges that for the duration of the baroness's stay they would all switch to nocturnal hours. There were a few startled looks, but the promise of double wages to make up for the inconvenience seemed to placate the staff who were by now accustomed to the odd goings-on that pervaded Greychester House.

This was just as well, for Elle did not want to be disturbed. She pulled the brass lever and stepped back inside her secret chamber.

This time, she paused only to light the one fresh candle she had brought with her from downstairs. Last night's foray into the Shadow Realm had not been particularly successful, but now she was ready to try again.

She closed her eyes and stepped into the circle.

Almost immediately, she felt the power caught in the barrier surge up and envelop her. She released her hold of it and within seconds she was crossing the divide with a speed and force she had never experienced before.

Light and shadow swirled around her until she landed on the ground. She was back in the golden field, but the place had lost all its vibrancy.

The tiny jewelled flowers had dried and withered until they were completely drained of colour and the light around her had turned from gold to bronze like the sepia of an over-exposed photograph. She did not pause to marvel at the changes in the place though, for time moved differently here and she could not

waste a moment of it.

Elle twisted her wedding band round her finger and composed herself. 'Well, Hugh, let's see if these rings really work.' The world of Shadow swirled around her, brushing up against her skin. Ever so gently, she allowed her energy to reach out and find the fine thread that ran from her hand. There, under her fingers, fine as silk, the thread stretched out far off into the darkness.

Carefully, she lifted the thread and followed it, gently winding it around her fingers as she walked. The thread seemed to disappear into her own ring the moment it touched her hand and so she walked on. It was like reeling in a fish, she thought. The real question was who was the fish and who the fisherman.

She walked for what seemed like hours. The path wound through the strange and undulating landscape. Everything was completely silent, except for the sounds of her footsteps crunching on the dry ground underfoot.

As she walked, the brown sepia tones around her grew darker and the world changed to monochrome. Black-limbed trees grew thicker and thicker, their branches clawing at the sky, until she found herself in the middle of a dark forest.

Every now and then, she caught the flicker of eyes glinting through the thick mist that shrouded the trees. She was not alone.

The path through the forest twisted and wound itself this way and that. Elle tripped over tree roots and slid on slimy rotting leaves but she kept moving. Her only guide was the fine silver thread that stretched out before her.

After what seemed like days of walking, Elle stopped and rested against one of the trees. She was exhausted and close to despair. The fine strand stretched out before her, with no end in sight.

She studied the rotting stump under her foot. It looked exactly like the rotting stump she had tripped over a while before, but there was no way of telling whether this was the same stump or not. She was normally an excellent navigator, but in the Shadow all sense of direction was different.

The little creatures in the trees chattered and hissed, now closer than before. One dropped down from one of the branches. It was the size of either a very large, hairless rat or a small dog, depending on which way you looked at it. Elle flinched at the sight of its leathery skin and disconcertingly monkey-like features. It hissed and chattered its razor-sharp teeth. Her despair was making them bold. They could smell her fear.

She lifted the silver thread and tugged it gently. It yielded and came towards her without any resistance. Was Marsh even on the other side of it? She sighed and rubbed her eyes.

‘Lovely evening for a walk, don’t you think?’ Someone spoke from the darkness to the left of her.

Elle felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise up. ‘Who’s there? Show yourself,’ she demanded.

She heard a soft rustle and an old man in a cloak stepped out of the mists.

‘Who are you? What is your name?’ she said.

‘Those are bold questions to ask of a stranger,’ he said. Carefully he opened his cloak to reveal the rather old-fashioned lantern he was carrying. The golden light that flickered behind the glass was warmly mesmerising in this miserable place.

‘Doesn’t hurt to know who one is dealing with,’ Elle said, dragging her gaze away from the light.

The old man nodded slowly. ‘Well, I suppose it doesn’t. The name is Old Jack. How do you do?’

He was short in stature with a shaggy beard. The dark cloak that hid the lantern fell all the way down to his feet. And when he moved, his shadow rippled in the same way light refracted like a fine film of engine oil on water. In the Realm of Light, shadows were dark. Here, in the Shadow, it was the opposite.

Jack stood perfectly still as if he was waiting for her to say something.

‘Eleanor,’ she said.

He laughed. ‘Well, now that we have both lied to one another, I think the game may begin, girl-with-no-shadow.’ He pointed at the ground to where her own shadow should lie.

‘There is no game and I shall be on my way, if you don’t mind,’ Elle said.

He laughed and shook his head. ‘My dear girl, anyone can tell that you are completely and hopelessly lost. Are you not?’

‘That sir, is none of your concern,’ she said.

He smiled at her and his face crinkled into a mosaic of wrinkles and bad, yellowing teeth. ‘Oh, I don’t think that is entirely correct. You see, these are my woods and so anyone found walking in them would be my business.’

‘I am merely passing through here. And I am not lost. I know exactly where I am going.’ She moved her hand behind her back so he would not see the strand.

But it was too late. ‘A strand of wyrd silk,’ he mused. ‘I haven’t seen one of those in many years.’ Old Jack looked down at her hand. ‘The dip-dibs told me someone was chasing a strand of light through here. But one should never

listen to a dip-dib. They are all terrible liars. Will do anything to sink their little teeth into your flesh. Only fresh blood will slake their thirst.'

'Thank you for the advice,' Elle said.

'Are you sure of the love of the person who is on the other side of that?'

'Of course I am,' Elle said.

'And are you sure that you feel the same?'

'Absolutely.'

'Hmm. I hope for your sake that this is true, because unless your intentions are equally matched, the magic that binds you will not draw you together.'

Old Jack lifted his lantern so the light could follow the fine white thread that disappeared off into the darkness of the trees before them. 'I don't mean to be rude, but I have to say that your little thread looks a bit slack to me. I wouldn't rely on this love if I were you, my dear.'

Elle stood up and straightened her robes. 'If you would excuse me, I shall be on my way. Thank you for allowing me the little rest here.'

Old Jack lifted his lantern and peered at her in the yellow light. 'You shouldn't be so hasty. I think you and I have much more to discuss before you go.' He smiled at her in a most sinister manner.

Elle took a step away from him. 'I really am in a frightful hurry, she said.

'Oh, it's not that simple, my dear. As I said before, these are my woods and you are trespassing.

Elle sighed. 'All right then. Let's get down to brass tacks. What is it going to take for you to let me on my way?'

Jack scratched his shaggy beard. 'You do know that if I order it so, you will wander round and round in circles here until you collapse, wyrd silk or not and

these woods are full of creatures who hunger for the flesh of the freshly dead.

Don't you, little dip-dibs?'

The air filled with the sound of hissing and chattering in answer to Jack's question.

Elle sighed. 'Name your price.'

Old Jack's smile broadened. 'Well, seeing as I am in a good mood, I will make it worth your while. I will let you pass unhindered, but in return, you must allow me a little holiday on the Light side. It's been such a long time since I've been able to visit.'

'I can't do that...and even if I could, you know the rules,' Elle said.

'Yes, I must promise to do no harm. But what does that really mean? And how can you expect to do no harm when you are a creature whose very existence depends on it?'

Elle shrugged. This discussion was far too philosophical and Shadow creatures were notoriously illogical when it came to such things.

'How about this as a proposal?' she said. 'Let me out of these woods and show me the way to the other end of this thread and I will agree to meet with you at another time to discuss a visit to the Light.'

'And you will dispense with the oath?' Jack said.

'I can't promise that I will be able to find a way around the oath you will need to take in order to cross the barrier, but I can promise to see what I can do.'

'A promise and a fair offer...' Jack mused. 'The lady promises things that do not necessarily lie within her gift... or perhaps they are but she's not saying... isn't that a thing, little ones?' He tutted and muttered and the

creatures around them hissed and chattered.

‘What you propose is not enough,’ he said once the noise died down. ‘Your end of the scales is still too light.’

‘It is all I have to offer at this stage,’ Elle said.

Jack shrugged. ‘Making sure that people get lost is so much in my nature, I am not sure I will be able to overcome it for your sake either.’

‘What else do you want then?’ Elle said.

‘Hmm, now there is a question I am not often asked,’ Old Jack said. ‘A holiday to the Light side where I can do what I will, unfettered by rules and oaths.’

‘Then we find ourselves at an impasse,’ Elle said.

Jack’s eyes narrowed. ‘Whatever shall we do then, little butterfly?’

Elle shrugged. ‘The ball is in your court. If you feed me to the dip-dibs then get nothing.’

Jack muttered and tutted to himself for a few long minutes. Then his eyes lit up. ‘I would like a favour,’ he said. ‘A favour where I can ask for anything and which I can call upon at any time.’

Elle considered his words. It was definitely a trick, but right now she was in no position to bargain. In her blind haste to find Marsh, she had foolishly wandered into the clutches of a Shadow creature and he could keep her here as long as it took to get what he wanted.

‘What’s it going to be, little butterfly?’ Jack said as if he had read her thoughts.

‘Very well, I agree that I shall owe you a favour,’ Elle said.

She could deal with this Jack later. And who knows, Shadow creatures had



such a distorted view of time, that he might only decide to call up the favour a hundred years from now, when she was long dead. Striking bargains with Shadow creatures in the middle of dark woods was not ideal, but she did not have many alternatives right now.

Old Jack's smile grew wider and he held out a gnarled hand. 'Then let us shake hands and be friends.'

Elle took the old man's hand into hers and shook it calmly. She felt a little tickle of magic in her palm that told her that the bargain had been sealed. She let go of Jack's hand as fast as she could.

'Come along, then.' He lifted his lantern and gestured towards the darkness. 'It's not far.'

They walked along through the forest in silence. The light from the lantern cast an eerie yellow glow on the path before them. Her travelling companion was , not tripping over things in the dark was certainly an improvement on before. As they walked, the trees grew thinner and shafts of light poured down to the ground.

Jack stopped walking and held up his lantern. 'This is the end of my domain,' he said. 'Walk on and be on your way. We shall see each other soon to discuss our bargain.'

'Goodbye Jack, and thank you for your help,' Elle said, but he had already disappeared.

She turned to survey the landscape. Before her lay a bleak open plain where the sky and the ground were both the colour of bleached bone. The only other thing inhabiting this place was a tiding of very large and scruffy-looking magpies. They sat, huddled in the white branches of a dead tree. The sun and

the shadow magic reflected off their mother of pearl black feathers, interspersed with the white. The magpies gazed at her with their unblinking, beady eyes.

‘Dark! Dark!’ One of the birds let out a rasping squawk that echoed across the emptiness. The sound made Elle jump. She looked down at her hand. The silver filament she hoped would lead her to Marsh seems to have retracted despite the fact that she had not followed while Jack had let the way. It now lay in a long straight line that stretched across the bleak landscape ahead of her.

Apart from the magpies, there was nothing but the whistle of lonely wind. ‘Better get a move on,’ she said to herself as she started walking. She walked for a while, through the nothing. Her only companion was the thin wind. The tree with the magpies grew larger and closer. Softly at first, the wind brought a sound. Elle strained to hear... it was a strange ticking sound. Like a hollow clock.

Suddenly, the magpies startled. They rose up, as one, from the tree in a mass of black and white feathers, squawking wildly as they flew.

The ticking grew louder and louder, a macabre metronome that echoed across the landscape. Eventually it grew so loud that it felt as if the noise was resonating in her very bones. Elle looked around to find the source of the sound, but around her was nothing but bleakness. Jack’s wood was far away now.

The ticking was an unwelcome reminder of the awful dreams she had been having of late.

Elle swallowed down her fear and walked on, hoping desperately that she would find Marsh.

They appeared on the horizon first. Figures no more than smudges of dark and light. Elle squinted in the bright, eerie light but it was almost impossible to make out anything more.

In the blink of an eye, they had crossed the dry shimmering distance. They stood very still, in a huddle, not looking at anything. And all the while, the sound of ticking rose up from their midst. It was a terrible sound of mechanical unison. Un-human. Un-dead.

With a growing sense of horror, Elle realised that her fine silver thread led straight into the middle of these creatures.

She walked up as close to the huddle of blank bodies as she dared. They did not move or acknowledge her in any way. Slowly she reached up to touch what looked like the outline of a shoulder, but her fingers slipped right through the image. These creatures were nothing but incandescent mirages. They were nothing.

How strange, she thought. Did that mean that these were not creatures of Shadow? Was their presence here simply an imprint of what was happening on the other side of the barrier?

This was so far beyond the reaches of her knowledge of the Shadow, that she had no idea.

Gathering up all of her courage, Elle pulled at the filament between her fingers. The flock of undead wavered like sea grass under water. Some of them turned and looked at her, but their faces were blank. It was as if the essence of whoever these people had once been was stripped from them, leaving only an empty husk behind.

She felt resistance give between her fingers and pulled again, this time with

more force. The bodies moved again, and, from their midst, one of the creatures stumbled. Its left arm was extended as if it had been lassoed.

Elle let out a small cry of despair.

‘Hugh!’ she cried.

There was no mistaking the height and dimensions of the body she knew so well. She had found her husband... or at least she had found what was left of him.

The figure tilted its head to one side and reached out to her.

Elle ran to him. She wanted to wrap him in her arms and take him home, but she her arms slipped straight through him. She tried again but there was nothing. He wasn’t really here. It was just a trick of the light. The infinite barrier of Shadow and Light that lay between here and home separated them. With a growing sense of despair, Elle realised that there was nothing she could do but stare at him.

In the distance the magpies sounded the alarm. She saw them circle round and round as the sky overhead darkened.

Thunder rumbled and, in the distance, bright flashes of lightning split the sky.

‘Run! Run!’ the magpies squawked as they flew past.

Elle spun round. The sky had turned gunmetal grey. Angry clouds boiled and multiplied with sinister speed. Something was coming. She felt the weight of it on her chest, threatening to push the air from her lungs.

Elle started shivering. With a growing sense of apprehension she realised that she was unarmed and vulnerable in this strange place. Whatever was coming was powerful. Powerful and dangerous. She could sense it coming.

The bank of cloud was almost here.

Elle looked about. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Jack's wood was too far away. She would never reach it in time.

Wishing herself home in an instant was possible, but also a bad idea. The last thing she wanted was for the thing that was making the cloud to follow her to the portal she used regularly.

'Run! Run!' the magpies screamed.

Elle looked at Marsh. He stood, forlorn with his left arm extended the silver threat glimmering in the light between them.

'I love you. I will come back to find you. I promise,' she whispered.

The wind whirled around. Marsh turned back to the empty crowd behind him. As he disappeared into the shadows, he turned and gave her one last look, his eyes empty.

The storm was upon her now. The clouds were so low that Elle ducked and threw herself to the ground, narrowly escaping a bright bolt of lightning as it struck the place where she had been standing.

Whatever was in those clouds, it wanted her away from here. More bolts of lightning rained down around her. She smelled the crackle of spark in the air.

In a moment of desperation, she reached into the barrier that divided Shadow and Light. This was a very dangerous thing to do, but she had no choice. She felt the energy give and space opened up big enough to slip through. Stepping inside the barrier felt like plunging into cold water. She held her breath and peered through the distortion. On the one side she could see the brightness of the Realm of Light and on the other the greenish-brown murk of the Shadow side. As carefully as she could, she swam across to the Light side.

Through the shimmering ripples she could see the inside of a cavernous warehouse. She could see rough-brick and iron pillars. The glass-paned roof vault stretched high overhead and even here, in the barrier the ominous sound of ticking resonated through her. The frisson of danger was almost palpable and she shrank away from it. This place on the Light side seemed as dangerous as the one in the Shadow she had left. The ominous shapes of the undead materialised from the gloom. And while they seemed quite harmless in the Realm of Shadow, she was not so sure that the same would be true in the Realm of Light. She was alone and unarmed. She could not risk running into those creatures on her own.

The barrier moved and sloshed around her. Elle fought a wave of panic that rose up within her. There was nowhere to run and she was running out of breath.

Elle closed her eyes and plunged back to the Shadow side. She felt the barrier give and then she landed on sand, spluttering and gasping for air.

The sky above her had turned bone white again and everything was silent.

‘Gone! Gone!’ the magpies shouted from their tree.

Elle looked around. She was all alone in this desolate place. Marsh was gone.

Looking about one more time to make sure she was safe, Elle closed her eyes and willed herself home with all her might.

She felt a wave of energy flood through her and in a single breath she was back on the mosaic floor in the little room behind the mantelpiece. Gasping and utterly drained, she crawled from the room and on to the bed, where she finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

## Chapter Sixteen

Loisa was waiting for Elle at the bottom of the stairs when she came down for dinner that evening.

‘Elle, you look so tired,’ Loisa exclaimed. ‘What on earth have you been up to while I was asleep?’

‘We need to speak,’ Elle said.

‘I thought as much. Let’s go to the library where the others won’t hear us,’ Loisa said.

Elle led her friend through to the library and there, by the comforting light of the fire, told her about what she had found in the Shadow that day.

‘That was a very big risk to take.’ Loisa’s perfect black ringlets bounced as she shook her head in amazement. ‘It sounds to me as if you got away just in time.’

‘I think you might be right.’ Elle twisted her wedding band around her finger as she spoke. ‘And there is the matter of the bargain with this Jack creature.’

Loisa pursed her lips. ‘I would keep an eye out for that one. The Fey are notorious tricksters. Speaking of which, where is that little splash of green you keep as a pet?’ Loisa looked around the room to see if the absinthe fairy was listening.

Elle sighed. ‘Adele disappeared around the same time as Hugh did. No one has seen her.’

‘Such a pity. She would have been most helpful right now. But that’s their way. Around when you don’t need them; away the moment you need them most.’

Elle smiled to herself. Nightwalkers and fairies were notoriously adversarial. It was a dislike that went back more centuries than anyone could remember.

‘He’s definitely here on this side of the barrier. I’d wager he’s here in London somewhere. I say we go and look for him,’ Elle said.

Loisa tapped her black satin slipper against the rug as she considered the matter. ‘You said he was in a large building. Perhaps a factory or a warehouse?’

‘It certainly looked that way,’ Elle said.

‘Perhaps we should start looking for him in these. Surely there can’t be too many cavernous warehouses in London, no?’

‘That is exactly what I was thinking.’ Elle was not as confident as Loisa. It seemed to her that there were a great deal of warehouses in London, but she did not want to diminish Loisa’s enthusiasm.

‘And you are sure that the police will be of no help?’

‘Very sure. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if the police commissioner himself was involved. We can trust no one.’

Loisa stood and straightened her gown. ‘Well, then. I would suggest that you and I go for a stroll after dinner.’

Elle hugged the Nightwalker. ‘Oh Loisa, thank you.’

Outside, the relentless drizzle sifted down across streets and grey slate rooftops. Loisa shook her black parasol to rid it of the wet. The weather did not



bother her physically, in fact Nightwalkers preferred the cold, but she did object to it ruining her hair. ‘Nothing is worse than London drizzle for ruining ringlets,’ she said to Elle as they walked.

Elle was wearing one of Marsh’s hats to accompany her usual ‘work’ outfit of jodhpurs and calf-length leather coat. He had braided her auburn hair into a plat that hung down her back. The hat was a terribly modern fedora he had purchased on a whim. It was a little too big for her, but it kept the rain off her face, which was what mattered.

They were trudging through the muddy streets around Limehouse. It was three o’clock in the morning and the place was completely deserted.

‘None of these warehouses look even remotely familiar,’ she said. ‘And there are so many of them along the Thames, we will never find it at this rate.’

‘Oh, don’t exaggerate. At the very least, we now know he is not in this place,’ said Loisa trying to sound cheerful.

Elle bit down on her teeth to stop them from chattering. They had been walking for so long that the wet had seeped all the way through her coat in the way that only London drizzle could. Her boots and jodhpurs were splattered with mud and the linen shirt she wore stuck to her skin in a most miserable way. The rim of her fedora hat drooped under the weight of the drizzle. Normally her outlandish outfit kept her warm, even in the coldest of high airstreams, but here on the ground, her clothes were proving to be less than waterproof.

‘You are cold,’ Loisa said in a matter-of-fact tone. She was not looking all too dry and composed herself.

‘A b–bit,’ Elle said. ‘But let’s keep walking and I’ll warm up.’ She was not

giving up. She had to find him.

Loisa pursed her lips. 'I think we should make a start for home. It is only a few hours until sunrise and I don't want to be caught by the sun,' she said tactfully.

'G-good idea,' Elle said. She wanted to keep searching, but even she had to admit that catching pneumonia would not assist in their cause. 'Let's take the road that leads along the riverside.'

As they walked, Elle scanned each of the riverside warehouses to see if any of them was the one she had seen from the Shadow. Some were too small. Others were the wrong shape. Some were made of wood. Some were clearly so derelict that not even the undead would consider living in them. None matched the place she had seen.

They trudged along in the dark in miserable silence. The squelchy muck covered their boots and stained Loisa's sodden skirts.

'This search is proving to be most miserable and unsuccessful,' Loisa said.

'We must keep going,' Elle said.

Loisa stopped and looked over her shoulder. She motioned for Elle to stay still. Then she turned and walked on.

'What is it?' Elle whispered.

'I'm not sure. I thought I heard footsteps. I think someone might be following us.'

Elle unclipped the Colt 1878 Frontier revolver she carried, in the holster on her hip.

They walked on, ears strained for sounds. Sometimes she thought she caught the sound of footfall, but it could have just been the rain.

At Waterloo Bridge they stopped to rest. Spark lights sat in proud iron holders all along the length of the bridge. They glowed an eerie shade of blue in the night fog. Elle rested against the sandstone railings and peered into the darkness. Until recently, the authorities had been charging people a penny to cross, but this had proven to be so unpopular that they had stopped it. Below her, a barge trundled by. It let out black puffs of steam as it chugged along. Here, so close to the water, it was even colder. 'It's no use, Loisa. We have walked for miles tonight and we have found absolutely nothing.' She hung her head in weariness.

An icy wind, chilled even further by the freezing water of the Thames, rose up from below and blasted them. Elle's teeth chattered. 'I t-think I n-need to get warm soon. I d-don't know how much more of this cold I can t-take,' she said.

'Shh!' Loisa held out her hand. 'Listen.'

Elle tried to listen but she was so cold she could hear nothing over the sounds of the wind and her own shivering.

'Get down. Don't move.' Loisa motioned for Elle to crouch next to one of the columns that anchored the balustrades.

Quiet as a whisper Loisa spun round and disappeared into the shadows. Elle counted her breaths as she waited for something to happen. Her knees ached from crouching, but she held still.

Elle heard the faint whisper of *crêpe de chine* and then a man shouted out in fright.

She rose, her Colt cocked and at the ready, only to see that Loisa had grabbed their pursuer by the throat and was now holding him firmly over the

edge of the bridge so that his feet dangled in the air.

‘Now, sir. Please explain why you are following us,’ she said loudly.

‘Please, I meant no harm!’ The man flailed about, but he was powerless in Loisa’s grip.

‘Speak! Or I shall drain you and drop your lifeless corpse into the water below. Or would you prefer the paving next to the water?’ Loisa’s fangs glistened in the light of the spark lamps. ‘And it has been a long, night so I am rather hungry.’

‘Please, don’t kill me,’ the man whispered. ‘I’ll tell you everything you want to know. Just please put me down.’

In one graceful move, Loisa hauled the man up over the edge and deposited him on the cobbles before her.

‘I suggest you start talking, sir,’ Elle said, coming up from behind Loisa. She pointed the gun at him. ‘Why are you following us?’

‘I wasn’t following you. Well, not really.’

‘Then what were you doing?’

‘I was looking for *them*.’

‘Them who?’ Loisa hissed.

‘The Tickers. I . . . I spotted you earlier this evening looking about the warehouses, so I assumed you were also enthusiasts. And . . . and you looked like a man with the hat and trousers, you seemed like you knew where you were going, so I started following you. I did not realise that you were out hunting. I meant no harm, I promise.’

‘What do you mean when you say “the Tickers”?’ Elle said.

Her revolver glinted in the light of the spark lamps.

‘No. Please don’t shoot!’ The man cowered. ‘The Tickers. You must have read about them in the papers? The strange creatures who wander the streets at night?’ The man wiped his hands on his trousers and made an awkward bow. ‘I’m Jasper. Jasper Sidgwick, by the way. How do you do?’

Elle looked at Loisa who just shrugged.

He reached into his pocket and Elle raised her Colt. ‘Slowly. And don’t try anything,’ she said.

Mr Sidgwick pulled out a little card and handed it to her. ‘It might be a little hard to read in the dark, but I am a member of the Society for Psychical and Otherworldly Research. At the moment, our society is all in a whirl about the new phenomenon. We are trying to discover where these new creatures hide, as they only seem to come out at night.’

Elle peered at the card in the light of the spark lamp. It had the man’s name on it. ‘I’ve never heard of your society,’ she said.

‘Oh, we are really more involved in séances and investigations into those who have passed on to the afterlife. We meet fortnightly, but our society is a select one. We prefer to conduct our investigations discreetly.’

‘And why are you so interested in these Tickers, as you call them?’ Loisa said.

‘Well, we believe that they are dead, but still alive. Undead if you will...tangible ghosts... and so this is of interest to us. Just think about what we could learn from them. Also... some of our members have actually seen them.’ Jasper straightened his coat. ‘Members post their sightings in the newspaper. Look up the advertisements for Mrs Sidgwick’s Clairvoyance

services. It will state a date, place and time. This is a log for others to note.'

'I see,' said Elle. 'And then those who know the code can track their movements. That's quite a clever system, Mr Sidgwick.'

'I thank you for the compliment.' He gave a nervous nod. 'If.. if you really are enthusiasts, you are welcome to join us at our next meeting if you wish,' he said. He pulled out a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and put them on. It was hard to tell in the dark, but Elle realised that he was probably not much older than she was.

'Thank you. We might just take you up on the invitation,' Elle said as she uncocked her revolver and slipped it back into its place by her side.

'You should be more careful the next time you decide follow ladies in the dark of night,' Elle said.

'They may not be as friendly as we are,' Loisa added.

Jasper gave Loisa a nervous smile as he put on his bowler hat. 'Well, then, I had better be off. It was nice to meet you. And please do call. You have my details on the card. We meet on Wednesday evenings at the pub below the Savoy Hotel. From about eight o'clock onwards.'

'We will be sure to bear that in mind,' Elle said.

'Goodnight, then.' Jasper turned and walked off into the mist at a pace.

Loisa and Elle looked at one another as they listened to Jasper retreat. After a few moments, his footsteps sped up considerably to a shuffling run.

'What an odd fellow,' Elle said.

'Very odd indeed.' Loisa stifled a yawn. 'I vote we find a nice dry cab to take us home.'

'Motion seconded,' Elle said, suddenly deeply grateful for the miracle that

was modern transport.

## Chapter Seventeen

Elle found the advertisement for Mrs Sidgwick's clairvoyance services in the back of the newspaper the very next evening.

'It seems to be saying that there have been sightings near Aldgate. Do you think it's worth a try?' she said to Loisa.

Loisa sipped her cup of blood-laced chocolate and stared off into the distance as she thought matters over. 'I can't see how it could do any harm. That boy we found at the bridge last night was so frightened that it didn't even enter his mind not to tell the truth.'

'We were a bit harsh with him, I think.' Elle held the little card between her fingers.

'What on earth have you two been up to?' The professor looked up from the book he was reading.

'We bumped into an undead enthusiast last night. I think Loisa put the fear into him right and proper though.'

'I don't think you should be out wandering the streets at night like that,' the professor tutted.

Elle gave him a warning look. This was an argument that had been raging for years. 'I know you worry about me but this is something I have to do. I must find my husband,' she said.

'I know, I know, my dear.' The professor held up a conciliatory hand.

Just then there was a commotion at the front door. Elle and Loisa rose as



Mrs Hinges, dressed in her best winter coat, burst in.

‘Mrs Hinges?’ Elle said.

‘Oh, my dear!’ she breathed. ‘I am so very sorry to barge in through the front like this, but I have news!’

‘What on earth?’

‘I couldn’t sleep this afternoon, so thought I would make a few enquiries myself. You know, ask about a little. But the weather is so awful that it took forever to get home on the bus.’

‘Oh, Mrs Hinges.’ Elle felt a surge of deep affection for her.

‘Listen to this,’ Mrs Hinges said. ‘I spoke to Mrs Barrett, she’s the housekeeper for number fourteen. Well, she says that she heard from one of the maids in number twenty, who does extra laundry for her on her days off, that the Earl of Mallory’s son has disappeared.’ Mrs Hinges unwound her scarf and took off her hat. ‘Terrible scandal brewing. You see, *he* was engaged to this girl. Terribly sickly and an entirely unsuitable match, but he would hear nothing of it. He was in love.’

Elle and Loisa stared at her, uncomprehending.

‘Don’t you see?’ said Mrs Hinges.

‘Not really.’ Loisa shook her head.

‘The young man set out to find a cure for his lady. Because if she were well, there would be no objection to them marrying. He went out one night and never came home. Just like our dear Lord Greychester.’

‘Are you sure?’ Elle said.

‘As sure as I stand here. Disappeared into thin air along with his father’s valet. Set the whole house on its head.’

Elle sat back in her seat and thought it over for a little while.

‘Mrs Hinges, you really will catch your death if you go running about in the damp like that,’ the professor said. He looked most concerned.

‘Oh, don’t be silly, professor. I am made from sturdy stuff.’

‘Why am I surrounded by women who simply won’t do as they’re told?’ the professor wailed. ‘What have I done to be punished and tormented like this?’

That set off a debate between the professor and Mrs Hinges which had been raging even longer than the one he had been having with Elle. Amid the discussion, Elle and Loisa escaped from the drawing room and went upstairs to ready themselves for the resumption of their search. It was still early but, it being February, the sun had gone down and it was pitch dark outside. Perfect conditions for Nightwalkers.

‘Look at you!’ Elle said when her friend joined her a few minutes later. Loisa was dressed from head to toe in black. She wore a pair of fitted black leather trousers – the type favoured by the cowboys of the wild west – knee-high boots, and a wool jumper over a fine lacy blouse.

‘I absolutely ruined my favourite dress last night with all that mud so I thought I would take a leaf from your book, my dearest,’ Loisa said as she pulled on a black leather coat that fell to just below her knees. ‘Do you like it?’

‘I think it’s fantastic,’ Elle said. ‘So much more practical than skirts. But where on earth did you get all these clothes?’

‘Ah, well, some of these things I brought with me.’ She gestured at her leather coat, which did indeed look very Transylvanian. ‘And I sent someone out to the dressmaker I retain here. She is used to my strange requests.’ Loisa

gave her a little suggestive smile and placed a finely fitted top hat with a delicate lace veil on to her curls to complete the ensemble.

Elle held up her hands. 'Fair enough. And maybe tonight, we won't be stalked by unsuspecting ghost hunters.'

Loisa laughed. 'I think we should go and visit Jasper, just to see the look on his face. I think his society might positively die if they found out who you are,' she said with a wicked gleam in her eye.

Caruthers coughed discreetly. He held out two woollen scarves and he had two umbrellas crooked over his arm. 'Your cab has arrived, ma'am.'

And so, suitably wrapped up against the biting cold, Elle and Loisa again set off into the darkness.

The steam cab stopped just outside the arches of Leadenhall Market. 'This is as far as I go, ladies,' said the driver. 'There are too many strange things that go bump in the night these days and a man can't be too careful. No offence, madam,' he said nodding towards Loisa.

'That's fine, but please wait for us here. There will be an extra fare in it for you if you do,' Elle said.

'If I must,' said the cabby, although Elle was not so sure he would be a man of his word.

Elle and Loisa started walking towards Aldgate. Even though it was still early, the streets were eerily quiet. The only noise they could come from the pubs that squatted along the street.

'We had better head for the water. That's my guess,' Elle said as they walked down Fenchurch Street. Around them, church bells tolled ominously in the mist.

‘There is something ill in the air. I can taste it,’ Loisa said.

‘I feel it too, it’s making my skin crawl,’ Elle said. ‘Something is out there.’

‘Let’s go east, towards the Tower,’ Elle whispered. They walked on, boots echoing on the damp cobbles.

It was Loisa who heard them first. She stopped and put her hand on to Elle’s arm, turning her head just a fraction to catch the faint sound of ticking, like a watch buried deep within a pocket.

‘This way,’ Elle whispered. Without making a sound, the two women stepped into the shadow of a doorway.

The sound of ticking increased, now accompanied by a soft scuffling and scraping. Elle held her breath as she watched the small cluster of undead lope past them. None of them looked right or left. Instead, they seemed utterly intent on reaching whatever destination they were seeking.

‘Phew! That was close.’ A man spoke from the other side of the alleyway.

‘Who’s there?’ Loisa leaned forward and peered into the shadows.

There was a slight movement as Jasper Sidgwick stepped out of the shadows.

‘Mr Sidgwick!’ Elle said. ‘You nearly gave me a heart attack.’

‘Good evening, ladies. I knew you would find them. And what a sight they were!’ He strolled up to them, beaming from ear to ear. ‘There are a few of us dotted about the area, searching, but none of us have ever managed to get so close. Did you hear that ticking?’

Elle and Loisa stared at Mr Sidgwick.

‘I am so glad I bumped into you again.’ He bowed politely. ‘Perhaps now you might honour me with your names?’

‘Eleanor Marsh. How do you do?’ Elle took Mr Sidgwick’s hand and shook it distracted. ‘This is my friend, Loisa Belododia. She is visiting from the Continent.’

‘Delighted to meet you. Please, call me Jasper.’ He took Loisa’s hand and bowed over it most gallantly as the Nightwalker looked on in bemusement.

‘I don’t mean to be rude, but don’t you think we should be following them?’ Elle said.

‘Well, I’m not sure, to be honest,’ Jasper said. ‘We normally only wait for them to pass. Observe statistics like numbers and group size, male or female and such things, and then go back to compare and compile the collected information. It’s more of an observation than a participation really.’

‘But we need to get closer,’ Elle said. ‘See where they’re going and where they came from.’

‘Oh, could I come with you,’ Jasper said.

‘It might be too dangerous for you,’ Elle warned.

‘I say,’ Jasper said, looking a bit wounded. ‘I do have some military training, you know.’

Loisa rolled her eyes. ‘We are wasting time,’ she said in a low voice.

‘Very well, but stay back and don’t get in the way,’ Elle said to Jasper.

They walked in the direction of the ticking sounds, eastward through the eerie lanes, past the Tower of London and the entrance of the newly completed Tower Bridge, which straddled the Thames. The spark lights on the crossbeams of the bridge made the structure glow eerily in the night fog.

‘This is St Katharine’s Dock,’ Jasper whispered. Elle could hear a slight tinge of fear in his voice.

Around them, the sad wood-fronted buildings of the docklands slum huddled close to one another. A gust of wind rose up and swept through the gaps and chinks in the houses, damp and bitterly cold. It made the loose planks and sheets of corrugated iron rattle mournfully. The only warmth in this place was the flickering light of the spark lamps which the city had installed a few years before in an attempt to make the area safer. They now merely stood as a silent testament to the failure of that endeavour.

‘Not the most agreeable of areas, I’ll grant you that,’ Loisa murmured as she sidestepped a pile of soggy horse muck.

In the distance they could hear water sloshing against the wharf and the mournful ting . . . ting . . . ting sound of rigging against boat masts. And below it all, just barely within the reach of normal human hearing, Elle felt the relentless rhythm of the ticking, like a pulse beating too hard for comfort.

‘They are close.’ Elle felt a sudden surge of energy from her wedding band. It coursed through her and made her left hand tingle. Even here in the Realm of Light, she and Marsh were bound. ‘Over there,’ she said, pointing into the dark distance.

Carefully they crept up to the edge of the little square that framed the docks.

‘Gosh, I’ve never been this close,’ Jasper whispered when the sounds of grunts and shuffles became audible over the sound of the ticking.

The fog parted slightly and they stared in amazement.

Before them, huddled in a tight group under the light of a spark lamp, were about forty undead. Men and women with their clothes hanging grotesquely off their emaciated frames. They stood with their heads and arms at haphazard angles, like resting marionettes waiting for their puppeteer.

Each one had a brass mask that covered the bottom half of their faces, clamped and tightly bolted over the jaw, as if to prevent them from biting and tearing at things in much the same way as one would muzzle a vicious dog.

But it was their eyes that were the worst: milky white and devoid of the iris, they stared blankly ahead of them, even as they moved and stumbled about.

To the side of the group of undead was a tall man. Like the others he was without a hat or coat. He stood perfectly still in the midst of the shuffling. His slightly-too-long dark hair hung in greasy streaks over his pale face. When Elle spotted him, her heart lurched in her chest.

Loisa turned to look and uttered a small shocked cry.

They had found Marsh.

## Chapter Eighteen

‘If you go round the other side to distract them, I can move in and see if I can grab him,’ Elle whispered.

One or two of the undead grunted and moved at the sound of their whispers.

‘That’s one idea,’ said Loisa.

‘Well, do you have a better one?’

Loisa shrugged. ‘I suppose not.’

‘Take Jasper with you. If we lose one another, then let’s agree to meet where the cab is waiting in Leadenhall,’ Elle said.

‘Be careful,’ Loisa whispered. ‘Jasper, come,’ she said before she slipped away into the dark with her Nightwalker grace.

Elle counted the long seconds as she waited for them to execute their distraction. While she waited, she kept her eyes firmly trained on Marsh. He had not moved since she had first spotted him. Looking at him made her heart ache.

Above them, the skies opened up and a fine spray of freezing cold sleet started falling. The drops of ice stung the skin and soaked into clothes with merciless cold.

Elle said a silent prayer to whoever might be listening and held her breath. What was taking so long? Surely Loisa would have come up with something by now?

In the distance, a loud crash and the sound of glass breaking broke the



silence. A flame flickered in the dark and Jasper stepped forward, banging loudly on a piece of corrugated iron roofing, which he held before him like the shield of some Medieval Templar.

‘Oi! Here! Come and get me, you ticking bastards!’ he shouted, and banged on the metal.

Elle’s eyes widened with surprise. She did not think gentle Jasper would be capable of using such peppery language.

The undead turned, transfixed by the noise and light. The collective rhythm of their ticking became faster and slowly the group started shuffling towards Jasper. Elle had no doubt that Loisa was lurking somewhere in the shadows, ready to pounce.

Then she spotted her chance. In the shuffle, Marsh had fallen to the back of the group. Elle sprinted up to him as fast as she could and grabbed the back of his coat. She spun him round and looked into his blank eyes.

‘Hugh!’ For the briefest moment she wrapped her arms around him in a rough hug. ‘Oh thank God, I’ve found you. We need to leave this place. I need to take you home,’ she said to him.

He did not respond. There was not even the slightest flicker of recognition in his blank eyes.

‘Hugh! Look at me!’ she said, desperately.

Marsh turned his face towards her, but his eyes were completely blank.

‘Come, we need to get away from here. Before they see me.’ She tugged at his arm for him to follow her, but he did not move.

‘Oh, what have they done to you?’ she whispered, close to despair.

‘Please my love...please move...for me?’ She dragged at his arm, but all he

did was lean into the movement as if he was rooted to the spot.

Elle closed her eyes in frustration. The other creatures had moved off about ten paces now and all it would take was for one to look back for her to be in serious trouble. They might be muzzled, but they were still outnumbered.

‘Damn it, Marsh, move!’ she hissed. Elle banged her fists against his shoulder, but he just stood there, rocking slightly as she yanked at him to follow her. He turned his face towards her and a slight crinkle in his brow made it look as if he was trying to understand, but it was like trying to move a fully grown oak tree.

‘Stop!’ a man shouted, off in the distance.

Elle felt her heart sink as two burly men stepped into the light of one of the streetlamps.

‘Oh bugger,’ Elle blurted out. The undead were not alone. They had guards. Four or five burly men with cudgels by the looks of things.

‘Stop where you are or I’ll shoot,’ the man said again. Elle caught sight of a large and dangerous-looking shotgun which one of the men raised and pointed at her.

‘And stop that racket!’ another man said. He started walking towards Jasper, but Loisa leaped out and grabbed him by the throat. In seconds, her preternatural Nightwalker grip had him passed out stone cold. Despite her delicate appearance, Loisa was very old and very strong.

Jasper’s shouting and banging was becoming more frantic as the undead advanced upon him. It wouldn’t be long before he would have to abandon his post.

She heard the sickening sound of metal upon metal as the guard cocked the

shotgun.

‘Jasper, run!’ she shouted, just as the first shot rang out. It missed but the shotgun pellets pinged as they went through one of the corrugated iron walls behind her.

The sound had made the undead turn and stumble in the direction of the new noise. Elle pulled out her Colt and briefly considered returning fire, but she would be shooting in the general direction of Jasper and Loisa which was not good. No, escape and evade was the sensible way forward here. In sheer desperation, Elle reached into the barrier and felt for the filament that bound her to Marsh. She stood, left arm up to her elbow in the Shadow Realm, and pulled with all her might.

Marsh moved. He stumbled a few paces and grunted.

She took his hand and held it in hers. To her astonishment, she felt the tingle of the bond trickle down her arm, over her wrist and into him.

‘Now, walk,’ she said as she pulled him towards her.

Marsh grunted and moved a few more steps before faltering.

Another shot rang out and the spark light above them went out in a spray of broken glass.

Elle tugged at Marsh again, willing him to break with whatever was keeping him rooted to the ground. He shuffled forward again.

‘Good. Now a few paces more, my darling,’ she said, trying not to let her desperation show.

The other guard suddenly cried out in surprise and Elle prayed that Loisa was the cause.

Marsh stumbled a few more paces towards her.

‘That’s right, keep going,’ she coaxed.

‘Round them up, I’ll go after the girl,’ a third man said.

She could hear footsteps in the dark and the sound of shuffling as they rounded up the other undead charges. Whoever survived Loisa’s attack would be upon her and Marsh in the next few seconds.

Just then, Loisa leaped out of the dark, hissing like a very large, very dangerous cat. The guard cried out in surprise as Loisa pounced upon him.

Elle had no time to lose. She took a deep breath and dragged at Marsh with all her strength. ‘Move! Damn you, Marsh. Move you bastard!’ she said between gritted teeth.

He grunted and suddenly Elle felt a surge of energy. It crashed over them, enveloping them like a tidal wave. For a few moments, they stood shrouded in the space between the realms of Shadow and Light. The light contorted and wisps of grey and black moved all around them. From where they were standing, the shapes of the buildings seemed as if they were under water. Marsh threw back his head and groaned as if he was in terrible pain and took a few shuffling steps in her direction before stumbling after her. With all her strength, Elle dragged Marsh towards what looked like a timber-covered alleyway.

The muffled sound of a shotgun rang out again and, far away in the distance, she heard Loisa squeal in pain. She heard the sickening sound of flesh and bone hitting cobbles. ‘Please let Loisa and Jasper be safe,’ she prayed.

‘After them! They went that way,’ she heard one of the men shout.

‘Walk, just a few steps,’ she said to Marsh who was still dutifully holding her hand. He made a small shuffling motion, obeying her command.

‘Yes, my darling, that’s right, one step at a time,’ she said.

Above her, thunder rumbled and clouds dark as soot boiled in the sky. Elle shuddered again as she felt the wave of energy ripple through the air, every bit as foreign and horrible as it had been in the Shadow Realm. Who – or what – had chased her the day before on the plane was now most definitely on its way here too. They dared not remain in this space for too long.

She took another few steps and this time it was easier for Marsh to follow. Elle tucked herself under Marsh’s armpit and held his arm over her chest. Her touch seemed to galvanise him into moving more and he leaned against her as they shuffled on ahead.

Elle did her best to ignore the cold edge of the muzzle covering his jaw that was pressing in her hair. She had lost her hat somewhere back in the dark, but that did not matter right now. Together she and Marsh walked a little further until they were outside the docks.

By this stage, Elle was panting with stress and exertion. Hot-slick sweat coursed down her body, wetting her clothes from the inside and chilling her, but she could not stop. The only way for them now was forwards.

Gently, she nudged Marsh along through the murk of the barrier until they were standing near what looked like a mucky side street lined with more clapboard houses. Gathering all her strength, she breached the barrier and plunged back into the Realm of Light.

‘All right, big husband, we’ve managed to give those oafs the slip for the moment. Now let’s see if we can get you home,’ she said in a tone that was as jovial and optimistic as she could manage. To her relief, he started moving after her in a gentle shuffle. And so they set off through the narrow alleys that

led away from the docks.

Behind her, she could hear the sound of footsteps, but Elle did not need to look back to know that they were being followed. She quickened her pace, frustrated by Marsh's slow shuffle. The space between her shoulder blades burned with tension. It felt like any moment now they were spotted.

The Tower of London loomed up in the dark to her left. Its battlements looked like the broken teeth in the jaw of some ugly beast. She briefly considered the possibility of hiding inside in order to escape the guards and the undead on her heels, but the doors would be locked at this time of night. She needed to keep going.

Marsh grunted and flailed his free arm in acknowledgement of their pursuers.

'Hush now. Don't look,' she said to him.

He dropped his arm and shuffled along obediently.

The wind picked up and with it came fat, cold snow-flakes that splashed against her face. She gasped at the cold but pressed on.

They rounded the corner and started up the street known as the Minories, which ran all the way up the hill back to Aldgate. The dingy shops and narrow houses were all closed and boarded up for the night, although here and there she could see the faint flicker of lamps behind the sackcloth and shutters covering the mean windows.

They walked until they passed the bright light of the Three Lords pub, but there was no one hanging about outside in this weather. They would see no help from kind strangers tonight. No one would risk life and limb to help the awful creature she was dragging along beside her. So she kept walking all the

way up the hill that led into the city.

Marsh stumbled once on the now icy pavement, almost dragging her to the ground, but she managed to steady them against a wall. She was numb from cold and bone-tired from dragging Marsh along, but there was no time to rest. She looked over her shoulder into the darkness behind them. The footsteps were getting louder, but it was so hard to tell through the muffling blanket of white February snow. It would not be long before the undead chased them down.

On impulse, she turned left into Jewry Street and on to a wooden-clad entrance, marked simply as Saracen's Head Yard. The low overhang of the buildings offered some shelter from the driving wind and snow and Elle allowed herself to rest for a moment with her head against a sign that read, COMMIT NO NUISANCE. She let out a slightly hysterical chuckle at the irony of it.

Marsh grunted and looked up in the direction they had come. She heard the jingle of keys and the muffled sound of footsteps.

'Do you see them?' one guard asked the other.

'Nah. They must have given us the slip further down. I told you we should have looked inside that pub.'

'There is no way she would have taken him into the pub,' the first said. 'The regulars would have thrown him out straight away.'

'Let's try that way anyway. I could do with a quick drink. You could freeze the balls off a brass monkey tonight.'

'Not a bad idea, my son,' the first guard said. 'We can leave this lot in the little square outside. They won't come to no harm out here.'

‘Aye, we’re going to need a drink in us to fortify us for the explanation her highness is going to want once she hears what’s happened.’

The first guard grunted in agreement.

Elle held her breath and listened to them round up the other undead before heading back the way they came. She stood there for what seemed like an age until the only noise she could hear over the wind and the drifting snow was the ticking sound that her husband made.

‘Come on then,’ she said to Marsh, as she dragged him out of the alley and towards upper Leadenhall Street. She stumbled along in the dark, all the while thanking the Fates that she was good at navigating.

Elle nearly cried with joy when, like a benediction, the bells of Old St Botolph’s church tolled to her right. They had made it to Aldgate. Marsh grunted and turned towards the sound of the bell.

‘This way, we don’t have much further to go,’ she cajoled as she turned left, using the momentum of their movement to pull Marsh along.

The walk from St Botolph’s church back to Leadenhall Market is not particularly long or difficult, but to Elle it was one of the longest of her life. Her back ached and her arms were burning with the effort of holding on to Marsh as they stumbled along, skidding and slipping on the sludge and ice. Around her, the snow sifted down mercilessly, icing over everything it touched.

When they finally stumbled in under the red and cream painted arches that made up the market she let out a small sob of relief.

Leadenhall was closed for the night. A few of the meat hooks and chains that held foodstuffs during the day swung and squeaked eerily in the cold



draught that blew through the market.

With agonising slowness, Elle dragged Marsh onwards until she found the cab.

The driver sat hunched up in his coat, but stirred when she approached.

‘Where are the others?’ she gasped.

The driver squinted in the dark as he took in the sight of them. ‘The woman in black paid me an extra shilling to wait for you. They said to tell you that they would meet you at the house. No amount of money is worth staying out in this weather, I tell ya,’ he grumbled. ‘I don’t know why I do it. Honestly, I don’t.’

‘Please can you take us back to Grosvenor Square?’ she pleaded. Marsh stumbled into the light behind her.

The driver took in the brass muzzle over Marsh’s face. He blanched and recoiled in his seat. ‘I don’t know what games you are up to, missus, but I ain’t playing. That thing is not going in my cab,’ he said.

‘No, you don’t understand. This is my husband. He can’t hurt you and he needs help. Please, we can pay,’ she said.

‘Well, show me the money then,’ the cabbie said.

Elle felt about in her pockets and pulled out all the money she had, well in excess of the normal fare home. ‘Here, take this,’ she said as she shoved the money at him.

The driver took the coins and pocketed them. ‘That’s a start, but I think that pocket watch might go towards evening things out. I am taking my life into my hands here.’ He pointed at Marsh’s waistcoat. Amazingly, his pocket watch was still pinned to the buttonhole of his waistcoat.

Elle felt her temper flare. If there was one thing she detested, it was when someone took advantage of those more vulnerable than themselves.

Before the cab driver could say anything else, she opened the cab door and shoved Marsh inside. He grunted and rolled over in the seat. ‘Stay,’ she told him firmly before slamming the door and locking it.

‘Oi, what do you think you’re doing?’ the cab driver said.

Elle pulled out her revolver and pointed it at the cab driver. The man’s eyes widened as he took in the sight of the barrel of the gun. ‘Now, look here—’ he started to say.

‘No, you look here, sir,’ Elle interrupted. ‘This has not exactly been the best of nights. I am cold, I am tired and my husband needs help. I have paid you more than the required fare. So you are either going to drive us home or I will take your cab and leave you here. Consequences be damned. There are plenty more undead ticking things lurking about in these parts and if they smell blood, they will rip your body apart so comprehensively that not even your own mother would recognise you,’ she said in a low voice. She had made up the bit about the limb-tearing for effect, and it seemed to work.

‘All right. All right. Let’s not hang about then,’ the driver said as he fired up the spark reactor. Mercifully, the boiler was already hot and the cab started moving. Elle pushed the gun into the driver’s ribs. ‘Grosvenor Square. And with a dash of speed,’ she said between clenched teeth.

The cab driver did not wait to be asked twice. He set off into the snow-slick streets at a speed that was not entirely safe for the prevailing conditions, but none of that mattered. They were going home.

Their journey passed in a daze. Elle felt her knuckles grow cold and stiff as

she kept the revolver pointed at the driver. Icy blobs of snow splattered into her face and hair, which melted forming freezing rivulets down her face and neck. And as she sat, she did her best not to let her teeth chatter. Fortunately, the old cab was rattling so much, she didn't think the driver noticed.

Elle had never been so relieved as she was the moment they pulled up outside Greychester House.

She jumped on to the ground and unlocked the cab door. Marsh was still lying on his side in more or less the same position he had been in when she shoved him in there. It took all her strength, but somehow she managed to drag him up and bundle him out of the cab without too much difficulty.

Marsh's legs buckled under him as they reached the ground but Elle dragged him up on to the first step when the front door opened.

The cab driver did not hang about to see what might happen next and roared off into the night. 'You'll be hearing from the law about this! Mark my words he shouted as he disappeared into the night.

'Caruthers, please help me. Anyone, help!' Elle called out. She was close to the end of her strength.

'Already here, my lady. We've been waiting for you,' Neville said. She noticed he was holding a cricket bat. 'The baroness arrived about three-quarters of an hour ago. Mrs Hinges is tending to her and the professor is waiting in the drawing room.'

'Thank goodness for that. Would you mind giving me a hand? He is ever so heavy,' she said. Elle gasped as her knees buckled when she stood.

'Good heavens!' Neville paled when he set eyes on Marsh. 'Caruthers! You had better come out and lend us a hand!' he shouted over his shoulder.

‘Let’s see if we can set him down in front of the fire in the drawing room. Grab -is other side,’ Elle mumbled. Her lips were so cold that they did not seem to work that well anymore.

Together, the three of them manoeuvred Marsh into the house and on to one of the wingback chairs next to the fire in the main drawing room.

Marsh sank into the chair with the groan of a man who had been standing for a very long time.

Elle stood shivering and wet in the middle of the drawing room as the household stepped into action. The fire was stoked, tea was made and someone rushed off to fetch the doctor. Someone wrapped a warmed dry blanket around her and handed her a hot drink that was both tart and bitter on her tongue.

Another pair of hands led her to a seat. He rested her head against the reassuring solidness of the wingback. She closed her eyes as wisps of conversation floated around her.

‘... the doctor is out on a call... I’ve left a message,’ Neville said.

‘... how extraordinary. He’s completely immobilised . . . I wonder what makes that thing in his chest tick,’ she heard her father say.

‘... find some dry clothes for her ladyship, before she catches her death.’ The comforting voice of Mrs Hinges drifted towards her.

Elle came back into awareness when Marsh groaned and tried to rise from the chair, but Neville had tied him down with a pair of leather straps. Even immobilised, Marsh craned his neck as if he were trying to sense where she was. His face turned from side to side while his milky eyes remained completely blank.

Loisa appeared in her line of vision. ‘Eleanor!’ She patted Elle’s cheeks.

‘Loisa, thank goodness you are all right. What happened to Jasper?’ she slurred.

‘He’s safe and at home. But I think we need to get you warmed up and dried off before you contract pneumonia,’ Loisa said and she nudged her towards where Mrs Hinges was waiting for her.

‘No, I must hear what the doctor says. We have to fix him before it’s too late,’ she mumbled.

‘The doctor will speak to us tomorrow,’ Mrs Hinges said. ‘There is nothing that can be done this evening. But you, on the other hand, need to look after yourself. I don’t think I could manage both of you at death’s door at the same time.’ Mrs Hinges chatted to her all the way to her room and helped her undress as her fingers were so still so numb that she could not undo her own buttons.

The last thing Elle remembered before she closed her eyes was the warmth of her comforter that enveloped her as Mrs Hinges tucked it around her.

## Chapter Nineteen

Elle sat up in bed with a start. She felt puffy-faced and groggy. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was half past ten in the morning. Mrs Hinges must have put something in her tea last night, and she had been asleep for hours. She groaned and struggled out of bed. Every muscle in her body ached and she was so stiff she could hardly move, but she managed to dress herself.

When Elle came downstairs Loisa was in the entrance hall, ostensibly examining one of the pot plants. Her beautiful porcelain doll face was hollow-eyed and grey in the half-light of the hallway.

‘Loisa, have you rested?’ Elle said with concern.

Her friend shook her head with a nonchalance that belied her fatigue. ‘I was just on my way up.’

‘What happened last night? It’s all such a blur.’

Loisa looked grave. ‘I tried to kill the guards but they were wearing charms or amulets, which sapped my strength, and they fought me off. So when the undead and the guards set off after you all we could do was follow behind. But there were too many of them for me and Jasper to take on alone, so we circumvented them and went to the rendezvous as agreed. We waited and waited, but you did not appear. We feared the worst when a few stray undead started appearing around Leadenhall. In the end we had to run or face being captured. We told the cab driver to wait for you. We caught another cab near Liverpool Street that took us to Jasper’s home. ‘I...’ She looked slightly

embarrassed. 'I needed to feed, so I made my own way in the night...It was quite an adventure.'

A series of grunts and cries, followed by the frantic whining of a gramophone record player wound too fast, came from the drawing room.

Loisa put a hand on her arm. 'Prepare yourself. Seeing him in the light of day is not going to be easy.'

Elle steeled herself as the harsh realities of last night came flooding back. Her eyes felt swollen and gritty and she had to blink a few times to get rid of the sudden surge of wetness that blurred her vision.

Neville and Caruthers had manoeuvred her husband into a wicker bath chair and they were both on their knees on the carpet securing the wheels. Marsh was grunting and straining against the canvas sleeves of the straitjacket that bound his arms. Slivers of drool were escaping from the brass muzzle that covered his jaw. Mrs Hinges stood beside the professor who was in one of the wingback chairs; together they seemed to be directing operations.

Elle let out a small sob that had formed unnoticed in her chest. 'Is that really necessary?' she said over the noise of the gramophone. She walked over to the machine and lifted the needle off the record. The room stilled, save for the grunts and groans.

'The music seems to calm him, my lady,' Caruthers said.

She walked over to the chair and put her hands on her husband's knees. 'Shh. There you are. It's all right, be still now my darling,' she murmured. She felt the thin filament between them draw tight and Marsh stilled. He turned his greyed-out eyes to her, as if he could see her somehow.

She rubbed his knee. 'There now. See, that's better,' she said. Marsh

grunted and closed his eyes.

Elle pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and carefully started wiping the drool from his muzzle. As she worked, Marsh suddenly turned his head and tried to snap at her hand. The sound of tooth upon tooth was horrible and the bath chair wobbled under his weight.

Elle recoiled in horror.

‘I’d bet he’s just hungry,’ Loisa said. She had come into the drawing room and was standing quietly behind Elle.

‘Have you tried to feed him?’ Elle said.

‘Well, I wouldn’t even begin to know what he eats now,’ Mrs Hinges said.

Despite the utter horror of the situation, Elle could not help but smile. For once in her life, Mrs Hinges was completely at a loss when it came to catering. Elle did not think she had ever encountered someone Mrs Hinges could not feed.

‘Perhaps we should experiment,’ said the professor. ‘I’m sure we can undo that horrible muzzle once he’s properly secured in the chair. Let me just go and fetch my tools.’

‘How about some porridge to start or some meat broth? See what stays down,’ Mrs Hinges suggested.

‘No porridge,’ Loisa said. ‘This is necromancy. The undead usually crave living flesh. He needs meat. Raw and as fresh as possible.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ Mrs Hinges did her best to hide a shudder.

‘Neville, what about those cast-iron statues of the lions at the bottom of the stairs? I’m always stubbing my elbows on them and they weigh a ton. See if some of the lads downstairs can give you a hand to get them in here,’ Elle said.



The professor smiled. ‘An excellent idea, my dear. Iron should modulate the thaumaturgic energy fields and, if my theory is correct, it should dampen his strength a little.’

‘I will get right on to it, my lady,’ Neville said.

‘Caruthers, I am placing you in charge of the gramophone. Only soft gentle music to calm him,’ Elle said.

‘Right away, my lady.’

Loisa was leaning against the mantelpiece, pale and fragile in the light of the fire. Elle turned to her. ‘Loisa, we have much to discuss, but first you must rest. We can’t have you turning to dust here on the rug, hmm?’ Elle said.

Loisa smiled at her affectionately. ‘I think I might have a short nap,’ she said.

‘Dinner is at seven. We will see you then.’

The baroness looked decidedly grateful as she swept from the room.

Elle heard the sound of Marsh’s teeth clicking together near her hand again. While she had been speaking to Loisa, he had leaned towards her, his teeth working furiously as if he was trying to chew through the muzzle to get to her hand.

More slivers of drool were swinging from side to side as his head moved. The sight of him filled Elle with such anguish that she had to look away.

‘Perhaps we might find a kinder way to muzzle him once we’ve fed him?’ She said ‘We don’t want him injuring some unsuspecting passer-by,’ Elle said softly.

Just then, the deep gong of the doorbell reverberated through the house.

‘The doctor is here,’ Caruthers announced.

Elle turned to the drawing-room door. ‘Well, let’s see what he has to say.’

Dr Miller was a skinny man with a rather large, beak-like nose that, along with his propensity to stoop, made him look very much like a carrion bird. This was rather unfortunate, given the fact that he was a physician and a good one at that.

‘Most extraordinary,’ said Dr Miller as he leaned forward to examine Marsh. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like it.’

‘We think we can remove the muzzle, but I’m not so sure about that thing in his chest,’ the professor said in an attempt to be helpful.

‘Hmm. I wonder. Are those brass screws holding the muzzle in place?’

‘I think I have a screwdriver that would work very well for that,’ the professor said as he started rummaging through his toolbox.

‘I will of course need to bring him to the hospital so we can examine the device further,’ Dr Miller said as he examined the source of the ticking with his stethoscope. ‘See here – the number 493. It’s all very odd.’ He paused and looked up. ‘If I might say so, I do believe that he would make an extraordinary subject for a medical paper. This type of science is far more advanced than anything we have seen. The person who invented this is a genius. There could be real benefit for medical research.’

Elle stood very still, biting the insides of her cheeks as she did her best to control the emotions that were storming through her. ‘No. I am not going to allow that. Lord Greychester is still a person, regardless of what you might think. And he is still my husband. He is not to leave this house so he can be poked and prodded by strangers.’

She was not going to allow them to treat him as if he were some oddity that

needed to be gawped at like an animal in a zoo or a circus performer.

She looked down at her hands. Her left ring finger felt numb and had turned a deathly white colour, just above the metal band. When she moved her fingers her hand ached with a strange dullness.

‘My lady, there simply is no other way to establish whether we can remove the device. We have no option but to do more invasive investigations and those simply cannot be done except within the controlled environment of a hospital. He will be perfectly safe, I’m sure,’ the doctor said.

‘I said no!’ Elle’s tone was a bit too loud and the doctor’s eyes widened in surprise.

‘I say,’ he muttered, ‘I am only trying to help.’

Elle took a deep breath. ‘Dr Miller forgive me for being rude, but this has been deeply upsetting to me. I am not myself at the moment, but on this issue I must be perfectly clear: Whatever happened to my husband, it was metaphysical. There are strange forces at work here that have nothing to do with modern medicine. And I will not let Lord Greychester out of this house until I have more answers.’

‘Perhaps we might continue this discussion when you have rested a little?’ the doctor said kindly. ‘Would you like me to give you a sedative?’

‘No, thank you. My mind is quite firmly made up. I will not have you and your colleagues poking and prodding my husband as if he were some freakish medical phenomenon. I will not.’

‘Of course, my lady. I meant no offence,’ the doctor said.

‘Now, tell me about that mechanism in his chest.’ Elle pointed at the opening in Marsh’s shirt which the doctor had been examining. It looked like

someone had taken a large apple corer to the centre of Marsh's chest. And there, slightly to the left, exactly where his heart should be, an oblong brass mechanism had been inserted. It had a small glass dome and, inside, Elle could see what looked like a mechanical heart. The cogs and gears of the device whirred and moved in simulation of a human heartbeat.

The doctor rubbed his chin. 'Well, yes. It is quite something, isn't it? As far as I can tell, it looks as if his heart has been removed and replaced by this clockwork device. And without it, or his heart, in place there is no demonstrable way to keep him alive.'

'And taking the machine out and putting his heart back? Is that possible?'

Dr Miller shook his head. 'I honestly don't know. See how the skin around the device has been cauterised.' He pointed at the puckered, greying skin adjacent to the device. 'In my considered opinion, unless the heart has somehow been preserved, there would have been a definite deterioration of the heart tissue, making it impossible to be restored. I mean, for a start, we don't even know where the heart is.'

'But if they did preserve it, do you think you could put it back?' Elle said.

'That sort of surgery is beyond my expertise. I could ask my colleagues who specialise in surgical procedures, but I suspect it's highly unlikely.'

'And the undead-like state? Is that linked to the device?'

'I would have thought so. But how much of the actual person remains is very hard to say. From the looks of things, not much.'

'But he will remain alive as long as the device keeps ticking?'

The doctor looked at Elle seriously. 'In a manner of speaking. If you define his current state as not dead, then I suppose you could call whatever he is

alive.’

‘He is alive in there, I can feel it,’ Elle said, undeterred by the doctor’s pessimism.

The doctor took her hand. ‘My lady, I’m afraid that your husband’s very survival depends on the faultless operation of that device. And I am somewhat concerned about the fact that there is a keyhole in the centre of it.’

‘Yes, I noticed that too,’ the professor said, looking up from his toolbox. ‘If that heart works like any other clockwork device I know, then it will need winding. And that can only be done by whoever currently has the key.’

Elle chewed her lip, which felt flaky and dry under her tongue. ‘How long do you think he has before time runs out?’ she asked.

The doctor sighed. ‘There is simply no way of knowing. What do you think, professor?’

The professor scratched his head. ‘Judging by the size and dimensions of the heart, measured against standard clocks with winding mechanisms of that size, I would say about a week.’

‘So we have about a week to find the solution,’ Elle said.

‘In theory, yes,’ the doctor said. ‘But I am completely stumped. This type of medical procedure is beyond anything I have ever encountered and I honestly cannot guarantee that we will be able to put things to rights.’

‘Well, gentlemen, it seems that I have one week to find the key to my husband’s heart,’ Elle said. She folded her arms with grim determination. ‘We had best get on with it then.’

## Chapter Twenty

‘Such a tragedy. My poor Hugh,’ Loisa mused as she sipped her tea. They were sitting by the fire in the small drawing room after dinner.

Marsh was sleeping in the cot they had set up for him in the library next door. After the visit by the doctor, the professor had managed to modify the muzzle by fitting a release latch. They could at least now open and close it in order to feed him, if they were very careful.

Marsh had, true to Loisa’s recommendations, consumed almost two pounds of raw liver once they had brought him under control. Elle was grateful that she did not have to witness him feeding because it was, by all accounts, a rather grim event.

Mrs Hinges had looked tired and drawn when Elle had found her in the kitchens earlier that evening. The strain of looking after a Nightwalker and an employer who was hovering between the living and the dead was starting to show.

Outside, the rain whooshed against the window-panes with relentless monotony. A storm had rolled in during the late afternoon, complete with more thunder and lightning. It was truly the type of dark and stormy night so favoured by writers of melodramatic prose.

Elle looked up from the evening paper and set down the magnifying glass she had been using to examine one of the photographs on the page. The headline that had drawn her attention read:

MYSTERIOUS TICKING MONSTERS SIGHTED IN HYDE PARK.

‘We found him near the docks, so let’s see if we can pick up a trail from there. Enough people have seen these Tickers to make it into the evening papers. Surely someone would have seen which direction they went.’

‘In this weather?’ Loisa looked at the windows. ‘We’d be lucky not to lose ourselves out there, let alone find some unknown enemy.’

Elle sighed. ‘Loisa, I can’t just sit here and do nothing. Every minute that passes is a minute wasted.’ She felt her breath catch. ‘At the very least, we need to find the key that winds up that thing in his chest. Surely they must go somewhere when the sun comes up? And I’m willing to bet that we will find the keys and the answers to this mystery there.’

Loisa nodded slowly. ‘This is the work of a necromancer.’

‘Conjuring of the dead.’ Elle nodded gravely. ‘That seems logical, but how does this help us?’

Loisa shrugged. ‘At least we have an idea of what we are searching for, but finding a necromancer’s lair is easier said than done. And even if we did find it, how would we go about approaching it? It’s not as if we will be invited for tea and cakes upon our arrival.’

‘I don’t care,’ Elle said. ‘I am not going to let him die, Loisa. I will not.’

Loisa’s expression softened. ‘None of us want him to die. I know you love him, my darling. But we need to be clever about this. Taking on a necromancer is not something one attempts lightly. Personally, I don’t mind so much. I have less to lose than you do. But you might well end up as one of these ticking things and that is not something we can afford, to happen – now can we *Madame Oracle?*’

Elle looked up at the ceiling in frustration. ‘And somehow we always end up back at the infernal business of me being the Oracle. Some days I wish I could just tear down that barrier and be done with the whole lot.’

Loisa smiled. ‘As do all the those who dwell in the Shadow, but we both know that this is something that cannot be. Chaos would ensue and you would have the blood of all those who would die on your hands.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Tell me, how fares the great divide?’

Elle stared out the window into the darkness. ‘The barrier is fine, I suppose. Apart from a few odd wobbles, that is.’

‘Oddwobbles? What is this word Oddwobbles? I don’t know it.’

‘It’s what a jellied mould or a pudding does when you move it,’ Elle said, ‘I don’t know. Like someone was prodding the barrier. I know people and creatures from the Shadow have been trying to cross over for thousands of years – since the barrier was in put there. Normally they simply bounce back, but lately it’s as if things are different. It felt a bit like someone or something was pushing into the folds – as I can do.’

Loisa frowned. ‘Do you think there is another oracle?’

‘I doubt it. The Council of Warlocks would have found her by now. Elle gave a cynical laugh. ‘I would have been swiftly relieved of my duties by now if there were someone else.’

‘Perhaps someone who would be capable of assuming the powers of the Oracle?’

Elle shrugged. ‘I honestly don’t know. There was an incident the other night at the opera. I thought I saw a strange woman and she was affecting the barrier, but she got away.’



‘Perhaps the two incidents are related,’ Loisa said.

‘Who knows?’ Elle replied. ‘That woman could be anywhere by now.’

Loisa frowned. ‘I know of very few creatures of Shadow or Light for that matter who could penetrate the barrier like that.’

Elle sat forward. ‘Do you think a necromancer could?’

Loisa shrugged. ‘I am not a scholar. My knowledge is very limited on these things.’

‘Perhaps we might go and see someone who could help,’ Elle said. ‘Do you know any occult scholars who might know?’

Loisa sat back and thought for a while. ‘We could try one of the Sectarrians... but they have their spies and I’m not so sure that we want the Council of Warlocks to know about Hugh. Who knows what they might do if they found out?’

Elle shivered. As usual Loisa had hit the nail squarely on the head. Marsh was her only protection against the nefarious plans the Council had for her. These included, among other things, a scheme to lock her up in a cave while they drained power through her until she died. If they knew Marsh was indisposed, or dead for that matter, they might decide to come for her.

‘You are right, Loisa. That is a bad idea.’

‘Hold on a moment.’ Loisa gave her a sly smile. ‘What about our new friend, Jasper Sidgwick?’

‘Do you think we can trust him?’ Elle felt her excitement grow. ‘Would he even know anything?’

Loisa shrugged. ‘I don’t know. What I do know is that he is a hopelessly ineffectual occultist with a magnificent collection of antique books. I had the

pleasure of listening to him recount the catalogue all the way from Leadenhall to his house yesterday,' she said drily.

'And you think he might have something?'

'He might do.'

'And yet he seems to know nothing of the Council. It is quite extraordinary that someone so educated could be so ignorant,' Elle mused. She sat forward, suddenly enthusiastic. 'Perhaps we should pay him a call. He did after all invite us to one of his meetings.'

'I think that is exactly what we should do,' Loisa said. She stood up and straightened her skirts.

Half an hour later, the steam-powered Stanley auto-mobile that was Lord Greychester's pride and joy, trundled out of Grosvenor square, buffeted by the strong wind and icy rain. Elle drove and Loisa navigated. This was perhaps not the most efficient system given that the Nightwalker did not know London all that well, but she was an even worse driver so it was decided that she would keep a lookout. At least Loisa could see in the dark, so they managed all right. The trees waved and shuddered in the wind as they made their way through Green Park and down the Mall.

'Good thing we have the car,' Elle said over the noise of the engine and the storm. 'Horses would have been impossible on a night like this.'

'I think you are right,' Loisa said, as she held on to her top hat to stop it from blowing off. They were both wearing goggles to keep the wind and rain out of their eyes.

'The tavern is below the Savoy Hotel. I have stayed at the Savoy on countless occasions and I never thought to look in on it. Just to the left,' Loisa

said.

Elle turned the steering and they trundled down the Strand towards the hotel. Apart from the odd hurrying straggler, the streets were again empty. ‘See if you can find somewhere close by for us to park,’ Elle said. Finding parking in the West End was always a veritable nightmare, even at this time of night.

Fortunately, Loisa spotted a folly of plane trees near the Embankment gardens. Elle cast a wary eye over the Stanley as she pulled up underneath them. Curse Marsh for his vanity. The white paintwork and chromed rivets gleamed even in this bad light. Could the man not have chosen a black automobile like a normal person? Elle hoped against hope that the motor would not be too conspicuous and that it would be safe and unharmed when they got back.

‘The pub. It’s this way.’ Loisa dragged Elle by the arm up the little hill behind the Savoy Hotel. They stopped under the flickering street lights outside a door with a heavy brass knocker that looked like the head of a wolf.

‘This must be it.’ Loisa lifted the knocker and banged on the door six times.

A small peephole opened and someone on the other side studied them.

‘The wolf howls not only when the moon is full,’ Loisa drawled. The peephole closed and Elle heard the bolts slide open.

‘Jasper told me the password last night,’ she whispered to Elle.

A man dressed in shirtsleeves let them in. His gaze flickered over Elle’s leather coat and jodhpurs for a moment, but he said nothing. Elle shook the water off her sleeves and took off her aviator cap and goggles. They had done a remarkable job of keeping her hair dry.

‘State your business,’ the man grunted.

Surreptitiously, Elle clenched her elbow to her side. Her revolver was sitting safely in its corset holster, was reassuring.

‘Is Jasper Sidgwick here this evening?’ Loisa enquired.

The doorman huffed. ‘Downstairs. You’ll find him in the cellar. You’re late.’

‘Thank you.’ Loisa gave him one of her alluring smiles, but it seemed to have no effect on the doorman. He did, however, shuffle aside to let them pass.

They climbed a set of narrow stairs that led down to what Elle assumed to be the cellar. Above her, she noted the heavy black beams that made up the floor of the pub above them. The sound of people talking over the noise of the piano filtered down through the boards.

‘Sounds like a jolly establishment,’ Elle said.

They reached a set of black doors, ornately decorated with all kinds of esoteric symbols. Inside was the low hum of voices singing a solemn hymn. The sound of the occultists’ voices was out of keeping with the jolly celebrations that were going on upstairs.

‘Just play along and, for heaven’s sake, don’t do anything that might give us away.’ Loisa lifted the latch and the heavy door creaked open.

‘Jasper! Are you here?’ she called out in her deep musical voice, as they entered the cellar.

Elle gave her a sardonic smile. Attending an occultist meeting was just about the last thing she wanted to do, but if needs must then they certainly would.

## Chapter Twenty-one

The singing stopped rather abruptly when they entered the cellar. Elle and Loisa turned to face a congregation of about eight people all sitting in a circle on benches.

Jasper was standing in the middle of the room dressed in rather fetching velvet robes of emerald green. His face lit up when he saw them. ‘Ladies! Welcome to our humble society,’ he beamed.

There was a murmur of agreement from the others in the room. The inside of the cellar was lit by a multitude of candles wedged into every crevice and sconce. Large stalactites of wax hung from the walls and candelabra. The cellar looked like it hailed from the days before spark had replaced coal: the fine dust had stained the walls pitch black. Even Elle had to admit that it was the perfect place to hold occult meetings.

‘Jasper! Thank you for inviting us,’ Loisa cooed.

‘Sorry we’re late. Terrible weather,’ Elle said in an attempt to be polite. She stepped forward and immediately hesitated, balancing her weight on her toes. She looked down. The tips of her boots were on the edge of a Delphic circle, inlaid entirely in a black and white pattern. She grabbed Loisa’s arm.

‘Careful,’ Loisa murmured as she steered Elle around the edge with her supernatural strength.

‘This is certainly a surprise. I did not think you would come,’ Jasper said. ‘Do sit down. We have just started.’ He gestured for them to sit on the benches.

He resumed his position in the centre of the room and the singing began

again.

Elle rolled her eyes as she mumbled along in tune to the music, hoping against hope that this would be over quickly, for she could feel time ticking away for Marsh with every beat of her heart.

‘All right then, everyone. If you could please join hands, we will begin with our séance,’ Jasper said.

Elle and Loisa joined hands with the other eight people in the room.

‘We call on the spirits of the departed, asking them to cross the divide between living and dead,’ Jasper said, rather dramatically.

‘We call on the spirits,’ the others murmured.

Elle pressed her lips together. She had her very own set of ghosts who spoke to her regularly, but judging by their recent and rather blissful silence, they were still unhappy with her after their last argument at the police station. Elle just hoped they wouldn’t do something embarrassing or too revealing. She wasn’t too worried though. Judging by the potency of the séance she was witnessing, Jasper would be lucky if he managed to conjure up the spirit of a dead mouse, let alone a former Oracle.

‘Is someone there?’ Jasper turned his face to one side as if he was listening for something. ‘We ask that the spirit who has come forward, please make itself known to us,’ he murmured.

‘We ask this,’ the others intoned.

There was a brief, breathless moment where it felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. All the candles went out and they were plunged into darkness.

More than one of the ladies present let out a little cry of surprise.

‘Maintain the circle, please,’ Jasper warned. Elle felt her fingers go numb as the woman next to her gripped her hand with fervour.

Elle sighed. Please spirits of the oracle, not now. I really don’t want to have to explain myself to these good people, she prayed silently.

‘I am getting a name!’ Jasper said in the dark.

‘It’s something with a V... Vivienne!’

Elle sat up straight. Vivienne was the name of her late mother. Her mother had been the Oracle before her, but she had died when Elle had been very young.

‘Vivienne. Thank you for joining us,’ the others murmured.

‘She says that her daughter is here. Is there a daughter of a Vivienne present?’ Jasper asked.

‘Yes,’ Elle mumbled, hoping that no one would recognise her voice in the dark.

‘What would you like to say to your daughter, Vivienne?’ Jasper asked.

‘Use me as your vessel to communicate. You are in a circle of safety here.’

Suddenly, Jasper’s voice changed. It became higher, more feminine. The voice sounded high and strained, as if the speaker were in distress and fighting to make herself heard. ‘My darling, I don’t have a lot of time. The others don’t know I am here and I cannot fight the banishment placed upon us for very long,’ the voice said.

Elle felt a lump rise in her throat. These words were touching that painful part of her childhood she did not readily share with others.

‘I want you to know that I am terribly proud of you. And I am so very sorry that I cannot be there to guide you. This path of ours is not easy, but the

rewards will be infinite.’ Jasper’s voice echoed in the darkness.

‘What do we need to do to help him, Vivienne?’ Loisa said.

Elle poked her friend with the toe of her boot to try and shut her up.

‘Look for the Lady in White. She has the answers. He can be saved . . .’

Jasper’s voice trailed off.

‘Where is she, this lady?’ Loisa said.

‘She is near water. Always near water. Follow the storms. And beware of the shadows. Don’t go into the garden alone at night.’

‘But where is the garden?’ Loisa said again, but the ghost ignored her.

‘Eleanor, you need us. You must unbanish us. Please!’

‘Mother!’ Elle blurted out, but the voice was gone.

The others in the room started muttering and shifting around in the dark. Jasper was the first to regain his composure and he set about re-lighting the candles.

‘Did you hear that?’ one of the women squeaked.

‘Do you think it was an actual ghost?’ a man asked excitedly. ‘Did anyone take notes?’

Clearly this was a momentous incident for this society, but Elle had had enough. She let go of Loisa’s hand and the hand of the woman next to her.

‘The spirit has left,’ Jasper muttered, sounding more than a little disappointed.

‘Perhaps it was for the best,’ Elle said.

The others stared at Elle in amazement ‘But why did you come to this meeting if you did not want to communicate with the dead?’ one man asked.

Elle did not answer. The last thing she wanted to do right now was to confront



the memories of her mother in front of all these strangers. And yet, the aching longing she had lived with for all her life felt somehow less. Her own mother – the one who was Oracle before her – had reached out across the void to speak to her.

‘Jasper, may we have a word? In private please,’ Elle said.

Jasper turned to his fellow society members. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the spirit who spoke was most powerful and I fear that she has taken it out of me somewhat. Shall we adjourn until next week when we can compare notes and thoughts on this evening’s meeting?’

Others murmured in agreement. ‘Drinks upstairs in ten minutes,’ one of the men suggested.

‘Very well, then. Till next week. I am looking forward to reading everyone’s findings on what has been a most exceptional meeting.’ He spread his arms and herded everyone out of the cellar with a little more speed than courtesy.

‘Well then, ladies. How may I be of assistance?’ he said to Elle and Loisa once everyone else had left the cellar. ‘Better come with me to the back where we can speak in a little more privacy.’

He gestured to an old velvet curtain that separated a part of the cellar from the rest. Behind the curtain was what looked like an office and a storeroom. There was a table overflowing with all manner of books and scrolls. On the shelves behind it, boxes of candles and other divination paraphernalia sat neatly in rows. Mr Sidgwick was clearly a highly meticulous man.

‘This is where our little club keeps the things we need for our rituals. Sorry for the mess, we don’t normally allow people back here,’ Jasper said

apologetically. He lifted his robes from his shoulders and carefully hung them on a wooden clothes stand by the desk.

Elle looked at one of the open books on the table. It was a book on alchemical runes and formulae. She shuddered and looked away from the concentric circles. Alchemy was her least favourite subject.

Jasper ran his hand over the patch at the back of his head that was thinning a bit. ‘Our society is not devoted to just one discipline. We are scientists and we use this place to study all forms of the occult,’ he explained with a touch of pride. ‘We also engage in all manner of occult practices. Fortune telling, communicating with the dead, mesmerism. In fact, I am currently postulating the theory that the channelling of power comes via an independent source, a cornerstone, if you like, and I am working on a way to access that power. Just think of how wonderful we could make the world if we could harness all the energy in it – not just spark. Just think of all we could achieve if we had access to infinite energy.’

‘But isn’t that inordinately dangerous? You could throw the whole world into anarchy if you get it wrong.’ Elle gave Loisa an anguished look. She was not about to tell Jasper that *she* was the way that all that power could be accessed. ‘Knowledge of such things usually comes at a price, Jasper. The question is whether you are prepared to pay that price,’ Elle added.

Loisa laughed. ‘Nonsense. I think Jasper proved with-out a doubt that he is most fearless in the face of adversity.’

Jasper blushed. ‘It was nothing. I am very pleased to have been able to get so close to the creatures. But tell me, how is the one that you caught?’

‘My husband is fine. Resting at home,’ Elle said.

‘You should bring him to our meeting. I am sure all our members would

love to see it up close.'

Elle felt Loisa grip her elbow, warning her not to say anything.

'Jasper, we were wondering if you could help us a little with one of our experiments?' Loisa said tactfully.

'Of course. All you need do is ask.'

'Do you have anything in your collection of works on the subject of necromancy?'

Jasper thought for a moment before his face lit up. 'Of course! Why didn't I think of that sooner? It makes perfect sense.'

'But necromancers are so very rare. I thought they had all been exterminated,' Loisa said.

'Ah, even you don't know everything, my dear immortal lady,' Jasper said with a knowing smile. 'My studies have suggested that necromancy is simply a technique. Any of the magically adept can turn to the dark arts of the dead. It's just a case of learning how.'

'So a Witch or a Warlock or anyone with the Shadow in their blood could be a necromancer?' Elle asked. 'Do they learn their craft like the alchemists do?'

Jasper nodded. 'Little is known about them. I would have thought some sort of apprenticeship would be the way.'

'If I were a necromancer, where would I hide if I came to London?' Elle wondered.

Jasper let out a puff of air as he contemplated the question. 'Impossible to say. I suppose it depends on the necromancer. If they draw their power from the elements, then water would go to water. Fire to fire and so on. Specific Shadow

creatures have different predilections for certain environments. Or so the theory goes.’ He fussed around the table and pulled out an illustrated chart. It was filled with Cabbalic symbols. ‘See here. Mermaids and kelpies like water. Nightwalkers cannot abide daylight, so they favour the night.’ At this he nodded at Loisa. ‘The various fairies favour whatever plant or stone they were born of. But there are myriad sources of power. The sea, lightning, volcanoes. They could be anywhere.’

‘Lightning,’ Elle said. She looked at Loisa.

‘Actually, I have a book about necromancy. My cousin Aleister briefly explored the darker reaches of power a few years ago when he was at Oxford. He let me borrow some of his books, but I forgot to return them. He is in Paris at the moment, so I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you took a look.’

‘That would be extremely helpful,’ Elle said.

‘Very well.’ Jasper looked excited at the prospect. ‘Why don’t you come round to me tomorrow evening? I shall arrange for some tea and a cold supper and we can discuss the matter in more detail. You have the address?’

‘Yes, I will be able to find your rooms again,’ Loisa said.

Jasper smiled. ‘Splendid. I am entirely at your service,’ he said, beaming.

‘Thank you, Jasper. We will call shortly after sunset,’ Elle said.

As they turned to go, Jasper called to Loisa. ‘Um, Baroness, may I have a word in private?’ he said.

‘I’ll see you at the car,’ Elle said as she carefully stepped round the Delphic circle.

The Stanley was thankfully untouched when Elle returned to it. She waited outside the motor until Loisa returned. ‘What on earth was that all about?’ she asked her friend.

Loisa shrugged. ‘Jasper has asked if I would consider turning him to the night side.’

Elle shuddered. ‘Why would someone deliberately want that?’

‘The power. The allure of immortality. Who can say? I suspect that he has been so helpful because he was looking for an opportunity to ask me.’

‘And what will you do?’ Elle asked.

Loisa shrugged. ‘He is far too young for the burdens that those of us who walk the night must bear. I told him that we should be friends for a few years first and if he still wishes to make the transition, then I shall help him.’

‘Fair enough. Let’s see what he comes up with tomorrow night,’ Elle said.

‘My thoughts exactly. It takes a long time before one can truly know the depths of someone’s character. Turning someone to the night side is not a decision made lightly.’

Elle sighed as she got into the motor and started up the engine. ‘Loisa, I’m cold and tired. Perhaps we should go home for tonight.’

Loisa did not make any move to get into the car.

‘Well, come on, then,’ Elle said. ‘The weather is not getting any better.’

‘You go home and get some rest. I am going to take my leave from you for a little while. I have spent far more time in daylight than I should have.’

‘Oh Loisa, you should have said something!’ Elle said.

The Nightwalker shook her head. ‘Your excellent dinners have sustained me, but I need a little bit more than animal blood to build up my strength. So I think I will take a short walk through the West End before I return home.’

‘Are you sure? I could wait for you,’ Elle said.

Loisa gave her a wicked smile. ‘My dear, you forget that I am a very old,

very strong Nightwalker. I am quite accustomed to looking after myself. It is the people of London you should be worried about.'

Elle frowned. 'Surely you are not going to grab the first poor fool you find in the street, are you?'

Loisa threw her head back and laughed. 'What do you think I am? No, I know of a lovely little crypt not far from here where people go to make . . . donations. It's all perfectly civilised and completely legal.'

'At least let me send someone to collect you when you are finished.'

Loisa tutted. 'Don't worry about me. I will see you tomorrow.' And with those words, she slipped off into the night.

## Chapter Twenty-two

Clothilde threw her hands in the air and howled in frustration. ‘What do you mean he got away?’

Emilian hung his head. ‘The minders lost him on one of their training walks, mistress.’

‘And who told you to let him out? I thought I made it clear that the tall one was special. He was to stay within these walls at all times.’ Dark clouds roiled in the sky above Battersea and great purple flashes of lightning crackled between the high towers of the monastery as her temper raged.

‘I’m sorry, mistress, but the monks opened the cages for the minders last night. I didn’t see that they let him out until he was gone.’

‘And whose responsibility is it to supervise these stupid little men?’

Emilian bowed. ‘Mine, mistress,’ he said.

‘So it is your fault and more so for trying to blame your underlings. Emilian, I am deeply disappointed in you.’

‘I am sorry, mistress.’ He kept his eyes trained on the ground as he spoke, but even now he exuded an air of subversive arrogance that she found deeply annoying. As if she could not see through his feigned subservience.

‘Did they even see where he went?’ she seethed.

‘He was with the group that went out hunting for recruits near the Tower Bridge docks. The minders say they were ambushed. People waiting in the shadows as if they were expected. There was a woman and a Nightwalker. I’m

not sure if I believe them, but Vargo says that the women stole him and ran off.'

'How is that possible?' she said. 'Do you honestly think I am that stupid? All my walkers are spellbound. They cannot be separated from the herd unless I will it.'

'I know, mistress. Vargo must have made a mistake.'

'Well, go and find out what really happened!' she shouted.

'Yes, mistress.' Emilian tipped his hat and made to leave, seemingly grateful for the opportunity to escape.

'And Emilian,' she said as he reached the door. 'I want him back undamaged. Whatever it takes. Don't make me regret saving that little sister of yours.'

Emilian turned and glared at Clothilde. His dark eyes blazed with anger. 'You leave my sister alone,' he said through gritted teeth. 'We may work for you and call you mistress, but know this, *La Dame Blanche*, we are no one's slaves.'

'Enough of this insolence, you miserable little cockroach!' Clothilde screeched. With a flick of her wrist, she summoned the power of the storm above her and flung Emilian from her chambers into the hallway. He landed on the hard floor with a satisfying thump. As a final touch, she made the door slam behind him for effect.

She turned and stalked to the large bank of windows behind her. From this room she could see London as it sprawled out before her, shrouded in the purple storm clouds that followed her everywhere she went.

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. That Emilian had given her such a



headache. Sometimes the temptation to throw them into the machine almost too much to resist, but she needed them. As a trueborn son of the travelling people, he was immune to her powers and charms and it was most necessary that she had someone she could rely on, but whom she did not affect. Emilian did not know this, but his presence served as a grounding mechanism, much like a lightning rod assisted in a storm. She also needed them for their knowledge of London. These were the only reasons she kept the brother and sister alive.

Clothilde glared out into the driving rain. Her beautiful Warlock was gone. And it was all due to the utter incompetence of the electromancers in her charge. It was yet again time to meter out some much needed discipline.

One of the electromancers knocked softly on the door.

‘What is it?’ she snapped.

‘It’s time for the feeding, mistress,’ he whispered. ‘You said to call when it was time.’

‘I’ll be there in a moment.’

The little monk bowed his head and retreated.

‘You!’ She pointed at the monk.

The little man froze.

‘Tell me . . . who was the monk in charge of letting our soldiers out of their cages last night?’

‘I—I’m not sure, ma’am,’ he muttered.

‘Well, can you find out?’ she said, her voice suddenly silky with menace.

‘I surely can, ma’am.’

‘Then do so. And bring him to me.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Clothilde strode along the gallery, her white robes billowing behind her. She was on her way to the control room where she could conduct tonight’s feeding. As she passed, the electromancers bowed and retreated into the shadows and long narrow passageways that made up the galleries.

The monastery was built in a large rectangle with a chimney at each point. Each chimney reached high up into the sky and was designed to collect the lightning the electromancers needed to make spark. In the middle of the complex was a cavernous glass-covered courtyard, which the electromancers called the spark turbine hall. It was in this hall that the electromancers channelled the static electricity that they fed into the turbines, where it was mixed with the magic they drew from the Shadow. Once combined, the bright blue spark was fed into massive holding tanks. Some was pumped into glass cylinders and tanks to be sent off to power airships and assist all manner of steam-powered machines. The rest was piped along the network into the city where it was used for light, heating and the grinding machines that made the city run.

Clothilde gave a small smile of satisfaction as she climbed the square staircase that led up to the control room. Despite her misgivings, the Consortium could not have chosen a better place to set up a factory. Here she had all she needed to bring their plans to fruition.

The only problem was that the monastery was so large that it was almost impossible to police on one’s own. Especially since she was surrounded by such weakness and incompetence. Grudgingly, she had to admit that the little

men did work very hard once motivated, and apart from a few newspaper headlines proclaiming shortages, they managed to produce enough spark to stop anyone from noticing what was really going on under their very noses. She had to admire that.

Emilian was waiting for her in the control room.

‘I thought I sent you on an errand,’ she said as she stared out the finely panelled glass windows. Some of them had been opened, allowing sound to reach her from the hall below.

‘All done. The culprit took only moments to find,’ he answered drily. ‘I thought it would be more fun to watch the spectacle up here with you.’ He gave her a sarcastic smile which made her ache to slap him.

Below them, a section of the turbine hall had been fenced off with sturdy cattle pens. In these pens, her undead soldiers waited in silence for her to command them. The only sound they made was the ticking of their clockwork hearts which beat in unison with her own. Eight hundred so far. Eight hundred fearless soldiers, incapable of feeling pain. Each one set to obey every command given by the one who commanded them.

A group of electromancers shuffled in through a side gate. One of them stepped forward nervously.

‘Are you the one who was in charge of these yesterday?’ she said through the speaking tube. The voice conveyance replicator squeaked and whined and a few electromancers flinched.

‘Well? Are you?’ she said, this time a little more carefully.

‘Yes . . . yes I am,’ the monk said.

‘Stay where you are. The rest of you, please go to your designated viewing

posts. Vargo, Hutch: let the feeding commence.’

Two of the minders she had employed nodded and signalled for the main doors to be opened. A herd of bewildered goats were ushered into the hall. They were wet and shivering from the cold outside.

The undead shifted. A few grunted as the goats leaped and bumped against each other, bleating as they sensed impending danger.

Vargo and Hutch closed the doors, securing them with the heavy iron crossbar. She watched them climb the spiral stairs to the first floor gallery where the other electromancers had taken their places as they had been commanded. They were all to watch the feedings. This was her way of showing them the magnificence of her creations. It was also a warning for those who disobeyed.

‘Everything set?’ she asked.

Vargo nodded.

The monk who remained on the ground looked at the goats with a growing sense of horror. ‘M–mistress! What about me?’ His voice echoed through the hall.

Clothilde ignored him.

‘Electromancers! Let this be a lesson to you,’ she said through the speaking tube. ‘I will not tolerate disobedience or incompetence in any form. This is the fate that awaits anyone who displeases me or who disobeys my orders.’

The electromancers stirred. A few muttered and looked on with worried faces.

Clothilde pointed at the guilty monk and in an instant he was floating in the air. The man gasped in surprise as she dropped him; he fell in the middle of the

herd of frightened, bleating goats.

‘Please. Please... don’t. I am sorry for what I have done. I did not mean to let him out. I–I didn’t know,’ he begged.

Clothilde did not waver. She raised her other hand and made a turning motion – as one would do with a key in a lock.

As one, like the visors of the knights of old but in reverse, the muzzles of all eight hundred undead slipped down from their faces to reveal their open gaping mouths. Some of them were drooling profusely at the smell of goat and man, so close.

Clothilde closed her eyes and drew a globule of power into herself. Then she exhaled and projected her will across the gallery. ‘Go, my children. Feed,’ she said.

Suddenly, the undead all started moving. Without hesitation, they set upon the terrified goats, tearing great chunks of living flesh and feeding in the gush of blood that ensued. The last that was heard of the poor doomed electromancer was a thin wailing cry as he was overwhelmed by the surging undead.

Clothilde wrinkled her nose at the sight of entrails and death as she watched the feeding frenzy below. Soon the only thing left would be a few blood splatters as her soldiers devoured everything before them - bone and skin included.

Emilian did not flinch at the sight before him, but she could see a small muscle jumping in his cheek as he ground his teeth together. .

‘That is part of the beauty of their design,’ Clothilde said. ‘They will clean up the mess of war by gorging themselves on the enemy, thus negating the

need for supply trains. It is indeed the work of genius, don't you think?'

'Some might call it madness,' Emilian said through clenched teeth.

'Madness is often the prerequisite for genius, my dear Emilian. With control of the stock markets of the world, the banks and this army, the Consortium will soon be unstoppable,' she said.

'Then the Fates help us all,' Emilian said. He turned and strode out of the control room.

Clothilde smiled. That was a lesson well learned. Emilian would think twice before defying her again.

'Once the feeding is completed, please ensure that all soldiers are safely in their cells. It is time to commence the next batch of Making,' she said through the speaking tube.

Those waiting for her commands sprang into action as they started preparing the enormous machine that was on the other side of the hall for this evening's work.

How did they manage to lose the Warlock? Clothilde let out another sigh of irritation. When she had done the conversion, she had not erased all that he was. She had kept a little. She found that it made him more intelligent, more capable of being civilised and while he was settling in with his new heart she had painstakingly unstrapped the nodule of power he held compressed inside him. She was very surprised when, even once released, she could not access his power. It was almost as if he was fighting her, refusing to yield to her will. Even though she knew that it would only be a matter of time before he yielded, the challenge of breaking his resistance had fascinated her.

And now he was gone. She slammed her fist down on the counter with such

force that the corner of one of the glass panes in the windows before her cracked.

She lifted the ornate brass key from around her neck and examined it.

‘I don’t know where you are, my love, but at some stage you will come back to me. I have worked it that you will be compelled to seek me out before the clock spring inside you winds down. When we are reunited and when this work is done, we will go away from this place. We will go to a place where we will be together forever.’

Clothilde felt a shiver of anticipation. What sweet magic they would make together one day. In response, purple fingers of lightning crackled in the clouds above the building. Yes, it would be good to have a mate to share things with, she thought. She had been alone for far too long.

## Chapter Twenty-three

The next evening, Elle and Loisa found themselves in a horse-drawn hansom heading for the suburb of Soho where Jasper lived.

His rooms, as was fashionable for unmarried gentlemen living in London, were just off Denmark Street. This was one of the slightly less salubrious parts of the West End, but a favourite with occultists, bohemians, absinthe drinkers and those other folk who liked to indulge in the various opium dens and private clubs that dotted the place.

‘Here is good enough, driver,’ Elle said. The cab trundled to a halt in Charing Cross Road, causing a slight traffic jam as they got out.

The driver pulled off before she could tell him to wait for them, leaving them standing on the pavement.

‘Well, that was rude,’ Elle said.

‘Oh, never mind. This is far too early to be awake,’ Loisa muttered. She stretched as gracefully. ‘Especially after yesterday’s adventure.’ Loisa was once again dressed in her black leather trouser outfit and the two of them were drawing more than one surreptitious glance from passers-by. Two ladies dressed in leather coats and trousers was something which drew attention, even in Soho.

Loisa, true to form, started smiling and winking at some of the gentlemen who walked by.

‘Loisa! Contain yourself. We’re wasting time,’ Elle said struggling to



contain her impatience.

Loisa turned her attention to her. 'My, we are a little grouchy this evening. But never fear. Jasper's lodgings are just up ahead.'

They knocked at the door, which was opened by an ancient lady with a crooked back.

'We are here to see Mr Sidgwick. He is expecting us,' Elle said.

'I'm afraid he's not here,' Jasper's landlady said. 'But do come in. It's not seemly for ladies to stand in the street. You can wait in the front room.' She stood aside to let them into the hall. It was a damp, sweaty-looking place with paint flaking off the casements and greyish patches on the walls.

'Upstairs?' Elle said.

'Second floor, but I've already told you, Mr Sidgwick is not there.' The landlady was looking visibly distressed.

'Loisa, come,' Elle said as she passed the landlady and strode up the stairs to the second floor. They stopped outside a door that was also in need of a fresh coat of paint.

'Jasper?' Elle rapped on the door. The sound echoed through the dank stairwell, but there was no answer.

'That's odd. He did say that we should come shortly after dark.'

Elle tried the door handle. It turned and the door sprang open. 'Not locked, then.'

Loisa pressed her perfect lips together for a moment. 'Best we proceed with caution. I'll go first,' she said as she entered the rooms.

'Good heavens,' Loisa exclaimed. Jasper's rooms were in a most deplorable state of chaos. The furniture he owned was all upturned. Books, papers and

other bits of occult paraphernalia were strewn around, intermingled with discarded bed linen and what appeared to be the contents of a featherdown pillow.

‘What a mess! What happened here?’ Loisa breathed.

Elle reached inside her coat and drew out her Colt. ‘Well, my guess is that Jasper did actually know something, but someone has beaten us to it.’

Loisa looked at her in alarm. ‘Do you think they’ve taken him, like . . . Hugh?’

Elle closed her eyes as the the image of Hugh flashed through her mind. ‘It’s possible.’

‘I told you he wasn’t here.’ The landlady had finally managed to shuffle up the stairs. ‘The place was like this when I got up this morning. There has been no sight or sound of poor Mr Sidgwick. Do you think we should alert the police?’

Elle shrugged. ‘Given past experiences, I doubt they’ll do anything about it.’

‘Poor Jasper.’ Loisa ran her fingers along the edge of the upturned desk. Her fingers were white against the polished mahogany.

‘Would you mind giving us a few moments?’ Elle asked the landlady.

The landlady looked a bit dubious. ‘Well, if you promise not to disturb anything further I suppose it could be all right, but I’ve got my eye on you,’ she said.

‘Thank you, we are ever so grateful,’ Elle replied as the landlady shuffled off into the shadows.

‘I wonder whether the book is still here. Most of it looks frightfully boring

if you ask me.’ Elle started rifling through the papers strewn on the floor.

‘Strange.’ Loisa pursed her lips. ‘I suspect nothing has been taken. Except Jasper. And the overturned furniture in the room suggests that he put up quite a fight.’ She picked up one of the overturned chairs and sat down in it.

‘Loisa, have a look at the shelves. See if there is anything that might relate to the undead. Some of the books Jasper mentioned might still be there.’

Elle lifted a leather-bound volume up off some papers where it had been discarded, open and face down. She wrinkled her nose in annoyance as she carefully closed the book and eased the binding into place. She hated it when people mistreated books.

‘All these tomes look the same to me,’ Loisa said. ‘See, some are in languages even I can’t recognise.’

Elle found a gap in the row of books where a poor abused volume seemed to have been removed. She picked it up to slip it into place, but there was something in the way. She put her hand into the gap and pulled out a manila folder. It had been wedged in between the books on the shelf.

‘What is this?’ Carefully she opened the folder. ‘Press cuttings and the back pages of penny dreadfuls where hangings and missing people are reported,’ she muttered as she leafed through the pages. ‘These are all recent. Look.’

Loisa picked up an overturned occasional table and they spread the contents of the folder out on it. Before them, the headlines of newspaper clippings from almost every major London newspaper stood out in bold black letters:

SPARK SHORTAGE LOOMS. ELECTROMANCERS IN TALKS WITH AUTHORITIES.

Another read: WETTEST WINTER IN LIVING MEMORY RECORDED. FEAR OF FLOODING.

A further article was the same one Elle had read just days before:

TICKING MONSTERS PROWL THE STREETS. PUBLIC ADVISED TO STAY INDOORS.

The rest of the cuttings referred to people disappearing along with various advertisements in the obituary columns for people presumed dead.

‘I think he was working on the theory that the problems with the electromancers are somehow linked to the disappearances. But how?’

At the back was a list of names, written in Jasper’s scrawl.

Loisa leaned in over her shoulder. ‘That’s a lot of people, if those are the missing. See. He even has Hugh’s name.’ She pointed at the list. ‘I think dear Jasper knows far more than he let on.’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’ Elle gathered up the clippings and slipped the folder into her holdall. ‘I’m willing to bet that whoever took Jasper is behind what happened to Marsh.’

‘Well, then,’ Loisa said, gathering up her top hat and gloves, ‘I suggest that we pay the electromancers a little visit. What do you say?’

*Life among the travelling folk is not so bad.*

*My new mistress has turned out to be a lot kinder than I had feared. Below all the hardness she exudes, there is softness in her.*

*But she keeps me tied to this place with her red silk, even though I am quite content to stay. And all things considered, she does always make sure that I am looked after, for the travelling folk understand the way of fairies. She has even given me my own fern to sit in during the day.*

*I am starting to enjoy the freedom that the wagons bring. It is far preferable to the stuffiness of my last home. I always dreamed of being a fine lady in a big house with servants, but in the end, all that English pretentiousness did not suit me after all. For no matter where I am or who I pretend to be, French blood burns in my veins.*

*My new mistress worries. She spends hours studying the cards laid out on a silk cloth. She peers into the future without really knowing what she sees, for she is no Oracle. It is only when the man with the peacock feather shows up that she relaxes.*

*He stepped into the wagon, bringing the stink of horses and the street with him.*

*'Emilian! Boots outside,' my mistress says.*

*'Sorry.' He kicks his boots off and shoves them out the door.*

*She goes up to him and they embrace. 'What news do you bring, dear brother?'*

*He sighs and rubs his eyes as if to rub away a great tiredness from them. 'The same. She is as insane as ever. Would you believe that she actually tried to trick me into making a promise of servitude?'*

*Florica, for that is the pretty name of my new mistress, tuts with disapproval.*

*'Have you eaten?' she says.*

*'No. There is no proper food in that place. The little men live on gruel and dry bread. And her highness lives off pure evil.' He spits into the glowing heart of the stove as if to rid his mouth of an awful taste in.*

*'Here, have some stew. Good rabbit. The boys caught some last night. I made it with dried apricots.' She spoons the stew into a bowl for him and I can smell hints of clove and parsley that rise up from the pot.*

*He picks up the spoon and starts eating. The flavours must have pressed his hunger, for he cleans out the bowl, mopping up the last bits with a crust of bread.*

*'I don't like it, Emilian. We should never have become involved with that woman. The women here say I have the shadow of darkness hanging over me. They make the sign of the eye at me when I go to fetch water.' She sighs. 'Perhaps they are right. I have nightmares about all those lost souls at night.' Her fine brow crinkles as she speaks.*

*'I wouldn't worry if I were you. You know we had no real choice in the matter. She would have let you die.'*

*My mistress sighs. 'Don't remind me of that.' Her fingers go to the row of buttons in her dress, slightly to the left. 'So how fares the lady?'*

*'She's very angry with me. One of the monks let her pet go roaming with the others in the night and someone stole him.' Emilian laughs. 'I mean, who would steal something like that?'*

*'Perhaps someone who cares about him,' Florica says. 'You forget that*

*those things were all once people with families. Would you not come looking for me if I went missing?’*

*Emilian put down his spoon and smiles at his sister. ‘Of course I would.’*

*‘I suppose you should find out who the man is and then see if you can find his family, his home. That’s where I would look,’ she says.*

*‘You are the cleverest little sister in the world, did you know that?’*

*‘Why do you say that?’ she asks.*

*‘Well, Mistress Evil was so angry that she fed the monk who did it to the creatures and now I am out looking for whoever stole him so she can get revenge. A loved one or family...’ He mulls the thought over in his mind. ‘Of course, that’s exactly who took him. All I need to do is trace his steps home and I will find him again.’*

*‘Oh, Emilian, do be careful,’ Florica says.*

*‘Don’t worry. I’ve already got some very useful information. You don’t go around making a spectacle of yourself without attracting some-one who will be a witness. I am paying a pretty penny to find out what her evilness wants to know.’*

*‘Do you really have to do this? Can’t she just make another pet?’*

*He shakes his head. ‘Apparently this one was very special. One of a kind. But don’t worry about it, little sister. It’s only for a little while longer. Her army grows stronger each day and soon she will move on.’ He smiles at her. ‘And when that happens, we will be rich beyond your wildest dreams. I will buy you a house painted with real gold and fine dresses made of silk. And then you can languish in your drawing room while servants bring you cake. You will never have to carry heavy buckets of water again.’*

*Florica shakes her head and laughs. This was a game the two of them play often. 'I don't want a house of painted gold. It would need too much polishing.'*

*'I will buy you a wagon of solid silver with four fine white horses.'*

*'I don't want a wagon of pure silver and fine horses – they eat too much.'*

*'What do you want then, little sister?'*

*'All I want is to be happy and free with the whole world to roam.'*

*Emilian's expression softens. 'You have the true blood of the travelling folk in your veins, little sister. And because of that and no matter what happens, you will always be free.'*

*'But we are not free as long as that woman has a hold over us. I cannot take much more of this, Emilian. I tell you I cannot.'* Her lip trembles.

*He puts a hand on her shoulder to console her. 'And that is why we must let her evilness succeed. It is the quickest way to be rid of her. I promise you that it won't be very much longer. You'll see.'*

*And as I listen to them speak, I take note of their wishes. Even bound and held in this place, I still might have a few tricks up my sleeve. And sometimes, for those who are true of heart, wishes can come true.*



## Chapter Twenty-four

‘Does it ever stop raining in this city?’ Loisa scoffed as she stepped out of the cab. She lifted her shawl of the finest Spanish mantilla lace over her top hat like a veil to protect her curls from the damp.

Elle strode out into the street to look for a cab but, as was invariably the case when seeking a cab in London, there was never one to be found when needed.

They turned into Charing Cross Road and started walking towards Trafalgar Square.

‘I’ll try on this side of the road,’ Loisa said. ‘You take the other.’

‘Jellied eels, madam? The best in the West End,’ said a coster with a barrow perched on the street corner as Elle passed.

‘No, thank you,’ she said quickly. She had never been partial to eels boiled in vinegar and suspended in a jelly made from their own cartilage.

‘I have oysters too. Freshly caught,’ he offered.

‘Thank you, but no,’ she said. Then she paused and looked at the coster. He was a surly-looking man with a salt-and-pepper beard that did not do much to cover up the scars from painful diseases which had marred his life. His eyes were sharp though. This was a man who missed very little.

‘Perhaps you might help me with some information,’ she said after thinking for a moment.

‘Well, I can’t say as I know much. I tend to stick to minding me own

business, I do.'

'That a fact now?' Elle arched her eyebrows. 'And you work this corner every day?'

'Every day that God gives,' the coster said.

'Hmm. Perhaps I will try some of your eels after all,' Elle said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out two pence.

The coster took a moment to examine the money in the light of his lantern before he started spooning eels into a newspaper funnel.

'Down the road, opposite that corner, lives a gentleman. He has sandy hair and wears glasses,' Elle said.

The coster nodded slowly. 'There's many gentlemen with sandy hair round here, madam,' he said.

'He's a fellow who likes books. Involved in all sorts of funny magic business. Comes and goes at all hours. Have you seen him today?'

The coster pursed his lips. 'I may have.'

'Did you see anything unusual happen in Denmark Street today?'

'Perhaps,' the coster said, scratching his ear.

Elle pulled another coin out of her pocket. 'I will give you this shiny new shilling if you tell me what you saw.'

The coster palmed the coin and smiled at her. It seemed that they were now speaking the same language.

'It were them gypsies. The one had a peacock feather in his hat. That's the evil eye, that is. They came here while I was setting up my pitch across the road. Carried him out and loaded him into a carriage as if he were a side of beef. I thought it must have been a gambling debt or something. Didn't think

more of it.'

'Do you know where they went?'

The coster rubbed his jaw 'They headed off towards Tottenham Court Road. Could be anywhere by now.'

'Thank you kindly.'

'Much obliged, madam,' the coster said. 'Bless you and have a good evening.'

'I will,' she said. 'But before I go, where would I look if I were out to meet the travelling folk?' she said, trying for just that little bit of extra information.

The coster scratched his head. 'Well, you might want to have a look at the Black Stag pub. It's in the East End, mind. But there are loads of travelling folk in the area and the landlord lets them drink there sometimes. One of the few houses that do.'

'The Black Stag,' Elle said. 'Thank you for the tip.'

'Do take care if you go there though. The Black Stag is no place for a fine lady on her own,' the coster said.

'I found one!' Loisa called out from the inside of a steam cab that drew up beside Elle.

Elle smiled at the coster. 'Well then, it's a good thing I am not a fine lady then. Good evening to you, sir.'

She stepped into the cab and sat down next to Loisa.

'Are those eels?' Loisa wrinkled her nose at the fishy vinegary smell that emanated from the newspaper parcel Elle held.

'They are indeed. Horrible-smelling things, aren't they?'

'So what did the man say? I presume you did not purchase those for the

purpose of eating them?’ Loisa said.

‘I’m sure there is someone out there whose hungry and who will want this.’ She put the parcel on the seat next to her and smiled. It was her first proper smile in days. ‘I do believe, my dear baroness, that we have ourselves a clue.’

Loisa looked at her with expectation.

‘After the monastery, we’re going to the pub.’

‘Well, so far this isn’t going very well,’ Elle said. The cab had dropped them off just outside Battersea Park and at that moment they were standing ankle-deep in cold mud. Water dripped down in big, insulting drops from the branches of the trees above them. One hit her right on that warm spot where ear and neck connect and she shivered.

‘Jasper told me that people say it’s the mist that draws forth the Tickers,’ Loisa remarked, unaffected by the cold.

The spark monastery loomed up ahead of them. Its four chimneys were silent and ominous against the gunmetal sky.

‘They must go somewhere during the day. Do you think that this place might be it?’ Elle said. ‘I must admit that it does make for a really good place to hide. Spacious and with as much spark as anyone could possibly need.’

Loisa lifted her head and sniffed the air. ‘I smell death,’ she murmured.

‘Oi, what are you two doing standing out here, eh?’ someone said behind them.

Elle and Loisa both turned to face the man who spoke, but they were blinded by the bright beam of a spark lantern that splashed light across the grass and trees. Elle could just make out the outlines of three large men. The one with the light was close and the other two were lurking a few paces behind

him.

‘The park is closed to the public,’ one said with a menacing edge to his voice.

‘Our apologies,’ Elle said. ‘We’re a little lost. We’ll be on our way now.’ She took a step to the side.

‘Not so fast,’ the burly one said. He ran the beam of light up and down Elle’s body. It made her shudder. ‘Seeing as we’re all here now, why don’t you two pretty darlings give us a little cuddle?’

‘There’s a penny in it for each of you if you do,’ one of them said.

‘That one is mine,’ Loisa said softly.

Elle nodded and stepped aside.

Quicker as a flash, Loisa leaped into action and grabbed the man. Before he could make a sound, she tilted his head and she sank her fangs into his throat - every bit the predator that books and legends spoke of. Loisa let out a choking sound. She let go of the man and she fell to the ground gasping and clutching her throat.

‘Loisa!’ Elle ran over to where she lay curled up on the ground.

‘Silver!’ Loisa gasped. She doubled over and started vomiting bile as black as peat on to the ground.

Elle held her friend by the shoulders as she retched. ‘What do I do?’

‘Run. Get away from here,’ Loisa choked out between bouts of retching.

The man she had attacked started laughing his reddening handkerchief pushed into his thick neck. ‘That’s right, little Nightwalker. Thought you could have a bite of old Tom?’ He laughed again. ‘You nearly got me once, but not twice... Never twice. I’ve been drinking my silver every day with my porridge, just in

case we met again, so there's to be no sipping from my neck, all right?' He let out a shrill whistle. 'Vargo. Hutch. It's them two girlies from the docks. I knew they'd be back for more trouble. Let's load them up. The dark one will be dead soon, but I'm sure the Mistress won't say no to the other. At the very least, she'll want to know where her Ticker's gone off to. She's not very big, but who knows, the mistress might have a use for her.'

Loisa was on her hands and knees, dry-heaving. Her body arched in spasms every time she retched.

Elle reached inside her coat and pulled out her Colt. 'No amount of silver will stop a bullet to the chest, so don't even think about it,' she said to the two lumbering assailants who were bearing down on her. She cocked the revolver with a satisfying click. 'I have a bullet to the head for each of you, with plenty to spare in case I miss, if you take even one step closer,' she said.

They hesitated. One of the men raised his hands in a gesture of submission.

'Loisa, can you stand?' Elle said.

Loisa groaned and gagged, but she nodded.

'Then on the count of three, I am going to support you so that we can run. All right?'

Loisa nodded again.

'One . . . two . . . three!' Elle slipped her arm around Loisa and dragged her up off the ground. The two of them stumbled past the men, Elle keeping her revolver trained on their would-be attackers. The three men had spread out to catch them as if they were locked in some bizarre rugby game where Loisa was the ball. One of the men lunged at her. Elle twisted her body and shoved forwards with all her strength. She felt her shoulder connect with the soft part

of someone's abdomen. The man gasped with surprise and stumbled backwards.

'Get them! Get them!' Tom shouted as Elle and Loisa broke free and ran for cover. Elle skidded and slid under the dark branches of a yew hedge. They landed in the freezing mulch where they lay for several long silent moments, hoping the men would miss them in the dark.

Loisa groaned and retched again. She looked to be in a terrible way.

'They went this way.' She heard the trudge of hob-nailed boots on wet leaves just outside their makeshift hiding place and she held Loisa tighter, lest she make another sound that might give them away.

But Elle's attempts were in vain. A huge hand grabbed her by the collar of her coat and dragged her out of the hedge. 'Got ya!' Tom he crowed.

Without thinking, Elle turned and fired at her assailant.

The two shots she fired rang out in quick succession across the silent park.

The man let go of Elle and she heard him drop to the ground. He gave a strange little gurgling grunt, and then he lay perfectly still. A shout went up in the distance as the two others realised their comrade had fallen.

Elle's ears were ringing from the shot fired at such close quarters

'Loisa, you have to run with me. Just for a little while, all right?' she whispered.

The Nightwalker nodded and Elle dragged her up.

The two remaining henchmen were crouched over their fallen comrade on the other side of the hedge, but they both sat up when Elle and Loisa broke cover.

'Not one step closer,' Elle warned, the Colt trained on them. 'Let us go

and nobody else needs to die. Understood?’

The one she thought was called Vargo lifted both hands in a gesture of surrender.

Elle did not wait to see if he meant it. She turned Loisa round and together they stumbled along the pathway and into the street. For once the Fates were looking out for them and to her unending relief, an unsuspecting steam cab pulled up just as they stepped on to the pavement.

‘Grosvenor Square. And be as quick as you can about it. This is an emergency,’ she told the cab driver.

‘Will fresh blood help?’ Elle whispered to Loisa as they rattled through the streets. Loisa was so pale that her skin shone with a bluish hue. Black veins spread under her fine skin as the silver made its way through her system.

The Nightwalker nodded. ‘It helps us heal,’ she mumbled.

Elle sat Loisa up against the seat and wrenched herself out of her damp leather coat.

‘Wha— what are you doing?’ Loisa mumbled. Her head lolled to the side.

Elle rolled up her sleeve to expose her wrist. ‘I am not going to let you die in the back of this cab, Loisa. Not while I can do something about it.’ She held her wrist before the Nightwalker’s white lips. ‘Take some blood from me.’

Loisa shook her head. ‘No.’

‘This is a matter of life and death. Do it, damn you. Before I lose my nerve and you die.’

Loisa’s eyes flew open at the sensation of Elle’s pulse against her lips.

‘Go on! What are you waiting for?’

Elle gritted her teeth and closed her eyes as she felt the sharp jab of fang



pierce her skin.

Loisa started making strange little slurping sounds that chilled Elle to the bone, but she held herself resolute. They both knew that without blood her friend would die.

Seconds ticked by as they sat, huddled together in the dark. Elle felt herself grow woozy and she gently touched Loisa's cheek with her free hand. The Nightwalker stopped feeding and fell back against the seat. Without missing a beat, Elle quickly wrapped her handkerchief around her wrist, sealing off the puncture wound that marked her arm.

'Now we are now blood sisters,' Loisa mumbled. She closed her eyes with a little sigh.

Elle watched her for a few anxious moments. The black under Loisa's skin looked like it was slowly receding. She would probably need more nourishment before she was well, but hopefully she would make it.

And so, for the second time in three nights, Elle found herself dragging an injured loved one up the stairs of Greychester House while the doctor was summoned. At least this time there was hope. They had found the lair of the necromancer.

## Chapter Twenty-five

A large man in a bowler hat stepped off the train at Paddington Station. He had

no luggage, save for a brown leather Gladstone bag which he carried with him always.

Patrice Chevalier had come to London.

Outside the station he paused and sniffed the air. It had stopped raining, but the air was thick with freezing fog. It was the kind of damp that soaked into the lungs, filling them with the miasmatic pneumonia that could spell death.

Unperturbed by the damp, he held up his arm and hailed a cab. 'Soho, if you please,' he said in heavily accented English.

'Walk on!' said the cabbie as the hackney lurched forward. Patrice studied the clockwork taximeter which whirred and ticked as the fare mounted up.

London was such an insanely expensive city. He hated coming here.

Outside a club in Dean Street he bade the cab driver to wait for him. His business here would be quick, he was sure.

Upstairs, Police Commissioner Willoughby was at lunch. He was slicing into the hunk of rare roast beef that sat in a reddish pool in the middle of his plate.

'Police Commissioner . . . no don't get up,' Patrice said smoothly as the startled man recognised him.

Willoughby gave a little cough of surprise. He put down his knife and fork and wiped his face. 'I am so sorry, Mr Chevalier. I was not expecting you.'

‘Do you mind if I sit?’

‘Of course,’ Willoughby said, dabbing at his mouth with his napkin.

‘I like to drop in on my contacts unannounced. It keeps them on their toes.’

He pulled out one of his little black cigarillos and lit it, blowing a fine plume of scented smoke into the air. ‘It has been a while, since we’ve seen each other, no?’

‘I am glad you stopped by.’ The commissioner said, his composure back.

‘How are your clients? I trust they are well?’

Patrice gave him a sly smile. ‘I have various clients, Commissioner. Some are better than others.’ Of course, the commissioner was referring to the Council of Warlocks. Patrice had kept Willoughby on their payroll for some time – even while he was working with Marsh. Sometimes it paid to have a few secret resources.

The commissioner pushed his plate aside. ‘Well, I think I might have some excellent news for them. You know our little problem . . . the one with the red hair?’

‘Yes?’ Patrice said slowly.

‘I think I might have dispensed with the obstacle. Let’s just say that I had an important task for the viscount and it has taken him away from home. The way is open for your clients to take what is theirs.’

‘Is that so?’

‘It is indeed.’

Patrice said. He did his best to keep his expression impassive, but Willoughby was right, this was excellent news. ‘Do I want to know how you achieved this most interesting state of affairs?’

‘It’s up to you. If you don’t ask, I won’t tell. But let’s just say he’s unlikely to return home any time soon. She’s all alone.’

‘Then I shall have to pay the lady a visit.’

The commissioner grinned with glee. ‘I had the young lady in my office just a few days ago. I had her in readiness to deliver to you, all trussed up like the pretty little goose she is, but her dastardly uncle intervened and so I had no choice but to let her go.’

Patrice let out a chuckle. ‘I’d hardly call Eleanor a pretty goose. She is most extraordinarily talented when it comes to escaping capture, but you did your best, sir, and I will not hold it against you.’ He picked up his bowler hat and stood. ‘I had better be off then. I am pleased with your news.’

‘Before you go, there is the matter of my fee...’ Willoughby trailed off.

‘Payment will be forthcoming once I have confirmation that your information is correct,’ Patrice said. ‘Until then, I bid you a good day.’

The commissioner nodded and picked up his knife and fork. He stabbed into his cooling beef even as Patrice turned to go.

‘Battersea Monastery,’ Patrice said as soon as he was seated back in the cab.

‘Are you sure?’ the driver said. ‘It’s closed to the public. Lots of rumours of trouble in the area, so it’s best avoided, sir.’

Patrice inclined his head. ‘You may drop me off outside the park,’ he growled.

‘Know someone in the spark business?’ the cabbie asked as they drove off at top speed.

‘Something like that.’ Patrice was not interested in discussing his affairs with a mere driver. ‘And I’m running late.’

The cabbie took the hint and put his foot on the accelerator.

As they made their way through the congested streets, Patrice noted that London had not changed much since he last visited. Apart from the extension of the rail system, it was still the same cold, damp, over-crowded place.

They slowed to allow a spark-tram to pass. A little newspaper boy ran up next to the carriage and thrust a newspaper at the window. It read

SPARK SHORTAGES PLUNGE CITY INTO CRISIS

in big bold letters.

Patrice smiled to himself. This place had not even begun to know what the word crisis meant. It was going to be so satisfying to see these smug people running from the terror that he, Patrice Chevalier, or Sir Patrice Abercrombie as he was known in the northern parts of the country, had brought about. Yes, it would be satisfying indeed. But first he had to go and see what his newest clients were up to. The Consortium paid well and he was curious to see the work they had told him about. With their money and influence, they were so much more powerful than the Council. Eleanor would have to wait until later. If Marsh was really gone, then a few hours would not matter. He would pick her up on his way back. The thought of her surprise at seeing him again made him smile. Yes, it would be sweet to finally deliver the Oracle to the Council. This little trip to London was proving to be most profitable indeed.

The driver dropped him off outside the park gates. This meant he had to walk the last part – a task he did not relish with his bad leg. In fact, his bad leg was something he preferred not to think about at all, if he could help it. The knowledge that he was only half a man, existing partly in the Realm of Light and partly in the Realm of Shadow was a source of much bitterness for him.

Outside the heavy oak doors he paused to knock with his walking cane.

In answer, a tiding of magpies rose up from the rooftops. 'Here! Here! Here!' they crowed as they circled the two lightning collector chimneys high up in the air above him.

The door opened with a low creak to reveal a monk dressed in the grey robes.

'Good afternoon, monsieur. We have been expecting you,' the monk said. He stepped aside to allow Patrice access.

Patrice nodded at the monk and stepped inside.

'Please follow me,' the monk said.

Patrice suppressed a shiver as they walked. He did not think it possible, but the inside of the monastery was even damper and colder than it was outside.

He wiggled his knee to allay the aching tingle that ran up and down half of his body.

'Everything all right, sir?' the monk asked.

'Fine. It's an old injury that plays up when the weather is bad,' Patrice said.

He was led down into a long corridor that took them through one of the refectories and on to the control room.

Patrice felt a chill pass over his shoulders. This place made his skin crawl, but he was not a man given to fancy or squeamishness.

The lady he came to see was waiting for him on the mezzanine that overlooked the turbine hall.

Patrice fought the surge of fear and desire that coursed through him as soon as he laid eyes on her. He had been warned about *La Dame Blanche*, but no number of warnings could have prepared him for the physical impact she had

on him – on all men, if the legends were to be believed. The harlot.

‘Madame,’ he said, nodding politely.

‘Monsieur Chevalier. Enchantée,’ she said with a gracious smile, switching to French.

‘I see you have been busy.’ He motioned to the massive machine and the cattle pens that took up large parts of the turbine hall.

‘I have indeed. We have managed to produce almost a thousand of them now. They are all in cells on that side of the building.’

Patrice felt himself fill with glee. A thousand unstoppable, infallible soldiers who never tired, who did not need feeding and who were nothing but utterly obedient was almost enough to take London.

‘I will take you to see them a little later. The insertion process is working very well. I am sure you will be pleased.’

‘Quite so, madame. What better soldier is there than one who does not fear anything and who cannot be killed?’

‘Please, call me Clothilde. Would you take a coffee?’ she said.

‘I might. But don’t you have anything stronger?’

She laughed. ‘Of course. One needs it in this place. It’s always cold and damp.’ Clothilde snapped her fingers and a monk appeared with a tray.

‘Cognac if Absinthe, if you have some,’ Patrice said. ‘And don’t let the fairy out. I like to hear them scream when I light my drink. They are such bothersome creatures, are they not?’

‘Indeed. They can be,’ the lady said with a tight little smile.

Patrice sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs. ‘I have brought the new prototype as requested.’ He opened his portmanteau and pulled out a glass case. Inside was a shiny clockwork device, the size of a human heart. It was

made entirely of silver.

‘Oh, isn’t it lovely? So he has perfected the perpetual motion mechanism. These silver hearts will require no winding, they will simply keep running, yes?’

‘That’s what they claim,’ Patrice said.

Clothilde smiled. ‘The Clockmaker is indeed a master of his craft,’ she said as she took the case from Patrice.

‘I gather that you have enough silver to replicate this for the second project?’

‘Yes. My men have been hard at work liberating silverware from donors who can afford to part with some of their wealth.’

‘You mean they have been robbing houses?’ Patrice said.

Clothilde shrugged. ‘If you want to be vulgar about it, I suppose you could call it that.’

‘What about the next stage of the project?’ Patrice asked.

Clothilde looked up. ‘Ah, Emilian. You have brought the drinks. This is Monsieur Chevalier, our honoured guest.’

Patrice looked round to see a man with dark hair and eyes carrying a tray.

‘*Bonjour, monsieur.*’ Emilian bowed and set about pouring their refreshments.

‘We aim to capture the first Nightwalkers for fitting with the devices within the next few days. I believe they would make a splendid addition to our armies,’ Clothilde said, continuing the conversation.

‘The chairman will be pleased,’ Patrice said.

Clothilde smiled sweetly. ‘If the chairman is pleased, then I am pleased.’



Emilian snorted as he set the fine absinthe glass with the spoon resting over the rim before Patrice.

‘I’m sorry, did you say something?’ Patrice said.

‘Ask her about her special project. The one she’s keeping a secret,’ he said under his breath.

Patrice looked at Clothilde who was glaring at Emilian with such venom that it made the hair on his arms stand on end.

Clothilde gave a shrill little laugh that belied her composure. ‘Emilian is so impudent. He really should be whipped for speaking out of turn,’ she said sweetly.

Emilian just shrugged, seemingly unimpressed by the fury of his mistress.

‘Special project?’ Patrice said.

‘Oh, it’s nothing really. They brought in a most interesting find about a week ago. A man unlike any other. I thought him to be the perfect candidate for some of my advanced tests.’

‘Does the Consortium know?’

‘Oh, I knew you were coming, I thought I would to speak to you about the matter when you got here.’ She walked over to him and laid her hand on his arm. ‘It’s so much better doing things face to face, don’t you agree?’ She gave him one of her most alluring smiles.

Patrice felt a gentle shiver run through his body that led to a most inconvenient stirring in his loins. It had been the first such stirring Patrice had felt since his accident and he found this to be deeply disturbing in the circumstances.

‘Ah, well now that is most irregular,’ he said without showing his

discomfort. He took a sip of the mixed absinthe Emilian had placed before him. Somewhere, a fairy screamed softly.

‘So where is this project?’ Patrice said.

Clothilde looked slightly embarrassed. ‘This is where we ran into a slight problem. We fitted him with one of the special devices the Clockmaker sent, but one of these incompetent little monks let him out for the night with the others... and now he is gone.’

‘Gone?’ said Patrice.

‘Someone stole him.’

‘Someone stole him,’ he echoed. ‘And there is no way you can get him back?’

‘We are working on it, but so far we have not been successful.’

‘Why is that?’

‘We haven’t managed to locate him yet.’ Clothilde toyed with the brass key she wore on a chain around her neck. ‘We almost caught the thieves but they shot one of my men. Who would have thought it?’

‘Can’t you just catch another specimen and redo the experiment?’

She shook her head. ‘It is unlikely that we will ever find one as good. I was most surprised when I examined him. A most unusual set of circumstances. Can you imagine my surprise when I started probing him, only to find out that he was a Warlock? And not only that, but he also seemed to have bound his own powers within himself?’

Patrice froze, his drink halfway between the table and his lips.

‘I unbound the man’s powers and tied them to me of course, but even in his reduced state, he fought me.’ She gave Patrice another smile. ‘Which is why I

wanted to speak to you personally. Just think of all the power one could channel through a Warlock. There is so much one could do with such an individual, don't' you think.'

Patrice stared at her but said nothing. Slowly he set his glass down.

'You are a man of business acumen - the kind who believes seizing opportunities when they present themselves, are you not? I believe in doing so too.'

'And the thieves?'

'Bah!' Clothilde waived her hand. 'Two women. A readhead and a nightwalker. I am sure they are nothing, but one of them had a gun. My men won't underestimate them when they find them.'

Patrice paled.

'Your men are sure the thief was a woman with red hair and a gun?' he said slowly.

'That's what they tell me. And they say she was dressed in trousers. Who would have thought it?'

Patrice rose from his seat. In two strides he walked over and struck Clothilde in the face. The impact of the blow sent her flying to the floor.

Emilian looked up in surprise at the suddenness of the attack.

'You imbecile!' Patrice bellowed. Spittle flew from his mouth as he spoke.

Clothilde stood up and wiped a thin trickle of blood from her face, too shocked to say anything.

'Do you even know what you have done?' Patrice shouted. He loomed over her again, fist at the ready. 'Tell me, do you?'

She shook her head.

Patrice sat down heavily on the bench and loosened his tie. ‘*Merde*. How on earth did you manage to capture the Viscount Greychester?’

‘Viscount?’ she said.

‘Hugh Marsh, Lord Greychester. Master Warlock. Former member of the Council of Warlocks. Special envoy to the Ministry of Intelligence. And to top it all off, husband to the current serving Oracle.’

‘The Oracle?’ Clothilde’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘The Oracle is in London?’

‘Yes, the Oracle. And I happen to know for a fact that she is little, has red hair, carries a gun and wears trousers. That is her husband you took and she will stop at nothing to get him back.’ Patrice rubbed the back of his head and started laughing. ‘Oh, this is just perfect. And the best part is that you still don’t have the faintest idea what you have done.’

Clothilde had grown very serious. The only colour in her face was the angry red welt where Patrice had struck her.

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

‘Never mind that now. You were very lucky that you told me and not the chairman with this news.’

‘So what do we do?’ she said.

‘That is my question exactly and while we are at it, why are there spark shortages across the city? I thought your orders were to remain imperceptible and to ensure that none of our preparations draw anyone’s attention.’

‘We have been busy. The monks are lazy. After a long night of processing soldiers, they refuse to work the next day. It has been all I could do to get them to do as much as they have.’ Clothilde rubbed her brow. ‘In fact, I have

executed so many already that I can hardly afford to lose any more. And yet, it has only made a limited impact on the stupid little brutes.'

Patrice shook his head. 'Well, madame, in a very short time you have brought the city of London to the brink of chaos. You are very lucky that the Consortium has influential contacts within Scotland Yard who have been able to quash most of the questions that have been raised as a result of your activities.'

'I have done exactly as the Consortium ordered,' Clothilde said, with no small amount of indignation.

Patrice shook his head. 'Added to that, you have provoked the wrath of the most powerful Oracle of our age by stealing her husband. I would say that you have done an extremely poor job. I shall have to make mention of this in my report.'

'Surely not?' Clothilde said, looking uneasy. 'The Oracle?'

'Oh yes!' Patrice shook his head and lifted his trouser to reveal his leg. It was a very unpleasant sight. Part of the limb was black as night and translucent, as if it was in a completely different plane of existence. The skin around the affected area was covered in an array of terrible bruises that ranged from yellowy-green to the blackest of purples.

Clothilde gasped when she saw it.

'Yes, gasp and feel horrified, my lady. For this is what that little redhead in trousers, as you call her, did to me. She is going to crush *you* until you are nothing more than a little pile of meaningless dust, you stupid, stupid woman.'

Clothilde sank into a chair. She stared at Patrice for long moments before she spoke. 'There must be a way we can salvage this situation.'

‘There had better be because I am not leaving London until you have fixed this mess.’

She turned and gave him a radiant smile. ‘I think I have a plan. One that will resolve all of our obstacles in one brilliant stroke, but first I need to think about the details.’

A gong sounded somewhere deep inside the monastery, signalling nightfall.

Clothilde closed her eyes and moved her hands in a swirling motion. Patrice felt an icy draft in the back of his neck and then great big clouds of fog started swirling upwards and out of the chimneys above them.

She opened her eyes and stood. ‘The fog is set and it is time to set loose the hunters. Every night they bring more and more candidates. We process them as fast as the machine can produce chest devices and muzzles. By day, it stamps out the spare parts for the monks to assemble and by night it implants them into the new recruits. It is quite a remarkable thing.’ She gestured out of the control room window at the machine in the turbine hall. ‘Once we have built the chairman’s army, I intend to diversify. Just think of the legions of servants, drivers and workers we could create. They would require minimum food and lodgings and would be capable of doing three times the work that a living worker could do. We are sitting on a veritable goldmine of opportunity.’

Patrice frowned. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to adapt the machine to diversify but then again, if there was a chance that money could be made . . .

‘The automaton market never quite took off as everyone had hoped. The machines are too unreliable and expensive to maintain. But with these organic automatons, we could be on to something,’ he said.

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Clothilde said. ‘But let’s go and watch as the monks

set the hunters free.’ Below them, a group of undead soldiers were being marched out into the pens. Some of them were shackled.

‘Those ones are the most aggressive. We liberated them from a prison. They are the best ones for the task of finding more recruits. They run well as a pack and we can send them out completely unsupervised, so effective the training has been.’

‘Fascinating,’ Patrice said. He heard a small sound to his left. Before he could react, a large hand grabbed him by the neck and pushed him to the floor. A pair of cold shackles clicked around his wrists with alarming finality.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he shouted. ‘Release me, immediately!’

‘Thank you, Emilian, well done. You may have bought a few more days of life for yourself.’ Clothilde gave a sly smile and pressed her fingers to her décolletage. ‘Oh, Patrice. Can I call you Patrice? Did you honestly think you could walk in here, assault and intimidate me, and I would meekly sit back and endure it?’

‘You don’t know who you are dealing with. Release me. I demand it. Immediately!’ he barked.

She smiled. ‘I am dealing with a former airfield clerk who, by virtue of a series of unfortunate events, managed to acquire a lot of money and a dip in the black vortex. And while it is most unfortunate that my servant here let the cat out of the bag, as it were, I also know that you arrived in London alone and that despite all your bravado and brutish behaviour, you really cannot do anything else but shout.’

‘You will pay for this!’ he shouted. ‘Release me immediately!’

Clothilde patted him affectionately. ‘All in good time, *mon cour*.’

She turned to the two undead guards who had appeared at the door. ‘Take him to my laboratory. And make sure he is locked up securely. I don’t want this slimy peasant escaping.’

‘What are you doing?’ Patrice said. He was starting to get extremely worried.

‘I am working on that solution you so violently demanded a moment ago. I must say that these brass muzzles are truly excellent at silencing people who ask awkward questions. Granted, you are not nearly as desirable as my Warlock was, but with one foot firmly within the Shadow Realm, I suspect that you would nonetheless be useful to me.’

‘You can’t do that! I am your boss!’ he shouted. ‘The Consortium will not allow it.’

‘Oh yes, I can,’ she said. ‘And what do you think the Consortium will do when they find out? Now that you have given me the information about the Oracle, I think they will be extremely pleased at my resourcefulness. You, on the other hand, have outlived your usefulness. Another envoy can easily be dispatched.’

‘Wait! Let me go,’ Patrice said, panic rising in his chest as the two guards groaned and hoisted him up. ‘You cannot do this! Let me go!’ But no one listened and all he could hear were the sinister sounds of *La Dame Blanche* laughing.



## Chapter Twenty-six

‘Do you think she will be all right?’ Elle asked Dr Miller. They were both staring at Loisa as she lay in her coffin in the guest room. The black lines under her skin had faded, but she was still asleep.

‘Well, my lady, I have to be completely honest when I say that I am not exactly a specialist when it comes to Nightwalker physiology.’ Doctor Miller rubbed his chin as he contemplated the matter. ‘But, if you ask me, I would say that she must have expelled most of the toxin in the park. She has fed and she seems to be resting comfortably. She is now in the hands of Mother Nature because there is nothing more we can do but wait and see.’

Elle nodded gravely. ‘Please take a look at my husband while you are here. I think I have noticed a little bit of an improvement in him,’ she said hopefully.

The doctor looked at her with much sympathy in his eyes. ‘You certainly have had your fair share of run-ins with tragedy lately,’ he said kindly.

‘And yet, I refuse to give up hope.’ She gestured for them to move. ‘So please let us go downstairs.’

Marsh was trussed up before the fire in the drawing room. It was the turn of the professor and Mrs Hinges to watch him. The two of them were engaged in a most animated card game. An outraged Caruthers hovered in the background. The sight of the housekeeper playing cards in the drawing room with the family was almost more than the poor man could take.

‘How is he?’ Elle whispered to the butler.

‘Much the same, my lady,’ Caruthers said solemnly.

‘Ah, Elle. How is the baroness?’ the professor said, looking up from his cards.

‘Good evening, Papa. All we can do is wait and see,’ Elle said. ‘But Loisa is strong and I have every hope that she will recover.’ She walked over and rested her hand on Marsh’s pale forehead. It was cool and clammy.

‘I have more splendid news!’ the professor said. ‘Come and sit here with us while the doctor does his examination.’

Elle took a seat on the chaise next to Mrs Hinges.

‘I think I have discovered how that device in Hugh’s chest works.’ He pulled out a set of drawings he had shoved under the seat of his chair. ‘Look.’ He handed Elle the plans.

She spread them open on the card table. They were a complicated set of diagrams and mathematical calculations, written in her father’s neat hand. Elle’s brow furrowed as she studied the diagrams.

‘My theory is, that device is powered by some sort of agent.’

‘Spark?’ Elle said.

‘I don’t think spark is enough, although it does seem to play an integral part in the process. I suspect it’s something elemental. Possibly mineral.’

‘That makes sense,’ Elle said, still poring over the drawings.

‘I also believe that his real heart is connected to this element somehow. If we build this machine and we find the real heart, I do believe that with reverse-suction vacuum thaumaturgy and a healthy blast of spark to get it beating again, we could remove the device, return the heart and reverse the effects.’

Elle looked up from the plans. ‘And what about Hugh? Will he emerge from

this once it is over?’

The professor sighed. ‘Ellie, my dear, there is no way of telling what the long-term effects of this will be.’

Elle nodded slowly.

‘What do you think, Doctor Miller?’

The doctor looked up from listening to Marsh’s chest with his stethoscope. ‘I will need to study your plans in more detail, Professor. I also think that I might need the help of a colleague – a brilliant young surgeon I know.’ He gave a little chuckle. ‘I am not a surgeon – as you well know, but I think that anything sensible would certainly be worth a try.’

‘This surgeon. When can we meet him? Can he come to see Marsh as soon as possible?’ Elle said.

The doctor nodded. ‘I’m sure that can be arranged. I have been doing a bit of reading and, if the surgery is unfeasible, there are many new rehabilitation techniques we could try too.’

Elle pressed her lips together. ‘When can you start building the machine?’ she asked the professor.

The professor gave Mrs Hinges a conspiratorial smile.

‘You didn’t think we sat here idly while you did all the rescue work, did you?’ Mrs Hinges said.

‘I never thought about it, to be honest,’ Elle said.

‘My dear, your father has already started work on the mechanics.’

‘Oh that is fantastic news!’ Elle said.

‘And I have taken the liberty making some of my own enquiries. I have found a nurse to care for him. A sensible girl with a strong stomach. She has

worked on the front, so she's seen her bit of action. She starts tomorrow.' Mrs Hinges gave a nod. 'Let it not be said that Mathilda Hinges sat by idly when something could be done.'

'Oh, Mrs Hinges.' Elle hugged the older woman, deeply touched by her determination.

'There, there my dear. It is all going to be all right.'

The doctor gave a polite cough.

'Yes, doctor?'

'My examination is complete. While I don't want to get your hopes up, I do believe that being in his home environment has brought about a slight improvement. It's just—'

They all looked at the doctor.

'Well, I just wish there were some way we could slow down the ticking. I've noticed that the warmth of the fire and any excitement seem to increase his heartbeat. A faster heartbeat seems to hasten the winding down process. Perhaps you should keep him somewhere cooler?'

'Oh my goodness. I never thought... We shall get him moved as quickly as possible. Thank you, doctor.' Elle rose to summon the staff but Caruthers was already at the door.

'Perhaps if we put him in the conservatory? It's cool in there at night?' he suggested helpfully.

'Yes. Absolutely!' Elle said.

She went up to Marsh and kissed his forehead. He groaned and turned to snap mildly at her. 'I'm sorry to have to do this to you, my love. I hate the thought of leaving you there all alone but we must conserve your energy.'

‘I’ll see to it that someone sits with him at all times,’ Mrs Hinges said. ‘And maybe some soothing music on the gramophone,’ the professor suggested.

Soon as the doctor was gone and Marsh was installed in his new cooler, calmer surroundings. Elle stood in the conservatory cool darkness of the conservatory, watching her husband as he sat in his bath chair surrounded by palms and ferns. She shivered and rubbed her upper arms. It was definitely cooler in here. She still wasn’t quite sure she had come to terms with the events of the previous evening. She had acted on instinct and it had been a matter of life and death, but the memory of the man’s lifeless body dropping to the ground had haunted her all day. She wondered if he was still alive. Would the police come for her now that she was a murderer?

‘There you are, my dear.’ The professor and Mrs Hinges came and stood beside her.

‘Terrible to see him that way,’ Mrs Hinges muttered. ‘It breaks my heart.’

‘The clock is ticking. I cannot just sit here and do nothing,’ Elle said.

‘Please don’t go doing anything rash, Elle. We have enough troubles as it is.’

‘But-’

‘There’s no if’s and but’s about it,’ Mrs Hinges said. ‘Your duty is to be sensible and steadfast right now.’

Elle did not answer. ‘As usual, Mrs Hinges was right.

Mrs Hinges sighed and stifled a yawn. ‘There’s nothing more for me to do here and I think that I’ve had quite enough excitement for one day. I had better get myself off to bed. There will be much to do later. Got to keep my strength up.’

‘Goodnight, my dear Mrs Hinges. Thank you as always for your charming company.’ The professor winked at her and bit down on the stem of his pipe.

To Elle’s surprise, Mrs Hinges blushed slightly. ‘Always a pleasure, professor,’ she managed to say.

Elle paused to stare at Marsh. He seemed to be asleep, trussed up in his heavy canvas straitjacket with the leather straps and buckles. She rested a hand on his pale forehead. He gave a soft grunt, which Elle hoped was an acknowledgement of her presence, but that was all.

Elle swallowed down the lump of sadness that was constantly in her throat these days. This had been her fault. She should never have taken that charter to Singapore.

‘We will find a way to save him, my dear. I promise you that,’ the professor said.

‘Thank you, Papa,’ Elle said. She wondered briefly whether she should tell her father about her brief encounter with the spirit who claimed to be her mother. That too had been a most upsetting incident and one she hadn’t really given herself much time to think about. She decided against it. There were enough upsetting things going on around them as it was. Reigniting her father’s grief would not be helpful at all.

The spirit had told her to seek out the travelling folk. The voices of the Oracle might be inscrutable, but they were rarely wrong – once you worked out what they were saying. She needed to find the man with the peacock feather in his hat. He was the key to gaining entrance to the monastery. She was sure of it.

On impulse she kissed her father. ‘Goodnight, Papa. I will see you in the

morning.’

‘Goodnight, my dear,’ the professor said. He had that quizzical frown that creased his forehead and which told her that his mind was already elsewhere, deep in problem-solving thought. That was just as well, Elle thought. He would not notice if she slipped out of the house and as Mrs Hinges had said, there was no reason for her to add to everyone’s burdens right now, she thought as she took the stairs two at a time to her room. There was much to do before morning.

The Black Stag public house was a dingy old place with a narrow entrance that leaned to one side. Gelatinous yellow-grey light glimmered through the windowpanes, which were sorely in need of a clean.

Within, the pub was as grubby as without. Dirty sawdust crunched under her boots when she walked inside. A few grim-looking patrons looked up from their ale and gin.

Good heavens, this is a sorry place, Elle thought as she stepped inside.

‘Ladies’ saloon on the other side,’ the landlord barked. He was pushing a sour-smelling mop through what looked like a puddle of blood and glass.

‘I’m sorry, but perhaps—’ Elle began.

‘I said: ladies’ saloon on the other side. Now get out before I throw you out!’ he shouted.

Elle put up her hands in a conciliatory gesture and slowly retreated out the door. She stood outside in a moment of indecision. The eel coster had been right. This was not a friendly place, but she had to find out if anyone knew something or had seen something.

She needed to find someone who could help her find a way into the

monastery.

She squared her shoulders and walked into the saloon entrance, which was really nothing more than a second entrance that led to the other side of the bar counter.

This side of the pub was as dingy as the other, except here a few bare-shouldered women clung to counters and doorways. The place was quiet at this late hour.

Elle walked up to the counter. As she did, she felt a familiar shimmer of magic wash over her. She looked up at the ceiling and spotted the flicker of yellow light above. Gin fairies lived here.

‘What will it be?’ The landlord had stepped behind the counter and was eyeing her suspiciously.

‘Pint of London Pride and a bowl of sugar, please,’ Elle said.

He snorted knowingly as he pulled her a greasy pint.

Elle met his gaze. Let him think she was a gin whore if he wanted. She did not have the time, energy or inclination to rectify his assumptions.

The landlord plonked the pint and a bowl of brownish sugar lumps in front of her.

‘Does anyone know how to speak to those fairies?’ Elle asked as she handed the man payment for her drink.

‘That’d be Georgie over there,’ he said, pointing to a woman who was sitting on her own at a table.

Elle took her glass and the sugar cubes and walked over to the woman.

‘Excuse me, but are you Georgie?’

The woman glanced up and nodded.



Elle noted how thin and tired the poor girl looked. There were deep purple hollows under her eyes that spoke of a life hard-lived.

‘What do you want?’ the girl said in a voice roughened by poverty and tobacco.

‘The landlord tells me that you know how to speak to fairies.’

‘I might.’ Her voice softened into a lilt, which sounded as if its origins were in Ireland.

‘Do you think you could ask them a few questions for me?’

Georgie nodded and extended her hand, palm up. ‘Five pence, for your fortune told.’

Elle sighed inwardly and pulled the money out of her pocket and put the coins into the woman’s hand.

Georgie glanced up and clicked her fingers.

Little yellow lights dropped down from the ceiling and morphed into fairies before her. There were three of them. Up close they were strangely ugly and beautiful at the same time. They all had grey hair and large dark eyes with queerly long lashes. They reminded her very much of Adele, Elle thought, with a pang of guilt. She had not even started looking for the absinthe fairy with all that was going on.

‘I don’t need my fortune told, I just need to know if they’ve seen someone,’ she said, as she placed the sugar cubes on the already sticky table.

Georgie stared at the fairies and nodded briefly. ‘They thank you for the sugar and they say that you are touched by the magic of the Fey. They say they will speak to you because of this.’

‘Thank you,’ Elle said, relieved that she had passed the first test. Fairies had

a way of making people feel so inferior. Fortunately there was nothing that fairies loved more than sugar. It was the great negotiating tool.

‘I am looking for a man. They tell me he wears a peacock feather in his hat. I am also looking for *this* man.’ Elle pulled the photograph of Marsh she had taken from the house and laid it on the table. ‘He may have come here sometime in the last week or so.’

The fairies started chattering amongst themselves. Every so often one of them would look up from their huddle, stare at Elle for a moment and then re-join the conversation.

‘What are they saying?’ Elle whispered to Georgie after a few moments.

‘Don’t know. They are whispering. I think they are deciding whether or not to talk to you. You seem to have some sort of a mark on you, miss.’

Elle took a deep breath and waited.

After a good few minutes one of the fairies turned to Georgie and spoke.

‘They say that the man was here. He was followed by one of the Fey. One of the Wormwood clan, far from home and not welcome in this place.’

Elle felt a surge of excitement. ‘Was the fairy French? Where did they go?’

‘She was from the absinthe,’ Georgie said after a short conference with the fairy. ‘The man was here and then he left. He followed the peacock feather. That’s all they seem to know.’

‘Where can I find the man with the peacock feather in his hat?’

The fairies shrugged.

Elle felt her hopes fade. ‘Did they see what direction they went?’

‘No. Fairies don’t care about things like that,’ Georgie said.

‘Does the man with the peacock feather come here often? Do you know his

name or where to find him?’

Georgie’s shoulders tensed slightly at her question and she briefly joined the fairy conversation. The leader of the fairies folded her arms and lifted her nose in the air with disdain. Georgie shrugged and all three of them blinked into the light, scooped up the sugar and dashed back up into the rafters.

‘What is happening now?’ Elle asked.

‘That’s all they have to say on the subject.’ Georgie shrugged. Then she looked Elle in the eye. ‘The man you are looking for comes here from time to time. But you are better off staying well away from him. He brings bad luck wherever he goes.’ She grabbed Elle’s arm. ‘Go home, fine lady. This is no place for you.’

Elle gritted her teeth and moved out of the woman’s grip. ‘Not before I’m told where this man went,’ she said, pointing to the photograph.

Georgie sighed. ‘If he was taken by the man with the peacock feather, then he is lost to the world.’ Georgie narrowed her eyes. ‘The fairies told me one more thing. They told me that you should be wary of making wagers with crafty old men like Jack. He will come to collect his debts and there will be much weeping when he does. Beware and find a way to undo the contract or you will be the one who weeps!’

Elle felt a cold shiver run over her skin and suddenly the air was full of the whispers of fairies.

Georgie leaned forward even further and held out her hand. I might know more, she said glancing down at her palm.

Elle placed another coin on it.

Georgie lifted it up and examined it. Satisfied, she put the money in her

pocket. 'There are wagons by the river. They like to camp under the bridges this time of year. Go and ask them if anyone knows the man with the peacock feather. He goes by the name Emilian. They may help you. They may not. But it's dangerous, so be careful!' Georgie whispered fiercely. 'Now go! I can tell you no more.'

'Thank you,' Elle said. She turned and walked out of the pub, leaving her untouched pint on the table.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Outside the pub, Elle stopped in the pool of light of a streetlamp. She rested her forearm against the cold iron and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. The freezing air stung her nostrils and made her lungs ache, but it was better than the claustrophobia of the Black Stag.

Around her, people went about their nightly business. Tired men were trudging home from work. A few determined costers were still about, trying to sell their wares. Here and there a barrow gave off wisps of steam as dinners wrapped in paper were sold to passers-by. It was a typical evening, but Elle could feel the gaze of eyes on her. As is the case in almost any city in the world, the locals can always tell if you don't belong and this part of London was as foreign as any strange city Elle had been. Those gin fairies were right. She did not belong here.

She steeled herself. This was no time to show weakness. She had to see this through. Marsh would do the same for her.

Suddenly a little yellow light appeared in front of her face. Elle stepped away from the iron streetlamp and, as the influence of the iron lessened, one of the gin fairies materialised. It hovered before her, slowly blinking at her.

'I'm sorry if I offended you earlier,' Elle said.

The fairy shook its head and shrugged. Elle peered a little more closely at the fairy. Its hair was shorter and more muscular than she had observed on Adele. Its wings were slightly bigger too. With a small burst of surprise, Elle

realised that the fairy was male. It made perfect sense that there would be both male and female fairies, it's just that she had never thought about male fairies before. It was usually only the female of the species that ended up in the tragic life of magical prostitution that can only be found at the bottom of a bottle.

The fairy pointed into the darkness and made a gesture with his hands that looked a bit like an hourglass. He put his hand on his hip in an effeminate gesture and closed his eyes.

'A girl?' Elle asked, slightly amused.

The fairy seemed to be concentrating. His face scrunched up with the effort and slowly his yellow light changed to flickering green. He held the pose for a moment before the effort almost made him drop from mid-air.

Elle held out her palm to stop him from falling as he righted himself.

'Absinthe? Is that it?' The fairy nodded.

'Did you see an absinthe fairy?'

The fairy nodded again and pointed in the same direction again.

Elle felt a surge of excitement.

'Why are you telling me this? Is this a trick?' Gin fairies were terrible creatures, worse than absinthe fairies, so it was wise not to be too trusting.

The fairy hugged himself.

'You took a fancy to her and you want me to bring her back here. Is that it?'

The fairy nodded. Then he looked up as if he had heard a noise.

'Where is she?' Elle said.

The fairy looked a bit agitated and pointed at the same dark alley. Then his light blinked out and he disappeared.

'Wait! Hang on a moment,' Elle said. But there was only silence around her

now. The gin fairy was gone.

She sighed and unclipped the little spark light projector she had brought with her and turned it on. A thin beam of bluish white light emanated from it. The answers she sought, whether good or bad, were somewhere down that dark, mucky alley.

The alley led into a winding maze of passageways between the haphazard buildings. One lane fed off on to another with no order or system she could work out. The only landmark was the distinctive smell of mud and sewers that came off the Thames. Its putrid odour wafted towards her on the night air.

Her light cast an eerie blue beam over the clapboard buildings that rose up around her. Above her, despite the lateness of the hour, hollow-eyed children watched from plank walkways that spanned between the buildings. Grey rags of laundry that no one had bothered to pull in from the night damp flapped forlornly in the chilly air as if they had resigned themselves to the fact that they would never be dry.

Elle's breath steamed as she walked along and the sound of her boots echoed against the wooden planks that were laid out for people to walk on.

The buildings thinned a little as the graceful arch of one of London's many bridges rose up.

'Well, Georgie. Let's see if the money I paid you was well spent,' Elle said to herself as she made her way towards the bridge. She turned a corner and a piece of derelict land opened up before her. Elle felt her spirits rise, because, in the shadow, she saw the flicker of yellow light from a wagon.

As she approached, fine images of flowers and animals became visible in the light of her lamp and even in the blue light from her spark projector, Elle

could see that the wagon was beautifully painted in bright hues of yellow, red, blue and green.

As she approached, she felt the soft shimmer of the Shadow ripple over her skin. It made the hairs on her arms prickle, warning her to proceed with caution. She slid her stiletto and hit it in her sleeve - ready in case she needed it for close combat.

She turned off her lamp and slowly made her way up to the wagon with its ornately curved stepladder.

Everything was silent. The curtains were drawn and apart from the single yellow light on the porch there was no sign of life.

Elle waited in silence as long moments ticked by. No one moved. Carefully she balanced the tip of her boot on the centre of one of the large spokes of the wheel beside her and hoisted herself up, for the windows were too high for her to peer through from the ground. Inside, she could just make out the fuzzy shapes of furniture, but nothing more.

‘Don’t move.’ A woman’s soft voice came from behind her.

Elle heard the fine shuck of metal on metal that could only be the sound of a shotgun gun being cocked and so she very slowly did as she was told. She jumped off the wheel and raised her hands in the air.

The double barrels pointed at her were held by a woman.

‘Drop it,’ the woman holding the gun said. Motioning towards Elle’s sleeve.

Elle dropped her arm and the stiletto and it fell, blade first, to the ground.

‘A blade in the ground is powerful magic,’ the woman said. Without taking her eyes off Elle, the woman retrieved the blade and slipped it into one of the pockets of her ample skirts.



‘I don’t want any trouble. I am only looking for a little information,’ Elle said. ‘I am looking for a man named Emilian.’

The woman’s face was hard to make out in the dark, but Elle noticed the barrel dip ever so slightly in hesitation. There were a few other wagons within running distance, but she had no guarantee that she would meet friendly faces.

‘Inside,’ the woman said as she gestured towards the steps.

With the shotgun at her back, Elle climbed the steps and stepped through the door.

The inside of the caravan smelled like cinnamon and incense. A small cast-iron stove glowed warmly at one end of what was a surprisingly spacious interior.

‘Sit.’ The woman gestured to one of the little benches. Elle did not argue.

The woman moved with easy grace and sat down opposite Elle. In the soft light Elle could see that she was very young and rather pretty. Her light brown hair escaped in ringlets from under the scarf that held it in place and her nose was dusted with a fine pattern of pretty freckles. This was definitely not one of the gypsy crones from the stories nannies told to frighten children to bed.

The girl said nothing but stared at her with eyes that were as hard and dark as a magpie’s.

It was then that Elle noticed the sound of frantic buzzing. She felt the shimmer of the Shadow Realm pass over again. Something very strange was afoot in this caravan.

The girl stamped her foot on the floorboard and the buzzing ceased, but only for a few moments before starting up again.

‘My name is Elle,’ Elle said in an attempt to start the conversation.

‘Why are you sneaking around my home in the dark, lady?’ the girl said.

‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t sneaking. I meant no offence. I should have knocked on the door,’ Elle said, suddenly embarrassed for being so rude.

‘That’s an apology, not a reason,’ the woman said.

‘I am looking for information and I was told that you might be able to help.’

The girl eyed her suspiciously. ‘Who told you that?’

‘Someone at the Black Stag.’

‘Did they now? I trust no one at the Black Stag...and neither should you.’

The girl stomped her foot again to make a renewed buzzing stop. The motion made the shotgun that was resting on her lap tilt dangerously in Elle’s direction.

‘I’m not going to argue with you on that count. The Black Stag is certainly not one of the better establishments in the city, but they did send me in your direction.’

‘And why did they do that?’ the girl asked.

‘I am looking for someone. They say there is a man here who might have seen him. Emilian is his name.’

The girl’s expression softened ever so slightly and Elle lowered her hands that she had been keeping in the air.

‘Where I can see them,’ the girl said motioning with the shotgun.

Elle raised her hands again. ‘I am looking for a missing person. The last person who saw him was a man named Emilian. I only want to ask this Emilian about it.’

The girl said nothing.

‘I have a portrait of the person who is missing. It’s in my pocket. May I

show you?’

The girl nodded once. ‘I will shoot if you try anything,’ she said in a matter-of-fact way that suggested she meant it.

Carefully, Elle reached into her coat and drew out the photograph of Marsh. It was her favourite, because unlike in most photographic portraits, Marsh had smiled when the shutter was opened. The corners of the portrait had become slightly curled from travelling. She laid it out on the table between them, smoothing the edges gently with her fingers.

The girl lifted the photograph up and stared at it for a few moments. Her only reaction was a tiny furrow in her brow that disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. Then she dropped the photograph on to the table and shrugged.

‘They say Emilian is a man who wears a peacock feather in his hat. They say he knows about the missing people...and the ticking hearts.’

The girl’s gaze shot up and her face grew fierce. ‘I know nothing of this man. Never seen that one either.’ She gestured at the photograph. ‘Who tells you these things?’

Elle took a long, slow breath. ‘As I said, the little people at the Black Stag told me.’

At that, the girl grew angry and raised the shotgun at Elle. ‘It’s time for you to go.’

Elle picked up the photograph and slipped it into her coat pocket. She wasn’t going to get anything more out of the girl, that much was clear. With a heavy heart, she rose carefully from the bench. ‘Look, the man in the photograph is my husband. He went out a few nights ago and disappeared. I managed to find him but now he is different to the person he was when he left.

Time is running out and I am beside myself with worry. I need to find Emelian or else he will die. Surely you must understand what it's like to love someone and to want to save them? If you have any information – even the slightest clue that might help save him – then I would be eternally grateful. Please. I am begging you.'

The girl hesitated for a moment, but the buzzing sound had started up again and had increased in intensity until it was now almost a frantic whine. Elle watched her last hope disappear as the girl's face hardened. With the barrel of the shotgun she gestured for Elle to stand.

'Out!' she said.

'I thank you for your time. And please accept my apologies again for barging into your home—'

Elle did not finish her sentence, because in a flash of light an absinthe fairy burst out of the woodwork. She darted to and fro- in movements that were most unfairylike and it took Elle a moment to realise that the fairy was tethered to the wagon with a strand of bright red silk.

'Adele!' Elle exclaimed as she recognised her friend.

The fairy stopped struggling and hovered before her in a gesture that seemed to say, 'Finally!'

'You know one another?' the girl said, looking at Elle and the fairy in turn.

'Yes, this fairy is my friend. She is my ward. What have you done with her? I demand that you release her at once!' She looked at Adele. 'Oh my little friend, I'm so pleased to see you. We thought we had lost you for good.'

Adele did a little twirl but the strand of silk stopped her short and she fell back to the ground.

‘She stays with me now,’ the girl said.

‘No, she does not. Not if you are going to tie her to the wagon like that. Adele is a free agent. She is a person and you have no right to hold her here against her will. What did you say your name was?’

‘Florica,’ the girl said, looking flustered.

Elle sat back down on the bench. ‘Well, Florica, we don’t know one another very well, but you have Adele and you have my blade. Adele had instructions to stay close to my husband, so if she is here it means that he was too at some point.’ Elle folded her arms. ‘If my husband was here then I’m going nowhere until I find out why. So I think you had better put the kettle on, because you and I are going to have a little chat.’

Florica stared at Elle, slightly nonplussed, but Adele rose up and hovered before her. Elle wasn’t sure but it looked like they were having a conversation. Adele was gesticulating wildly with her arms and wings.

Florica blanched and looked over at Elle.

The fairy nodded in an I-told-you-so gesture.

Florica sighed as if she was very tired. With great care, she breached the shotgun and placed it on the table, within reach. Then she pulled the stiletto out of her pocket and laid it out on the table next to the gun.

‘Very well. This Fey tells me who you are, my lady.’ She bowed her head in reverence. ‘You must forgive me, but I did not know that you were the Oracle. My people live on the fringes of the Shadow and we do not meddle in matters of high power, but if this Fey is right, then I must listen.’

Elle opened and closed her mouth in surprise. She had no idea that the power of the Oracle reached that far.

Adele gestured for her to do something.

‘Er, yes. I am Pythia and I would that we speak of these matters,’ Elle said, trying to sound as official as she could.

Florica bowed her head. ‘The Fey says you can be trusted, so I shall comply, for my people have followed Pythia for more centuries than anyone can count.’

‘Thank you,’ Elle said as she leaned back on the bench. ‘But I am not here as the Oracle. You need not fear me. I am just a concerned wife, looking for her husband.’

Florica folded her hands in her lap and her face softened. ‘That is unfortunate, because only someone as powerful as the Oracle could stop her evil.’

‘Her evil?’ Elle frowned.

‘*La Dame Blanche*, the Lady in White.’ Florica sighed. ‘It is a difficult situation.’ She opened the laces of her dress to reveal a small brass plate embedded in her skin, just above her heart. ‘It wasn’t working properly so she fixed it. She let me keep my heart, but one misstep by me or my brother and I am dead. She has the power to stop my heart in an instant.’

Elle recognised the metalwork and her mouth went dry.

‘Emelian is your brother?’ She didn’t know exactly what Florica meant by ‘Lady in White’, but the ominous way the girl said the words was enough to tell her that this was the answer she had come for.

Florica nodded. ‘We do her bidding. Emilian goes to her every day and I help with the . . . recruitment. She has commanded us to do so many awful things, but there is nothing we can do to resist her.’ Her eyes grew intense.

‘But she must be stopped, I grow more sure of it every day.’

Elle leaned forward. ‘Then let us work together to stop her.’

Florica nodded. ‘I shall help you.’ She pressed her lips together. ‘But you are never to breathe a word of it. If she ever found out that my brother or I helped you, we shall surely be put to death.’

‘Your secret will be safe with me,’ Elle said. ‘I give you my word. I will do everything in my power to stop whoever is behind this.’

‘Then I shall make us some tea,’ Florica said.

‘That would be lovely,’ Elle said, feeling her hopes rise.

Adele settled on the edge of the table, legs crossed at the ankles as Florica filled up the copper kettle that hung from a hook by the stove.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Elle cursed under her breath as she took yet another wrong turn that brought her to yet another blind alley. She turned back and started trudging the way she had come. The walk back from Florica's wagon was turning out to be rather trying. It was late and she was cold, tired and desperately annoyed.

The houses and buildings in this area of London were slapped together in such a haphazard way that they formed an almost impenetrable maze. She rounded another corner and her spirits rose as she spotted cobbles that signalled the fact that she had found a main road.

She walked on and was even happier when, to her amazement, she spotted Neville waiting by the motor which was parked under a streetlight.

At that moment, he was hard at work defending the car from a clutch of dirty children led by a ragged-looking gin fairy. They were hovering around him, each looking to distract Neville so another could try to steal something. Neville was brandishing a large black umbrella and threatening to thump anyone who stepped too close. The fairy keened with delight as it hovered above Neville's head, attempting to knock his bowler hat off his head.

'Hey, over here!' Elle fished a handful of pennies from her pocket and held them out to the children.

In a heartbeat they abandoned Neville and were flocking around her, all the while grabbing at the pennies she was offering. They pushed and thronged until the money fell to the cobbles and little hands and bodies darted for them.



‘Neville! My goodness, you are a sight for sore eyes,’ Elle said, barely escaping the scuffle of children and fairy that had erupted around her.

‘Thank heavens you are safe, my lady,’ Neville said. He opened the front passenger door for her.

Elle climbed into the car, grateful for the reassuring feel of the leather seat against her back. ‘Oh Neville, I have no idea how you found me, but thank goodness you came. Let’s go home,’ she said.

Neville did not wait to be asked a second time. He revved up the engine, which had been softly pattering in the background. They were in motion and barrelling down the road almost instantly, leaving the rank squalor behind them.

‘The baroness said you might be here so I took a chance to try to find you,’ he said after a mile or so when they had slowed down a little.

‘Is Loisa awake?’

‘She woke briefly this evening after you left, but she is still resting. The doctor checked in on her again on his way home, and he says she is much improved, but still in danger.’

‘And how is he?’ She leaned forward to speak.

‘Same as before, my lady. The doctor says he thinks the ticking is still increasing, it grieves me to say.’ Neville’s profile was grave as he drove.

Elle closed her eyes and rested her head against the seat. Despite her initial willingness to help, it had taken two cups of tea, a generous glug of cheap whisky and the tender of Elle’s stiletto as payment for the information before Florica had finally talked. And talked she had.

Adele, as it turned out, was rather taken with living with the travelling folk,

despite her dramatic entrance earlier that evening.

In the end the three of them had agreed a compromise: the fairy was to stay with Florica for the moment, mostly because the charm that bound her to the wagon was too complicated to undo quickly. Elle had promised to return and, as a token of trust, Florica had given her a brass button off her coat. With it, Elle would always be able to find the wagon. Florica had also given her a potion that was said to cure Nightwalkers who accidentally ingested silver. And so Elle had parted on good terms with Florica and with the promise to return once her quest to save Marsh was over. That was a most excellent result, because now she had a plan.

The sky had turned to murky grey by the time they pulled up to Greychester House.

Elle took off her coat as she strode across the black and white squares of the hallway floor and up the stairs.

Loisa was still in bed, fast asleep and pale as moonlight.

‘Loisa, I have found someone who can help us,’ Elle said. ‘She told me so much. She also gave me this potion for you to take.’

Loisa did not answer and without hesitating, Elle pulled the stopper from the bottle and dripped the amber liquid into Loisa’s mouth.

Loisa almost choked, but she managed to swallow the medicine without waking up.

Elle sat beside Loisa for a little while and as she watched, it seemed as if the black tracks that still spider-webbed under her skin were fading.

‘Rest now, dear friend. I will be in to check on you a little later.’

Elle said a quiet prayer that Loisa would be all right, before she turned and

left Loisa's room to see her next patient.

In the library, Marsh's cot was empty and her heart leaped into her throat.

'We've put him in the cold larder,' Mrs Hinges said behind her.

Elle spun round. 'Mrs Hinges! You startled me. What are you doing up so early?'

'I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to do that.' She smiled at Elle. 'This house now runs at all hours with the baroness and his lordship being so ill. Mr Caruthers and I are manning the fort in shifts in order to keep an eye on things.'

Elle hugged her. 'Oh, Mrs Hinges, I'm so sorry for putting you to so much trouble. You must be exhausted.'

'Never mind that my dear. It's all right.' Mrs Hinges gave Elle a reassuring rub on the back.

'All this is my fault. All I seem to do is bring misery and destruction upon everyone unfortunate to cross paths with me.' The words caught in Elle's throat.

'Oh, what utter nonsense!' Mrs Hinges gave her a stern look. 'I will not stand here and listen to you spout such silliness. We haven't any time for feeling sorry for ourselves right now.'

'I suppose you're right,' Elle said.

Mrs Hinges stared at her with concern. 'You look like you are chilled to the bone, my dear. Let's go to the kitchen and get you warmed up with a cup of tea and something to eat. We can check in on his lordship while we are at it as well.'

Elle smiled. After two cups of Florica's brew, tea was the last thing she

fancied, but a talk with Mrs Hinges would certainly help, so she followed the older woman downstairs.

In the kitchen Elle stood on tiptoes and peered through the little glass window of the door of the cold larder.

A row of large blocks of ice had been placed around the stone floor in order to keep everything inside the room cold. The room was completely empty except for Marsh. He sat perfectly still in the bath chair, trussed up in his muzzle and canvas jacket. At that moment he was looking up at the ceiling as if he was listening for a sound that wouldn't come.

Elle tapped against the glass with her wedding band. He turned his head ever so slightly at the sound and she felt her heart contract at the sight of him.

'The cold seems to slow him down a little. Doctor thinks that the less he moves about, the slower that thing in his chest will wind down. And don't worry, dear, I made sure they put an extra cardigan on him before they strapped that canvas on. I couldn't let the poor man suffer,' Mrs Hinges said. 'I'm also rather grateful the butcher hasn't been for this week's delivery or we would have had a real problem on our hands. The smell of raw meat sends him into a right bother.'

Elle smiled at her. 'Thank you for everything you're doing.'

Mrs Hinges patted her on the arm. 'Why don't you tell me what you've been up to while I make you a sandwich.'

Elle shook her head and gripped the older woman's hand. 'There is no time to waste, Mrs Hinges. Every moment we sit here is a moment wasted. I must go to my room. Please see that I am not disturbed for the next few hours.'

The house was very quiet as she made her way up to her room. All the curtains were drawn.

Elle felt bone tired as she undid her hair and brushed it. Her whole body ached from physical exhaustion and lack of sleep. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed, coddled, warm and dreamless, but she could not rest. Not yet.

She tied her hair in a braid that fell down her back and slipped on her linen robes. Time to head to the Realm of Shadow. There were a few people she needed to see before she could rest.

Inside her secret chamber, she did not even bother to light the candles. She stepped into the circle and closed her eyes, willing herself to the place where she wanted to be.

Travel to the other side was becoming easier and within moments she felt the rush of energy that filled her senses as she slipped through the barrier.

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Finding the dark woods took almost no time at all once she had crossed over. The bare branches of the trees stretched up to a sky that was the colour of watered milk.

No matter what the time, it never seemed to grow completely dark here, almost as if the sky was afraid to surrender this place to the shadows.

The ever-present dip-dibs watched her with large eyes. They chattered their sharp little teeth at her as she passed them by. Above her, magpies kept silent watch from the gallery of boughs, peering down at her with eyes like shiny black beads.

Elle walked until she found the largest tree she could. The elm stood in

silence as if it had been waiting there for her.

She looked up into its branches and shouted, 'Jack!'

'Here! Here!' the magpies above her said, but otherwise there was nothing but silence. Even the bloodthirsty dip-dibs held their breaths.

'Jack!' she called again. Her voice echoed a few times in the silence before it too was swallowed up by the woods.

Elle took another deep breath and shouted one last time, 'Jack!'

The magpies took to the sky, circling in a flurry of squawks and black and white feathers.

'All right, all right. Here I am. No need to be so impatient.' Jack hobbled out from behind the tree. He opened his cloak and peered at her in the light of his lantern. 'Oh, it's you,' he said. 'Any news on my holiday?'

'Hello, Jack. I've come to ask you a favour,' Elle said, getting to the point.

'Favours, favours. Everyone always wants a favour,' Jack muttered. He leaned over and rested his lantern on a tree root. 'No one spares a thought for Old Jack. Not a single thought, I tell you.'

'I need you to tell me how one stops a Lady in White.'

Jack gave her a wily look. '*La Dame Blanche*? Sounds like you have got yourself into a spot of trouble, young lady. Those elemental witches are known to hold grudges for more years than you have to live.'

'But how does one stop one? I need to make her undo something she's done.'

'Ah, an undoing.' Jack leaned forward with an air of amusement. 'Even more tricky because it requires reversing the intent of the doer.'

'There must be a way. There always is,' Elle said.

Jack smiled and looked up into the branches above him. ‘So impatient. Always want the answers immediately, don’t you?’

‘Jack, please. I don’t have a lot of time. I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t an emergency.’

Jack looked at her for a few long moments. ‘Tell me first, what are you going to do for Old Jack? What news do you bring about my holiday?’

‘News! News!’ the magpies squawked.

‘I haven’t had a chance to discuss the matter with anyone yet.’

He shook his head. ‘There is nothing to discuss. All I need is for you to say yes. It’s a very simple matter.’

Elle was starting to wonder whether coming here had been a good idea. She had been warned about Jack, but right now, there was no one else she could ask. ‘I think a short visit would be fine as long as you promise not to harm anyone.’

Jack narrowed his eyes. ‘This is a trick. You know I cannot promise that. What control do I have over the universe? What if I step on an ant without looking or accidentally squash a worm while I’m there? I would be punished by bursting into flames and that, my dear, is most unfair.’

‘Jack, I don’t make the rules. I am bound to obey the Council just as much as you are.’

‘The Council of Warlocks. Now there is a fine institution if I’ve ever seen one. Not a fan of them, I gather.’

‘Not really, no,’ Elle had to admit.

‘But back to my holiday. Do you think I would be harming something if I ate anything? You know I am very fond of a bit of fried bacon with butter on

bread in the morning. Would I be harming the pig if I did that?’

‘I don’t know, I never thought about it like that,’ Elle admitted.

‘You see, it’s a very old and very stupid rule.’

She sighed. ‘Very well, but as long as you promise not to harm anyone on purpose.’

Jack grinned at her and held out his hand. ‘I accept. The bargain is struck.’

Elle took his hand, and immediately she felt a cold ripple of magic spill over her arm and run all the way up to her shoulders. She shivered and let go of Jack’s knobbly old fingers.

‘Deal! Deal! Deal!’ the magpies squawked as they flew off into the darkness of the forest.

‘Now, tell me about the lady and how I make her undo something.’

Jack shook his head. ‘That was payment for the last favour. When I let you out of the forest... This one costs different.’

Elle closed her eyes in exasperation. ‘You are being tricky and I don’t have time for that. How do I even know that you are telling the truth? You could be pretending that you know when you don’t.’

Jack looked indignant. ‘Do you know who I am? Do you even comprehend who you are speaking to?’

‘It is I who must ask you that question.’ Elle felt herself grow angry. She might need his help, but she was not going to allow this twisted creature to trick her.

Jack stared at her for a long moment. ‘It seems, little Oracle, that you and I have reached an impasse. How can there be a bargain when both parties carry tricks up their sleeves?’



‘I have told you why I am here and what I want. Now it is time for you to do the same. Or else I will revoke my permission and you shall have no entry into the Realm of Light. Ever.’

Jack looked alarmed. ‘You cannot do that. A bargain struck is a bargain binding. *Pacta servanda sunt*. Pacts must be served.’

‘Not if the bargain was struck through trickery. Now tell me straight what it is that you want. I do not have time for this.’

Jack was silent as he thought the matter over. ‘I want you to take me through the barrier when I come. Will you do that?’

Elle thought about it for a moment. She had no idea why Jack would want something so specific. It had to be important, but she could not think why.

She watched a little black spider drop down from the branches above them on its silken thread, only to quickly climb back up it again.

‘If you let me through the barrier, then you would know where I was,’ Jack said.

Jack had a point. And knowing what Jack was up to was certainly better than leaving him to his own devices.

*Oh voices, what should I do?* she thought. But there was nothing but silence. Elle suddenly regretted banishing her allies. Elle sighed. She would have to make the decision on her own and right now saving Marsh was her only concern.

‘Done,’ she said. She could worry about Jack later when the time came.

Jack gave her another crooked-toothed grin and rubbed his hands together. ‘That is splendid, my dear. Splendid indeed.’

‘Now tell me about the Lady.’

‘All right, all right, I am getting to that,’ Jack said. He scratched his wispy beard. ‘The Ladies in White are difficult creatures. Wilful, stubborn. And they hold grudges like no one else in the two realms. Oh, I remember a little dalliance with one when I wore a younger man’s beard.’

Elle pulled a face. ‘That’s not much help. How do I stop one?’

Jack shrugged. ‘That depends on the situation. As far as I know there are only two ways to stop her. You must either make her want to change her mind. Or, if she won’t, then the only other way is to change her mind for her. You know what I mean?’

‘Not really, if I’m honest,’ Elle said.

Jack looked at her with his sharp little eyes. ‘Oh, don’t be so slow. You have to *kill* her.’

Elle shuddered. The image of the man in the park was still vivid in her mind. ‘More blood on my hands,’ she murmured.

Jack tutted. ‘I heard rumours that the new Oracle was a little behind on her training, but really, this is too much.’

Elle glared at him. ‘My training is just fine.’

Jack held a hand up to placate her. ‘I’m sure you are well aware that you are one of the few forces in existence that can stop almost anyone from the Shadow with your power. You *are* the Shadow, my dear, and so you control the energy that flows within all of us.’ Jack nodded slowly. ‘I suspect that there are some here who would see me lynched for letting the secret out, but we are all yours to command, my Queen.’

Elle blinked. She was queen of the Realm of Shadow? This was certainly news.

Jack chuckled and gestured towards her hand. 'Also, that bit of silk around your finger might come in handy. That would tie her up in knots in no time.'

'But if I unwound the ring, would it not sever the bond?'

'It might. But I thought you wanted to stop the Lady no matter what the cost?'

'I do.'

'“At all costs” is sometimes very expensive, you know.'

His words were not comforting.

'But how would I kill her?'

Jack shrugged. 'There are many ways. It will depend.'

Elle closed her eyes. She wasn't going to get any more out of Jack, of that she was sure. She drew up her cloak and rose.

'Right, so it's settled then,' Jack said. 'Just give me a moment to gather a few things.'

'What? You want to come with me now?' Elle said.

Jack shrugged. 'Now is as good a time as any, don't you think? I hear the Orient is lovely this time of year.'

'I have no idea.' She had not bargained on him wanting to go immediately.

'Stay where you are, let me just get my things. I won't be a moment,' Jack said as he disappeared behind the tree. Elle watched his lantern flutter and flicker on the ground where he left it.

This sudden turn of events was not good. She did not trust Jack one little bit and the last thing she needed right now was to be playing governess to an old fairy.

'I'm sorry, Jack, but I'll have to come back for you another time,' she

whispered as she snuffed out the light of the lantern. Then Elle turned and ran for the barrier as fast as she could.

As she ran, she heard a strange howling noise behind her. It was the sound of pain that ran deeper than any mortal could withstand, paired with utter and desolate disappointment. The sound was so awful it set her teeth on edge.

‘Run! Run!’ The magpies appeared overhead, squawking loudly.

The dip-dibs screeched as she flew past them.

‘Rrrrrrun!’ the magpies said.

As soon as Elle cleared the trees, the world sped up to a pace that made her nauseous. When she thought she could not stand moving any more, she felt the barrier before her. She closed her eyes and dove headlong through it. The moment of weightlessness, as if she were underwater, passed in an instant and then she landed on the cold, hard floor of her secret chamber.

She stood up, shivering. All her limbs were damp and cold as if she had been lying outside in the rain. She stumbled out of her secret chamber and closed the door firmly behind her. Grateful for the safety of her own room, Elle crawled to the bed and slipped in between the covers. She lay there shivering and thinking for a very long time. She had many plans to make before nightfall.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Elle found Loisa and the professor in the dining room that evening when she came downstairs.

‘Loisa! You are up,’ Elle said.

Loisa still had halfmoons the colour of bruised damsons under her eyes, but she was alert and seemed much better. ‘Thank you for the potion, it has worked wonders,’ she said. ‘You can always trust a gypsy to have the cure.’

‘That was a rather close call you had, Ellie, my dear. Loisa was just telling me all about your little adventure in the park.’ The professor rose from the table. ‘Blasted business, shooting a man, isn’t it?’

Elle did not meet her father’s gaze. ‘I’m sorry I’m late. I overslept a little,’ she said avoiding the subject.

‘You look like you needed it, darling.’ Loisa took a sip from the ruby-coloured liquid in her goblet. ‘But in answer to your question, Professor, Elle is a deft hand with that revolver and we were lucky we managed to get away when we did. A few moments later and it would have been too late. Even for someone as skilled as me. I owe her my life.’

Caruthers started serving the meal, which was a strange mix of dinner and breakfast dishes. Elle helped herself to some kedgeriee. ‘How is he?’ she said.

There was an awkward silence as her question hung in the air.

‘Ticking along as ever, my dear,’ the professor said softly.

‘I know this might not be the best topic for the table, but as we are all here,

we might as well talk,' Elle said.

No one objected.

'How is work on the device coming along, Papa?' Elle continued.

'Very well, actually. I tested it out on a pig carcass that Neville picked up from Smithfield for me. You know, even though I hated every moment of it, the time spent with those alchemists was most illuminating. I actually ended up learning quite a lot from them in the end,' the professor said.

'But what about the device, Papa?'

'Oh that. The device made the transference of the organs still attached to the pig without a problem. I can't say the same about the mantle clock in my room though. I hope you don't mind.'

'As long as you can make that machine work, you may use anything you can find in this house, Papa.'

'I take it that you have been up to something while the rest of us were in repose,' Loisa said.

'Actually, I went to the Shadow side before bed this morning. I went to find a very recent acquaintance of mine,' Elle said and she related what had happened.

'That was a very risky thing to do,' Loisa said, when Elle had finished relating her story. 'Dealing with the old Fey is always tricky business and there are always consequences,

'Desperate times, Loisa,' Elle said.

Loisa patted her bee-stung lips delicately with the starched table linen. 'At least we know what we are dealing with now.'

'I will handle Jack if he shows up,' Elle said.

‘A real Lady in White,’ Loisa mused. ‘They are very rare creatures, you know. Elemental witches.. and judging by the splendid weather we are experiencing at the moment I’d say her elements are air and water. Storms to be more precise.’

‘So that’s the explanation,’ the professor said. ‘I knew there was something behind all this rain.’

‘Exactly my thought,’ Loisa replied. ‘And what better place for an elemental who specialises in the use of thunder and lightning . . .’

‘. . . than a spark monastery right next to the river!’ Elle finished Loisa’s sentence for her.

‘What we need to do is plan the offensive,’ the professor said.

Elle looked at him in surprise.

‘You didn’t think I was going to let you go in there all by yourself, now, did you?’

‘I am coming too,’ Mrs Hinges said from the door. ‘There is no way I am going to allow that thundering valkyrie to get away with what she has done to his lordship.’ She shook her head. ‘Not in a million years.’

‘And neither will I,’ said Caruthers, not to be outdone by Mrs Hinges.

‘I’m coming too,’ said Neville. Clearly they had all been listening from just outside the dining-room doors.

‘I cannot allow you to place yourselves in harm’s way,’ Elle said. ‘I caused this problem and I-.’

‘Oh, here we go with the it’s-all-my-fault nonsense again. I knew she was going to say that, didn’t I?’ Mrs Hinges said. ‘No, my dear, this calls for teamwork. United we stand and divided we fall.’

‘Hear, hear!’ said the professor. ‘Caruthers, see if you can find us a bit of that nice sherry in the study. I say we all retire to the drawing room to toast this endeavour.’

‘Splendid idea,’ Loisa chimed in.

Caruthers wandered off looking somewhat scandalised at the thought of servants and members of the family drinking together, but by the time they were all assembled in the drawing room he had found the sherry glasses.

‘I have been formulating a battle plan,’ the professor said as soon as the sherries were poured. ‘Neville, bring in the drawing board!’

Elle turned around in surprise as Neville wheeled in a wooden drawing board, the kind the professor used for presenting lectures. Pinned to it was a big sheet of paper with a number of diagrams and formulae.

The professor pulled his telescopic lecture cane with the brass tip from his pocket and opened it up with a flourish.

‘Right. If everyone could please be seated where they can see the plans, I will begin,’ he said in his best lecture voice. ‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said when everyone had settled down, ‘before you I have a floor plan of the monastery. Here is what I suggest we do...’

With that, the professor launched into a detailed account of his proposed strategy.

Elle listened to the professor outline his plan with a growing sense of enthusiasm. Her father’s battle plan was far-fetched, but it might just work.

‘Very well then, if everyone is agreed and sure they know what to do, then I suggest we set about completing our preparations. We move tomorrow night.’



‘Yes, sir!’ Neville and Caruthers said in unison.

Mrs Hinges nodded slowly as she thought matters over. Elle could see that the housekeeper was working on a few embellishments of her own, but she was wise enough not to get into a debate with the professor about them.

Loisa just sat in silence with that secret little smile of hers on her face. Elle wished she could tell what her friend was thinking.

‘Neville, would you mind driving me into the West End this evening?’

Loisa asked.

‘No problem, Baroness. Just let me know when you wish to go,’ Neville said.

Loisa gave Elle an apologetic look. ‘I still do not have my full strength back quite yet. I need to go out.’

‘Think nothing of it, dear Loisa. Just please be careful.’

‘Of course, my dear,’ Loisa said. ‘I always am.’

‘Then we are all set,’ Elle said. ‘We will convene here in the dining room tomorrow evening.’

After the meeting dispersed, Elle wandered into the kitchen. She walked over to the meat room and stared through the window. Marsh was still in the position she had seen him earlier. He sat completely still with his head bowed forward as if he were extremely weary. His hair had flopped forward on to his brow.

Elle wanted to pull the door open and hold him in her arms, but she knew she could not. Any agitation would simply make the clock in his chest tick faster.

‘We will fix this, my darling,’ she whispered as she laid her hand on the

cold glass. Her warmth created a film of fog on the glass that separated them and then, just as quickly, it was gone.

Marsh did not respond.

Elle closed her eyes and turned away from the window. As she did, she prayed that their plan would work and that tomorrow evening would not be too late.

## Chapter Thirty

Clothilde stood very still in front of the magneto generator in her laboratory. Somehow, even though they could not see her, she felt she had to stand when she was speaking to her employers.

‘You are sure you linked this connection to the telephony line securely?’

The chairman’s voice crackled and echoed through the brass speaker horn which stood to the side of the cabinet.

‘Our cable is spliced into the transcontinental line, bypassing all the exchanges. I had the electromancers attend to the matter,’ Clothilde said. There was a brief pause as her voice carried down the line across the continent to her employers.

‘Nonetheless, we will keep this communication short,’ the chairman said. Another whizz and crackle on the line ensued. ‘We are all assembled. You may report,’ he added.

‘All is going according to plan. I now have a thousand made and ready for shipment.’

‘Very good,’ said the chairman. ‘And the quality?’

‘The best I could find. Very strong and durable.’

‘And your visitor? We are surprised that he has not made contact with us.’

‘He is not here at the moment. He said that he had some other business to attend to. He left us the day after he arrived, but he said he would be back soon. Apart from that, I do not know what he is up to.’ As she spoke, Clothilde

stared at the glass tank that had been erected in the corner of her laboratory. Inside the blue spark-infused liquid, Patrice floated silently. A grotesque array of wires and springs sprouted from the cauterised hole in his chest. He was awaiting the insertion procedure, but s Clothilde had not quite got round to completing the process. The solution he was suspended in would preserve him indefinitely. Opposite the tank, Patrice's heart floated in one of the jars of the shelf, neatly lined up and numbered, so there was no rush.

She stroked the side of her face. It was still slightly tender from where he had struck her. It would do the odious man some good to marinate for a while, she thought with a warm pang of satisfaction.

'I am sure we will hear from the good *monsieur* before long.' The chairman interrupted her thoughts. 'In the meantime, I will arrange for transport of the first shipment by dirigible. Choose a hundred of the best specimens and have them ready for collection. The Emperor is willing to allow us to deploy a small batch in the East as a demonstration. He wishes to see how they perform before completing his purchase negotiations.'

'When shall I expect the flight?'

'Tomorrow evening.'

'I will see that they are ready,' Clothilde said.

'Then we are pleased. You have done excellent work so far, Miss de Blanc. Very good work indeed.'

'Thank you, sir.' Clothilde inclined her head even though she knew they could not see her.

With another crackle and a hiss, the connection was terminated.

'You know that it's illegal to have one of those without a licence,' Emilian

said behind her.

Clothilde swung round. He was sitting in a chair eating an apple. He sliced off a with a rather large and dangerous-looking knife.

‘How dare you listen in on my private conversation?’ she blazed. Blue energy crackled in her white hair.

‘Oh, don’t be so touchy, lady. You called for me, remember?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Clothilde frowned. As their numbers grew, maintaining control over the soldiers was becoming more and more taxing. She was so tired some days that she found herself forgetting things. Forgetting things and making mistakes – mistakes she could ill afford.

‘Well, you heard the man. We need to round up a hundred and have them ready for shipment.’

‘Shouldn’t be a problem.’ Emilian put another slice of apple into his mouth. ‘I was thinking that batch of prisoners we stole would do nicely. They are the most bloodthirsty. If they want to do a proper demonstration, those ones should put up the best show.’

Clothilde nodded. ‘Yes, I think you might be right. Those would be good specimens to send.’

‘What are you going to do with Fatty over there?’ Emilian pointed to the tank.

‘I haven’t decided yet,’ she said. ‘And don’t think I have forgiven you for that little faux pas, Emilian. You should be the one floating in that tank for telling him about the Warlock.’

Emilian met her gaze steadily and smirked. ‘I thought he needed to know that you were running your own little business on the side.’

‘I would be more careful with my words if I were you,’ she said. Clothilde raged silently at his insolence, but she would have to put up with him for the moment, but when the time came she was going to relish sending him into the machine.

‘So what about Fatty?’ he asked again, pointing the knife at the tank.

‘He is touched by the Shadow and once the insertion of the heart device is completed, he will be part of my personal guard,’ she said.

Emilian held the hand, still holding the knife, palm out but with the blade between his fingers in a cocky half-gesture of submissiveness. ‘Understood, mistress.’ He went back to slicing his apple. ‘What do you want me to do with the other special ones? The little lordling and the table-rapping fop you had Vargo pick up from Soho?’ Emilian placed the square apple core on the little ledge beside him and carefully wiped his knife clean. ‘The fop keeps wailing and whining about wanting to get out of here. Can’t you sort him out for us?’

‘He can wait,’ she said. ‘We have more pressing business...’

Clothilde thought for a moment. ‘Actually, I think we should send the young lord along with the prisoners. They will need a pack leader to herd them and he could do with a little training.’

Emilian nodded and stood. ‘All righty then, I shall do as you command.’ He made a little bow, which had nothing to do with respect or subservience.

‘Thank you. You are dismissed,’ Clothilde said.

‘Oh yes, before I go.’ Emilian rose from his chair. ‘In case you were wondering, Tom is dead. He died this morning from the gunshot wound to his stomach.’

‘I trust that the search for a replacement is underway?’ she said, without

batting an eyelid.

‘Yes, we are looking.’

‘Any news on the whereabouts of the woman who shot him?’

Emilian hesitated.

‘Speak!’ Clothilde barked.

‘Vargo says the Nightwalker got a nasty mouthful of silver when she sank her teeth into Tom.’ He paused for effect. ‘We don’t think she should be long for this world.’

‘And the other, the one with the red hair?’

‘We don’t know.’

Clothilde went very silent. Was this the same woman Patrice spoke of? Was she the one who chased her in the opera house? The one who sensed her using Shadow magic? It was too much of a coincidence for it not to be.

‘Also, Georgie from the Stag said that the Warlock’s wife came looking for him last night.’

‘No!’ Clothilde felt a pang of fear. Lightning crackled and struck the conductor chimney high above them.

‘Did she find your sister?’

Emilian shook his head. ‘She did not. Besides, even if she did, Florica would not betray you.’

‘I very much hope for both your sakes that this is true, Emilian. You and your sister have tried my patience for the longest of time with your insolence. Don’t make me regret my decision to hire you more than I already do.’

Emilian stepped back a few paces at the sight of her wrath. ‘Just the messenger, remember. I’ll go see to your hundred.’ He turned on his heel and

made his way out of the room, ostensibly ignoring her anger, but she saw a little shadow of worry pass over his face just before he turned away. This pleased her. Emilian might be cocky and subversive, but it was all bravado. She still had them firmly in her grip and he knew it.

Once Emilian was gone, Clothilde sank into a chair and rested her head in her hands. She felt weary to the depth of her bones.

Running this operation on her own was exhausting. Her underlings were hard to control. The Consortium were demanding results and now she had the actual Oracle after her. She gave a deep sigh. She was so close to success - success that would finally purchase her freedom, but she could lose it all in an instant.

She looked up at the tank. Patrice still floated motionlessly before her. It was time to take some precautions.

She turned to the long gallery of glass jars that were lined up on shelves along one side of the room. Each jar was filled with the same liquid as the solution in the tank. Each jar was connected to a network of copper tubes and cables that fed the spark current into them.

She liked seeing the hearts beat gently in unison with one another. Watching them brought her a sense of tranquillity, but she had no time for heart-gazing right now. It was time to make a few contingency plans.

She walked along the gallery until she came to a specific heart. 'It seems, Monsieur Chevalier, that today might just be your lucky day. I need you alive and with all your faculties at your disposal more than I had initially realised.'

Carefully she lifted the jar off the shelf and carried it over to her operating table. There was work to do.



## Chapter Thirty-one

Patrice gasped like a goldfish out of water as the world came into focus. It took him several moments to work out that the metal beams before his eyes were roof trusses.

He groaned and tried to sit up, but a terrible pain shot through his chest.

‘Be still or you will reopen the wounds,’ a woman’s voice said with measured calmness.

‘You!’ Patrice croaked as the sight of Clothilde swam into view. ‘What have you done to me, you harlot?’

‘Now, is that really necessary?’ she said.

Patrice ran his hand over the thick padded bandages that were strapped tightly around his torso. ‘What is this?’ he mumbled. ‘Why can’t I feel my legs?’

‘The wound has been sealed up, and I have taken the liberty of numbing your body from the waist down so you won’t accidentally hurt yourself by trying to run away too soon. You should be able to move in a few hours – as soon as your insides settle.’ She was busy with her equipment and packing things away on the shelves and in cupboards.

‘My heart,’ Patrice said. ‘You cut out my heart!’ Patrice felt a fresh wave of horror and outrage wash over him, temporarily numbing the pain.

‘I must thank you for that. It was a most useful experiment with surprising results. I have, for the most part, managed to reverse the effects of the organ

removal. Apart from a scar on your chest, I expect you will fully recover.’

‘Why?’ he said. This woman baffled him utterly.

‘When the charming Emilian blurted out my secret, I needed to make sure that you would keep your mouth shut. With the Warlock missing, I thought you might make a passable replacement.’

‘Then why bring me back?’ Even in his current state, Patrice was a pragmatist. Nothing in this world came without its price.

‘It appears you are more useful to me fully alive than undead. So here you are.’

‘It’s the Oracle,’ he said. Of course it would be.

Clothilde’s expression remained impassive.

‘She’s hunting you and you need me to tell you how to stop her.’ Patrice started laughing at the irony, but the laugh ended up in a painful cough.

‘I thought you and I could be allies, given that we share a common enemy,’ Clothilde said with a feigned air of nonchalance.

Patrice started chuckling again, this time with a little more caution. ‘What makes you think I will help you?’

‘I had a little look at your legs while you were unconscious,’ she said.

Patrice tensed. He hated the hideous half-shadow mess the lower half of his body had become. The anguish and embarrassment of being only half a man – a man who was absolutely no use to any woman – burned and . . . he looked away.

‘That’s quite an injury you have there. I could not neutralise it completely, but I did manage to turn it to your advantage.’

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘Only if you tell me how to vanquish the Oracle.’

Patrice started laughing again. ‘Oh, you poor simple creature. It was the Oracle who did this to me.’ He tried to wiggle his feet, but they were completely numb. ‘There is no stopping her. She’s too powerful.’ He coughed. ‘A hapless monstrosity like yourself does not stand a chance. All she’ll do is make you obliterate yourself with your own power.’

‘But she can be killed?’ Clothilde’s voice held some hope.

‘For all her power, she’s just a mortal woman.’ He winced. ‘I do wish you much luck with trying. If I know Eleanor Chance – and I do – she’ll not submit to death without putting up a fight. And it’s a fight you will lose.’

‘I wouldn’t be laughing this much if I were you,’ Clothilde said. ‘You have a powerful *meticule* at work within you. It needs time to settle or you will die.’

Patrice turned his head towards her. ‘I laugh, *madame*, because I am already a dead man... and so will you be. Soon.’

‘What do you mean?’ Her voice rose. ‘Tell me!’

‘If you don’t manage to kill her, she is going to destroy you. You took her husband away from her and that is not going to sit well with the lady.’ Patrice wiggled his shoulders as if he were trying to get more comfortable on the wooden table that held him. ‘And if you kill her,’ he started laughing again, ‘the men who will come after you for killing their Oracle will seek their vengeance. You will die slowly, chained up in darkness while they sap every bit of Shadow magic out of you. Drop by drop. And no one will hear you scream.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Clothilde said.

Patrice turned his head away. ‘You don’t have to. It’s all the same to me.’

‘What shall I do?’ Clothilde said. She stood before the rows of jars before her. ‘All my work . . . it will all be in vain,’ she murmured.

Patrice did not answer. He felt too tired to bother. Strange waves of nausea washed through him. Every part of him hurt.

She swivelled round and walked over to him. ‘Perhaps there is a way,’ she said.

‘Let me alone,’ he mumbled.

‘Join forces with me. Together we can destroy them,’ she said. Her voice assumed a seductive tone, but to Patrice it sounded hollow and false.

Patrice smiled at her. ‘You may do whatever you want, my dear. I am going to lie here and watch this little performance unfold. At least I will die entertained.’

‘No!’ she said. ‘You have to help me! I demand that you tell me what I want to know or else I will end your life right here and now.’

Patrice closed his eyes and grunted. Enough was enough. He had been pandering to this crazy witch for long enough and his patience was at an end. He gathered what little strength he had and reached up to grab her. Suddenly, a strange sensation of power flooded through him and his large hand closed around her delicate throat without any difficulty. He dragged her face close to his.

Her eyes widened with surprise and she let out a noise in the back of her throat.

‘What have you done to me?’ he said through gritted teeth.

‘Set the power trapped within you loose . . . was a chance you might become a Warlock . . . it’s working,’ she choked.

Patrice let go of her and stared at his hand in surprise. The deathly pallor was gone – his hand looked and felt exactly as it had before.

Clothilde had stumbled to the ground where she was coughing violently and gasping for air.

‘Explain!’ he barked.

‘Instead of allowing the Shadow to simply eat away at you as it was doing, I reworked it so you would be able to harness it. It’s not the same type of power that the Warlocks use, but it works on the same principles. In time, as you adapt, your body should become your own again... your own but better.’

Patrice stared at her in wonderment. If what she was telling him was true, he would have real power. He would be a warlock, but unique. He’d be whole again.

‘I thought we might be good together,’ she whispered. ‘I thought we could be allies.’

Patrice started laughing again, but this time he tapped into the delicious darkness that swirled within him. His voice rose and filled the laboratory. ‘But your plan backfired. I am too powerful – you cannot control me and you cannot kill me.’ The laughter grew inside him. ‘The puny tricks you use on men no longer work on me.’ His laughter rose and resonated through the laboratory. ‘Behold the monster you have created!’

She did not answer him, but her look told him that he was right.

She rose and turned to the door.

‘Not so fast,’ he said.

She hesitated.

‘It is true that we have a common enemy. You are cunning and you have

valuable skills... I think your initial instincts were right... we might very well be useful to one another.'

She lifted her chin – a defiant gesture but she said nothing.

'We can indeed be allies, but from now on, you will work for *me*,' he said. 'You have your heart back and I have done what I can to heal you, so we are even,' she said. 'We will be equal partners or nothing.'

'*Madame*,' he said as she reached the door.

She turned and for a moment her face showed such a sad loneliness that it made him bite back the nasty comment he was about to throw at her. 'If you do as I say, we will both get what we want, but if you defy me I will kill you.'

She gave a small nod 'Rest now. You will be ready to move very soon.'

Patrice lay back on the table. Great waves of dizziness were making the world tilt around him.

Those were the last words he remembered the Lady in White say before the world went black around him again.

## Chapter Thirty-two

‘Is everybody ready?’ Elle looked over her shoulder at the motley crew of people who made up the Greychester household. They were all assembled in the entrance hall, dressed to kill and ready to set out on what was, quite frankly, an insane plan.

The professor donned his pith helmet and ran his fingers over his moustache, which he had waxed especially for the occasion. ‘Huzzah!’ he said, using an expression from his military days.

Dr Miller was there too, dressed in his white coat and holding his medical bag at the ready. Next to him was another man, also dressed in a white coat. This was Dr Smith, the surgeon. He was doing his best not to goggle at the strangeness of the situation he found himself in. Dr Miller donned his bowler hat. ‘Ready, my lady,’ said. He had agreed to be on hand, in case of any injuries. ‘We are here when you need us.’

Neville and Caruthers were also both suited and booted. Neville had his trusty cricket bat by his side and Caruthers had, with permission of course, taken one of the cavalry swords from the library. It gleamed, finely polished and sharpened, at his side.

The Stanley motor had been parked outside the front door, waiting for their departure.

Elle turned to Mrs Hinges. ‘You are sure you will be all right manning the fort here while we are gone?’

Mrs Hinges waved Elle off. ‘Of course I will be fine. Never you mind me.’

‘Where is Loisa?’ Elle looked around, but the Nightwalker was nowhere to be seen. ‘Has anyone seen Loisa?’

Just then, a black steam cab pulled up to the door. Loisa was in the driving seat and by the way she was swinging the steering this way and that, it was apparent that she was not completely *au fait* with the driving of the vehicle. She skidded to a halt, just inches away from the bumper of the Stanley and let the engine stall. The cab backfired with a blast of steam that rocked its suspension.

Quite unperturbed by her terrible driving, Loisa waved at them and hopped off the top of the cab. In one graceful motion she was beside Elle at the front door.

‘Loisa, what on earth—?’ Elle said, taking in the Nightwalker’s elegant little black goggles and a black-and-white striped scarf.

‘I thought we might need more transport for this evening, so I picked up this little darling in town. Do you like it?’

‘That’s very generous of you, but a cab?’ Elle said, still somewhat surprised.

‘Actually, I can’t believe it has taken me so long to make the switch to steam. Horses have always been afraid of my kind and you have to feed them and stable them. Then when you drive through the mountains, wolves try to eat them, leaving you stranded in the snow. This is so much easier!’

‘Where on earth did you manage to buy a London cab at this hour?’ Elle said.

Loisa shrugged in her typical non-committal way. ‘Let’s just say that the



previous owner and I negotiated an excellent exchange.'

Elle thought better of enquiring any further. Instead, she hugged her friend warmly. 'Loisa, I don't know what I would do without you.'

Loisa just patted Elle's cheek. 'Let's not get too sentimental quite yet, my dear. We still have a way to go before this awful nightmare is over.'

'Quite right,' Elle said, composing herself. 'Caruthers, let's load his lordship into the cab. I think he might stand less of a chance of falling out in there.' Elle started directing operations. 'Neville, I think you are a better driver than Loisa.' She glanced at her friend apologetically. 'I think you should take the cab with the doctors. I will take the Stanley with Caruthers and my father.'

'Yes, my lady.' Neville and Caruthers disappeared back into the house to fetch Marsh.

Elle stood by with her heart in her mouth as she watched them wheel Marsh down the makeshift ramp of planks placed over the stairs to the cab. The bath chair wobbled dangerously and the professor had to step in and grab hold of one side to stop it from toppling down the stairs, but they finally made it.

Marsh was trussed up from head to toe in strong canvas that had been buckled down with leather straps. He groaned mournfully and moved his muzzled head from side to side as they secured him in his seat of the cab.

Elle put a reassuring hand on his forehead. 'Shh, my love, it's nearly over. We're going to fix this, I promise,' she said softly. Her voice seemed to calm him enough to allow Dr Miller and one of the maids to get into the cab with him.

'Wait! Before we go!' The professor ran back up the steps and into the house.

The professor appeared a few moments later, with a leather carrying case.

‘It’s the spark blaster. I’ve been tinkering about with it since Constantinople.’ He opened the case to reveal what looked like an old-fashioned blunderbuss with a glass bottle attached to the top. ‘You’ll get about four clear blasts out of this reservoir,’ he said.

‘Thank you, Papa,’ Elle said. She hugged him and kissed his cheek.

‘Now, you all remember the plan or do I need to repeat it?’ the professor said.

‘Yes, Papa,’ Elle said. ‘Let’s move out. Time is wasting.’

Elle felt a rush of affection as everyone hurried to take their positions. She would have to remember to tell Marsh all about this later.

As she climbed into the driving seat of the Stanley, Elle gave a little smile. The professor might have planned this expedition right down to the smallest detail, but she still had a few trump cards to play. As a precaution, she had sent an urgent telegram to Ducky up in Farnborough where he was seeing to the repairs to the *Phoenix*.

To her relief, he had telephoned her that afternoon to tell her that he was about to leave and that he would meet them at the monastery. It did not hurt to have a contingency plan, in case things went wrong and an air evacuation was the quickest, safest means of escape she could muster. She was not going to allow any of the people she loved to be hurt.

Elle took a deep breath to calm herself and released the brakes of the car. ‘Let’s go and find my husband’s heart,’ she said.

The full moon fought with the craggy clouds as the Greychester convoy pulled into Battersea Park. Elle had not noticed it the last time she had been here, but

the normally well-tended hedges looked shabby, as if someone had forgotten to prune them in a while. This was unusual, because the electromancers were known for their fastidious care of plants and gardens.

‘Let’s stop here, so they won’t see the cars.’ Elle motioned for Neville to pull up behind an overgrown coppice of trees. The cab shuddered to a halt next to the Stanley.

‘There she blows,’ the professor murmured.

The monastery rose up before them with its four imposing spark collection towers. The building looked like a gargantuan dreadnought, armed and ready for battle.

Elle got out of the Stanley and strode over to the cab. ‘Neville, I think you should keep the spark blaster with you. Stay here with Marsh until we give the signal. And don’t let anyone near him,’ Elle said.

‘I won’t, my lady. The professor had me practise with this thing to test it the other day. Rest assured, no one will come near us, not if I have anything to say in the matter.’ He slipped the leather strap attached to the blaster over his shoulder. The blue spark glowed in the glass canister and cast an eerie light over Neville’s face.

‘Thank you, Mr Neville. I cannot tell you how much this means.’

Neville coloured slightly. ‘Please – call me Giles,’ he said with a warm smile.

‘Well, Giles Neville, if I do not return from this errand, please take care of my husband as long as you can. It has been an honour knowing you, sir.’ Elle found that she had to swallow down a lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

‘And you, my lady,’ he said with a gracious bow.

Elle turned to Loisa who was waiting by her side. ‘Ready?’

‘More than ready.’ Loisa smiled at her and in the faint moonlight Elle caught a glimpse of fang.

She led the way through the park towards the monastery. Behind them, Drs Miller, Smith and the professor made hardly a sound. Everything was deathly quiet. Not even the crickets chirped in the shrubs and bushes around them. It was as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

## Chapter Thirty-three

The doors of Battersea Monastery were not locked when Elle and Loisa tried them. The heavy oak panels embellished with brass creaked open, sending a groaning echo deep into the building. Above them, in the eaves, Elle spotted five magpies. They sat perched high up, their beady eyes turned towards her. The sight of these birds – the very embodiment of Shadow and Light – made the hair on Elle’s arms prickle with apprehension.

‘They are expecting us,’ Loisa said under her breath, peering into the gloom ahead of them.

Elle pulled her Colt out of its holster and cocked it. ‘Let them send out the welcoming party then. I very much look forward to meeting these villains,’ she said.

‘I don’t like this. It’s too quiet,’ the professor murmured behind her.

‘Quiet, maybe. But we are not alone.’ Loisa pointed off into the shadows.

Elle turned on her shone her spark light and the cool beam cut through the gloom. A row of undead stood perfectly still in the shadows of the turbine hall as if they were awaiting a command. The only sound they could hear was the slight clinking of the metal armour they wore. Each one was wearing a brass muzzle just like the one fitted to Marsh. Not one moved as they passed.

‘Outnumbered, many to one,’ Loisa murmured.

‘We don’t have a lot of time,’ Elle said. ‘We need to divide into groups.’

‘Agreed,’ Loisa said.

Elle turned to the professor and the doctor. ‘Papa, Loisa and I are going to draw these undead away. You and the doctors stay out of sight and keep to the shadows. Find the heart. That’s the most important thing. We will handle the rest.’

‘Whoever runs this place must have some sort of workroom or laboratory. We’ll try there,’ the professor whispered. The professor and the doctors were walking very close to one another as they slipped away.

‘Just look at that thing.’ Elle glanced up at the enormous machine with its metal and copper tubes that reached all the way up to the glass-covered roof. The configuration of the machine looked very much like the organ pipes of some terrible cathedral organ.

‘What is it?’ Loisa whispered.

‘Those are innocent people underneath those muzzles. I am not sure I want to kill any of them,’ Elle said.

None of the undead had moved even a hair since they walked into the massive hall.

‘We should focus on the head of the serpent,’ Loisa said. ‘There are two of us and one of her. If we destroy the head, the rest of the body will be powerless.’

‘Then let’s go find the head of this monster.’

Elle stepped into the middle of the hall and looked up at the glass-fronted mezzanine level that looked like some sort of control room. It sat on the first floor before her.

‘*La Dame Blanche!* We know that you are in here somewhere and that you can see us. I demand that you show yourself immediately!’ she called out. Her

voice echoed in the silence. A few of the undead rustled slightly as if an invisible wind had moved them.

‘I said, show yourself, you coward!’ Elle shouted.

There was a soft ripple of light and a white apparition stepped forth on the balcony before them.

‘Lady Greychester and the Baroness, I presume?’ The woman’s voice echoed through the hall. She spoke in a soft French accent. It was definitely the woman she had encountered at the opera house, Elle realised.

‘You presume too much, err . . . what did you say your name was?’

The woman smiled. ‘I didn’t. But you may call me Clothilde, for it is the name I favour in this realm.’

‘I want my husband’s heart back. You have exactly one minute to produce it,’ Elle said, cutting to the chase.

Clothilde laughed. The sound tinkled through the open space. ‘Now it is you who presume too much. What makes you think I would do that?’

‘I have no time for silly games,’ Elle warned.

‘Neither do I.’ Clothilde’s expression hardened. She raised her arms and clapped twice. The undead beside Elle and Loisa drew to attention.

‘I said, give me my husband’s heart!’

‘What exactly will you do if I don’t comply? It seems to me, my dear Lady Greychester, that I have an army.’ She motioned with her hand and the undead responded, raising the long knives they carried. ‘...and you have nothing.’

‘Run for it. I will keep them back,’ Loisa whispered, indicating the stairs that led to the mezzanine level.

Elle inclined her head ever so slightly in agreement.

‘Make for higher ground,’ Loisa said, drawing a long, ragged-looking cutlass sheathed on her hip.

Elle took off towards the stairs as fast as she could run. Loisa was close behind her, matching her pace.

‘I’ll hold these off as long as I can. But you must hurry!’ Loisa said as she stopped halfway up the stairs. She turned to face the undead who were closing in on the staircase in menacing silence.

Elle took the remainder of the stairs two at a time. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Loisa take a stand, fangs bared.

In the last few steps before she bounded into the control room, she raised her Colt. ‘Don’t move or I’ll blow your head off,’ she said as she pointed the gun at Clothilde. ‘Now call off those monsters and alter your will so I can put my husband’s heart back where it belongs.’

Downstairs, Elle could hear blades clashing, punctuated by the groans and dull thud of undead tumbling down the stairs and hitting the floor below.

Clothilde laughed. ‘Do you honestly think that silly thing could hurt me?’ She waved a hand and Elle felt a sharp tug of power as the Colt was wrenched from her grasp. The revolver fell to the floor, discharging a bullet with deafening force. The glass panes to one side of the mezzanine shattered in a million pieces.

Elle felt tendrils of power snake around her arms and legs, restraining her as she made to retrieve the gun. Clothilde’s hold on Elle tightened painfully as she was lifted into the air.

‘Ah, Oracles. They are always so stubborn. So superior. So arrogant,’ Clothilde said. ‘I am really looking forward to killing you.’ She sneered at Elle.



‘I’d like to see you try!’ Elle said, struggling against the power that held her.

‘You can do nothing against me, you little fool. And now I am going to do to you what I did to your husband.’

‘Over my dead body,’ Elle growled.

‘*Exactement!*’ Clothilde said. ‘Your heart is going to end up in a jar in my laboratory right next to his – where you can be separated by fluids and glass for eternity. But before we proceed, you are going to tell me where he is. You see, I am quite taken with your husband. Such a handsome man.’ The tendrils of power which held Elle aloft moved to give her a little shake. ‘He is mine now, do you understand?’

‘Oh no he is not,’ Elle said.

Clothilde laughed. ‘A woman like you does not deserve a man like that.’ She tightened her grip on Elle’s throat. ‘Now tell me where he is, or I will kill you and that ridiculous little Nightwalker who came here with you.’

Elle turned her head to see Loisa tossed on the stone floor by two surly undead. Loisa’s face was covered in blood and she was breathing heavily, her cutlass gone.

‘Thank you, boys,’ Clothilde said to the undead barring the entranceway. Elle felt the tendrils of power move as Clothilde also grabbed hold of Loisa. The Nightwalker put her hands to her throat gasping. She looked up at Elle from under her beautiful curls and shook her head to signal defeat. Loisa had fought bravely, but they were hopelessly outnumbered.

‘Wait!’ Elle said.

Clothilde paused and looked at Elle.

‘He is here, close by. If you let us go I will tell you where he is.’

‘Elle, no!’ Loisa said.

Elle felt the tendrils loosen slightly and she fell, hitting the cold, hard floor.

‘I’m listening,’ Clothilde said.

Elle stood up and dusted herself off. She kept her face impassive. Jack had said that the Shadow was hers to command. She closed her eyes and focused on the energy that was swirling around her. Shadow and Light seemed to merge into one. It was as if she could see the two dimensions at the same time. She felt the dark fog rise. It was the same fog she had seen in the Shadow Realm before. The blurry double vision caused by looking into both dimensions was nauseating and extremely disconcerting, but she gritted her teeth and grabbed hold of the fog that could only be Clothilde’s power.

‘I am Pythia!’ she said in her strange booming Oracle voice. ‘You will heed my command, Shadow creature!’

Clothilde gasped as Elle tried to grab her, but she managed to slip through Elle’s fingers.

‘So you do know a trick or two...’ Clothilde said. ‘But your grasp of your power is rather clumsy. Ineffectual, despite all the booming commands.’

‘Unwill my husband’s heart. I command you!’ Elle said, as she tightened her grip on Clothilde’s power.

Elle noticed the witch flinch.

‘All right. All right,’ Clothilde said sweetly. ‘But we will have to go to my laboratory. I cannot do it from here.’

‘Take us there, then,’ Elle said.

‘First you must let me go.’

‘I will not,’ Elle boomed. ‘You shall harm none in the Realm of Light.’

‘Let me go or I shall not cooperate?’ Clothilde said.

Elle did not answer.

‘Then we will simply stand here staring at one another until you grow tired. You cannot maintain that incredibly clumsy grip you have on my power,’ Clothilde said. ‘By the looks of things, that won’t take too long.’ She flicked her wrist and Elle felt her grip on the woman slip again. The witch was right. She was not sure she could hold on to the other woman for very long.

‘Touché, Madame,’ Elle said. ‘I will let you go so we can go to the laboratory, but if you try to trick us, I will destroy you.’ Elle said with as much bravado as she could muster.

‘Oh, I don’t doubt that,’ Clothilde said, shaking herself free of Elle’s control. ‘In fact, I’m always extremely happy to show people my work. There are so few who truly appreciate the intricacy of it.’ She sashayed towards the door and the undead parted to allow her to pass. ‘This way, if you please.’ She motioned for them to stand. ‘I believe the two gentlemen in your company are already waiting for us there.’

Loisa gave Elle a look, warning her to keep silent and follow the Lady.

The narrow halls and winding staircases of the spark monastery were all dark as they passed through them. The only light was that which seemed to radiate from Clothilde herself. Behind them, Elle could hear the shuffle and clink of the undead who were following them in the shadows.

‘Where are the monks?’ Elle asked.

‘Oh, here and there,’ Clothilde said non-committally.

‘But the city needs them to make spark. Without the electromancers we have no means to drive our machines.’

Clothilde smiled at her. ‘Most inconvenient, isn’t it? That the Realm of Light has to rely on the electromancers so. It is an irony not lost on many of us who dwell on the other side.’

They had reached another set of doors, which Clothilde pushed open. ‘Inside!’ She stood aside so the undead could shove Elle and Loisa through the entrance. Elle stumbled into the room.

‘In the cage!’ Clothilde commanded as she opened the gate of what looked to be a large metal construction of bars that made up a cell. The professor and the doctor were both inside.

‘No!’ said Elle.

‘Inside, or the other two die.’

Elle watched in horror as her father and the doctors started clutching their throats, gasping for air.

‘Papa, doctors, are you hurt?’ Elle said as soon as they were shoved inside.

‘We’re fine,’ the professor whispered. He gave Elle a little wink. ‘We have a plan.’

Loisa rolled her eyes and set about cleaning her face with the fine silk handkerchief she had produced from one of her pockets.

‘Behold, my laboratory!’ Clothilde swept her arms through the air and the row of spark lights that hung from the roof lit up in sequence.

Elle and Loisa stared, open-mouthed. Clothilde’s laboratory was huge. It was a long, narrow room that spanned almost the entire length of the building. The roof was a network of wood and metal beams. From them, an array of tubes and pipes led down into vast rows of glass jars lined up neatly on shelves that lined one wall. The glass jars, which were, in turn, all

interconnected by various copper and rubber tubes, glowed with an eerie blue light.

All the tubes led into a console of dials and gauges that seemed to regulate the flow of whatever was in the pipes.

‘My goodness, that is quite something,’ was all Elle could say. There was enough spark in the laboratory to power a hundred airships for a very long time.

‘Necromancy,’ Loisa whispered. ‘I can smell it.’

‘Welcome to my chamber of hearts. Do you like it?’ Clothilde gestured at the rows of jars.

Elle repressed a surge of revulsion as she looked closer at the jars on the shelves. A lot of them were empty, but many were not, and their gory contents made bitter bile rise up into the back of her throat.

‘*Mon Dieu,*’ Loisa said as her gaze followed Elle’s around the room.

Inside each jar, suspended in the blue glowing liquid, was what appeared to be a pulsating human heart. And they all seemed to be beating in unison.

‘There must be thousands of jars,’ the professor said.

‘There are,’ Clothilde said. ‘But sadly we are not quite up to full capacity just yet. We are making progress, though.’

‘Why are you doing all this?’ Elle said.

Clothilde laughed. ‘Oh, don’t be so stupid.’

‘I need to hear it from you.’ Elle steadily met her gaze, challenging Clothilde to continue.

‘If you insist,’ she shrugged. ‘We are building an army of soldiers that feel no fear or pain. An army that requires no supplies. One made up of soldiers who

can fight night and day and who obey every command fearlessly and without question. And whoever commands this super army will rule the world.’

‘But this is madness,’ Elle said as Clothilde’s words sank in.

‘Only for those who are on the receiving side,’ Clothilde said. ‘And with my unlimited spark production upstairs, soon no one will be able to stop me.’

‘Who are We? Who are your masters?’ Elle said, grabbing on to the only piece of information that made any sense to her.

‘I have no masters,’ Clothilde’s eyes flashed. ‘I do have business partners. They are called The Consortium. That is all you need to know. That and the fact that they have a most skilled clockmaker in their ranks. He is the one who designed the beautiful mechanical hearts.’

‘The Clockmaker?’ Elle felt a cold shiver of apprehension move through her.

‘But we digress. Would you like to see your husband’s heart?’ She ran her pale hand along the row of jars. Elle noticed that each jar had a number on a little brass tag attached to a tie around the top.

Clothilde stopped in front of one of the rows and studied the tags. ‘Ah, here he is. Number 493.’ She peered at the heart, which was a strange shade of purple in the blue light. It was the same number that was present on the brass plate fitted to Marsh’s chest. To Elle’s dismay, she noticed that Marsh’s heart beat ever so slightly quicker when Clothilde rested her hand against the glass.

‘You mean to bring war and destruction to this world,’ Loisa said. ‘We cannot allow it.’

Clothilde arched one of her finely curved eyebrows at Loisa. ‘Oh, and your kind has not caused death and destruction for centuries? You may dress and act

civilised, but for more centuries than anyone cares to remember, your kind treated the Realm of Light as nothing more than a feeding ground. I would be slow to criticise if I were you, Nightwalker.'

Loisa hissed and bared her fangs.

Clothilde just laughed. 'Don't forget that you are still within my power. One flick of my wrist and your head rolls over the floor.'

'I would like to see you try,' Loisa growled.

'Ah, she shows her true nature,' Clothilde said. 'You are lucky that I need you alive for the experiments I am planning. Having Nightwalkers in the ranks is going to be an exciting addition to the armies. You will be the mother of them all. But we can have a little duel of wills before we proceed, if that would make you happy.'

Loisa sprang towards the bars of the cage with such force that the entire structure wobbled.

Clothilde turned away from her to the elaborately fitted-out operating table that took pride of place in the centre of the laboratory, as if Loisa's anger was insignificant.

Suddenly, they heard a loud thump, like metal hitting stone. Clothilde's expression froze as she was suddenly engulfed in a shroud of blue spark. Before anyone could say anything, she sank to her knees and vaporised before their very eyes.

'What on earth?' Elle said as Neville stepped forward holding the spark-blaster at the ready.

'Ah, Neville, old chap,' the professor said. 'Right on time. That was a jolly good shot. Would have been a six if you were on the Oval.'

Neville grinned from ear to ear at the compliment.

‘Look out!’ Loisa said, for the four undead soldiers grunted and came at Neville in a sudden rush. Neville blasted them with the spark blaster, which knocked them to the floor.

‘Stand back!’ Loisa shouted. She kicked the door of the cage with such force that the lock cracked and the door sprang open.

‘That wasn’t much of a difficulty then,’ the professor said, glancing at the lock.

‘Clearly not,’ Elle said drily. ‘Neither was the Lady in White, by the looks of things. Quite disappointing as far as vanquishing foes go. Let’s herd those guards into the cage. Quickly. I’ll see if I can find something to secure the gate.’

‘Shall I bring his lordship in now?’ Neville asked as soon as they had secured the gate with an old chain and a padlock they had found in one of the cupboards.

‘Without delay, my dear man. Without delay,’ one of the doctors said.

Neville whistled and Caruthers appeared at the door with Marsh. They had loosed his feet from the canvas and somehow he had managed to walk Marsh there. Marsh moaned as soon as he saw the other undead. It was a terrible sound that emanated from the back of his throat.

‘Neville, you stay and guard the entrance while my father and the doctor get to work. I don’t trust this. Vanquishing *Madame Blanche* was a little bit too easy if you ask me. No offence meant, of course,’ Elle said.

‘None taken, my lady,’ Neville said. ‘But this thing seems to work really well on those undead.’ He shifted the spark blaster to a more comfortable



position. 'Well, see if you can refill the canister. Heavens knows, there is enough spark around here for that.'

'I don't trust the silence either,' Loisa said. 'We had better make sure she is really dead.'

'Lead the way, Loisa,' Elle said. She picked up a spanner the length of her arm off one of the shelves and lifted it over her shoulder. 'Besides, the evil hag stole my Colt and I want it back. Along with my husband and my life - before we go home this evening.'

## Chapter Thirty-four

‘How many did you manage to bring down while you were on the stairs?’ Elle asked Loisa as they crept along the narrow passageway that led back to the main hall.

‘I think about a dozen or so. The problem is that they won’t stay down. You have to break their legs so they can’t come after you.’ She made a face. ‘Also they taste really awful if you bite them.’

‘Let’s hope I never have to,’ Elle said, grateful for the fact that she was not a Nightwalker.

The soft sound of rustling caught their attention.

‘What was that?’ Elle whispered.

Up ahead of them in the passageway something was shuffling around in the dark.

Quietly as they could, Elle and Loisa crept up to the doorway to see what it was.

‘Who’s there?’ Elle switched on her spark lamp and a beam of light revealed a small man in a grey robe.

‘P—please don’t hurt me,’ he muttered, lifting his hands before his face to ward off the blinding light of the lamp.

‘An electromancer!’ Loisa said.

‘Where are the rest of your brothers?’ Elle asked.

‘We’re hiding in the tunnels below the building. She hasn’t found those

yet,' he said.

'We've come to liberate you,' said Elle.

The electromancer's face lit up but fell again. 'You won't get past the Lady. If she gets angry, you end up being food for those things!'

'The Lady is gone. Well at least we hope she is. I would suggest you get your people out of here as quickly as you can,' Elle said, 'in case there is more trouble.'

The little man gripped her hand. 'She's gone?'

'We blasted her with a blunderbuss and she evaporated into thin air,' Elle said.

The electromancer started shaking. 'W-We're free! Thank you. Thank you so much!' He opened a small hatch in the floor and disappeared into it.

'That solves one of the mysteries,' Loisa said.

'Indeed it does,' said Elle. 'I think those are the stairs to the control room up ahead. My guess is that if she is still alive, that's where she'll be.'

Around them, the building echoed and creaked eerily like a giant ghost ship.

Elle had not been wrong, for a sudden screeching, wailing noise met them halfway up the stairs.

'Head for open ground!' Loisa said to Elle, and they turned and ran down the stairs.

A white cloud of mist boiled out of the stairwell behind them as they burst into the turbine hall. Great flashes of lightning flashed in the sky above them.

'I cannot be vanquished by spark, you stupid fools. I am the very element that spark is made of!' Clothilde rose up before them in a vast cloud of roiling mist that gradually diminished, leaving the elemental standing before them. 'I

was foolish to show you mercy before, but not this time.’ She was seething with anger.

‘We’ve made her a bit cross,’ Elle said to Loisa.

‘Livid, by the looks of things,’ Loisa replied.

‘The time for playing games is over.’ She lifted her arms and rose up above them, ready to strike a deathblow.

At that moment, bright searchlights flooded through the glass roof of the turbine hall. Elle looked up and her eyes widened with surprise. Above her, the hull of a giant airship loomed from the darkness. It was hovering so low that its bottom almost touched the glass panes of the roof.

Clothilde blinked as if she had just woken up from a trance. Ignoring Elle and Loisa, she smiled sweetly as she took in the sight of the ship above them. ‘Such brilliant timing! They are here. Vargo, start preparing the soldiers to embark! Find whoever you can to make up the hundred. We lost a few to the Nightwalker, but it does not matter. We shan’t leave the Consortium waiting. In the meantime, I will see to these – these vermin,’ she said, motioning towards Elle.

Vargo and two other men appeared from the doorway to the stairwell behind Clothilde. They were the same men from the park, Elle realised with a shudder. Beside her, Loisa bared her fangs.

‘I said move!’ Clothilde bellowed.

‘Yes, mistress.’ Vargo stared at Clothilde as if she had gone completely mad, which was, it seemed, a conclusion that did not require a huge amount of deductive reasoning. But he shrugged and strode off into the distance.

‘Where are you taking those people?’ Elle demanded.

‘They are a special order for the Emperor of Japan. He will be very pleased with his consignment,’ Clothilde said rather smugly.

‘She really loves the sound of her own voice, doesn’t she?’ Elle said out the side of her mouth to Loisa.

Loisa snickered in reply.

‘I will not abide such insolence. Neither you, nor anyone else is going to stop me,’ Clothilde said.

Elle shook her head. ‘Did you know, your voice is becoming shriller by the moment? You are liable to start shattering glass soon if you don’t watch out.’

‘Don’t you shake your head at me, *Oracle!*’ Her voice had become like nails dragging on a chalkboard. Elle and Loisa both flinched.

At that very moment, there was a terrible rumble and a crash. The dirigible hull above them shifted sideways and tapped the panes. Large cracks appeared in the glass and spread across the roof like spider webs. There was one loud crack and then the air filled with sounds of shattering glass. Deadly shards started falling to the ground.

Clothilde screamed as a shard of glass sliced into her shoulder. Great bolts of lightning flashed and started hitting the ground all around them.

‘Loisa run! Get out!’ Elle covered her face with her hands and made for the door. The bits of glass slashed at her, cutting through the hide of her sturdy leather coat. She felt the skin of her arms and scalp slice a few times before Loisa grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and shoved her through the open doors.

Outside the monastery, Elle skidded to a halt. Before them a state of utter chaos reigned.

The undead were running about lashing out at anything and everything. Around them groups of people, armed with a startling array of home-made armour and weapons that ranged from frying pans to sheets of corrugated iron, were trying to round up the herds of undead. It looked more like a giant game of tag at a village fete than a battle to the death.

‘Where did all these people come from?’ Elle looked at Loisa in amazement.

Loisa shrugged, but before she could say anything, she was interrupted by someone shouting and running towards them at full speed.

It was Jasper. He was covered in grime and his clothes were tattered, but he was alive. He was waving his arms frantically while shouting, ‘Take cover!’

The sound of wood splitting and the groan of distressed metal rose up from the general pandemonium around them. It was a terrible sound that Elle had heard only once before – it was the sound of an airship dying.

Elle spun round in the direction of the noise and stared, transfixed with terror. Two dirigibles, locked together like beasts at each other’s throats, were hovering just above the roof of the monastery. The tether ropes of the bigger ship had become entangled in the roof beams. As if suspended in water, the two vessels slowly tilted sideways and crashed to the ground, taking most of the monastery roof with them. The patch of land that was immediately to the east side of the monastery was suddenly filled with billowing canvas and the impact of the crash made the ground shudder.

Splinters of wood, the size of a man’s forearm, along with other debris flew through the helium-laced air, piercing everything in their path.

‘Get down!’ Elle shouted, but her voice was drowned out by the general din of the crash.

A few people, undead and living, were knocked to the ground by bits of flying plank and Elle watched in horror as one of the undead was skewered and pinned to the ground by a deadly shard of metal. He continued to move, his arms and legs flailing pitifully.

‘Look out!’ Loisa cried. Her voice was comically high from the helium in the air. A large chunk of metal came hurtling towards Elle. She grabbed on to Loisa and they sidestepped the missile which jolted to a stop just beside them. Elle peered at the hunk of metal in amazement. It was the head of a fierce-looking bird.

‘Oh my goodness, that’s the *Phoenix*. Ducky!’ They both turned to the mangled wreckage in horror and dismay.

As they watched the settling mass of wrecked ship, a few planks shot in the opposite direction, as if someone had kicked them away from the inside. From the wreckage, two men stumbled. One was half dragging the other in a fireman’s hold.

‘This way! Over here!’ Elle called to them. To her amazement, she realised that it was Captain Dashwood, carrying Ducky.

With much care, Dashwood lay Ducky down on the ground. ‘There you are, old fella,’ he said. ‘He got hit by a falling beam. Knocked him out cold,’ he said.

Ducky groaned and opened his eyes.

Elle crouched beside him and rested her hand on his forehead. ‘Ducky? Can you hear me?’ she said.

He gave her a lopsided smile. ‘Sorry about the ship, Bells. Made a bit of a mess of the landing.’

‘Oh, Ducky,’ Elle said with a sob.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Dashwood said.

‘How did *you* get here?’ Elle said to Dashwood.

‘Well, I was at a bit of a loose end... given that I was temporarily without a ship and Ducky asked me to co-pilot for him. The *Phoenix* needs two pilots, remember?’ He looked at her. ‘You, lady, owe me a ship.’

‘Rally! Rally! Come on, ladies, secure those stragglers!’ someone shouted through a loudspeaker behind them. ‘Left flank! Suffragette unit! Send in the medics and get someone to look for survivors on those ships!’

Elle put her hand before her mouth in amazement as the group turned their attention to the spectacle that was playing out before them. Loisa’s cab, which at that moment was being driven forward ever so slowly by a rather flustered-looking Caruthers, came into view. On top of the cab, Mrs Hinges stood with a loudspeaker before her face. She was directing the crowd of people before her like an army general.

‘To the left. To the left! They are escaping!’ Mrs Hinges waved her arms directing the troops.

‘Jasper!’ Loisa said, catching Mr Sidgwick by the lapel as he raced by.

‘How on earth did you get here?’

‘They jumped me in my rooms, and the next thing I knew I was in a cell, ready for processing into one of those things. Something must have gone wrong though, because they never got round to me. I just sat there and waited.’ He rubbed the little thinning patch on the back of his head and nodded at



Dashwood. ‘The monks let me out. They were whispering about someone who had come to save them. They just unlocked the door and told me to run for my life. So I did. I thought you two were behind this.’

‘Bravo, Jasper!’ Loisa said. Jasper beamed back at her.

Someone had switched on the monastery’s outside lights and they shone across the open space with blinding intensity. Elle peered through the spark-light-illuminated half-dark. People from all walks of life loomed out of the dark. Some were servants, dressed in uniform – as if they had abandoned dinner to come here. Others were wearing green and purple sashes over their dresses.

A woman ran up to them. ‘Elle! Thank goodness you made it out of the building.’ It was Christabel Pankhurst; she had a streak of mud on her cheek.

‘What on earth are *you* doing here?’ Elle asked.

Christabel winked at her. ‘Mrs Hinges told the lady’s maid of one of the Mandevilles, who in turn told their mistress, who told me. You didn’t think we’d let you try to save London all by yourself, did you?’

‘I suppose not,’ Elle said.

Christabel smiled. ‘The Mandevilles are manning the medic and refreshment station which has been set up in the park.’

Mrs Hinges made Caruthers sound the cab horn through her loudspeaker, signalling to the troops to change manoeuvres.

‘The electromancers! The electromancers are revolting! Join us, brothers!’ someone shouted.

Sure enough, the little monks started pouring from the building. They were linking arms in a line that effectively flanked the undead, herding them into a

group and preventing them from re-entering the monastery.

‘About my ship,’ Dashwood said.

‘Christabel,’ Elle said, ignoring the captain, ‘this is Captain Logan Dashwood. He is most interested in the ladies’ cause and would like to join in the fight for the vote. He told me just the other day that he would love to discuss these issues in detail. Perhaps you could take him under your wing and show him the ropes, as it were?’

‘How do you do?’ Christabel said, as she took in the handsome captain. She ran her hands over her hair to make sure her fashionable Gibson girl knot was still in place.

Dashwood blanched and gave Elle a horrified look.

Ducky started laughing.

‘Let’s get this wounded fellow to the medic tent. He looks as if he could do with a bit of a patch-up,’ said Christabel glancing down at Ducky. ‘I see my squadron of ladies is faltering without me and we need to round up as many of these Tickers as we can so they can be restored to health. There is no time to waste. Come along then, Captain Dashwood. Deeds not words! Chop chop!’ Between them, they lifted Ducky and headed off towards the park.

The last Elle saw of Dashwood was his pleading look for help, as he and Christabel supported Ducky between them.

‘We need more light!’ Mrs Hinges bellowed.

To her left, Elle caught sight of flashes of yellow that were almost as bright as sunlight.

At least a dozen fairies of various descriptions were blasting shafts of their light into the undead, illuminating the whole area. From the corner of her eye,

Elle could have sworn she saw a flash of green light, which could only have been Adele, but she wasn't sure and there was no time to check. It seemed like the travelling folk and the patrons from the Black Stag had also decided to join in the fight. Elle caught a glimpse of Emilian's peacock feather bobbing through the crowd as he sprinted towards the fairies.

The undead seemed utterly disorientated by all the lights and activity. In response they started huddling together in a big herd in the middle of the open ground in front of the monastery.

'Is anyone we know *not* here tonight?' Elle asked Loisa.

'We had better go and see how your father is faring,' Loisa said. 'Hopefully that breaking glass has killed the witch while she was in human form.'

'Let's hope we are so lucky,' Elle said. She looked back at the wreckage and bit her lip. About half a dozen Suffragettes were sifting through the rubble, looking for the pilot of the other ship.

'There is nothing you can do for him now,' said Loisa, who could see better in the dark.

'As always, you are the voice of reason, Loisa,' Elle said, feeling suddenly utterly exhausted. 'Let's go and collect Hugh. I want to go home.'

## Chapter Thirty-five

Patrice stood in the shadows under a tree on the opposite bank of the Thames. He watched the dirigibles plunge to the ground and shook his head. What a debacle.

He bunched his fists at his sides. Once again the Oracle had ruined his plans beyond the point of redemption.

There was one consolation, though. At least this time, he could blame it on *La Dame Blanche* when it came to reporting to the Consortium. The Consortium, Patrice chuckled. These men, the captains of industry, rulers of the world's stock markets – how utterly foolish of them to place such an important project in the hands of a woman.

But it mattered not, because for once, he, Patrice Chevalier, had come up trumps.

He closed his eyes and felt the surge of dark magic flow through him. This new energy that he felt deep within him was more powerful than anything he had ever imagined. No wonder Hugh Marsh had always been so smug.

He chuckled lightly, but this time the wound in his chest did not hurt. He had sent a little bit of his own magic to the area and he seemed to be healed up entirely. All that was left was a puckered scar, which he quite liked.

He shivered with excitement, for he was one of the few people in this world who knew the true secrets of the Council of Warlocks. For years they had been nothing but an impotent group of posers, pretending that the power they had

once yielded still existed. They were nothing but a bunch of stage magicians putting on a show.

All that was about to change.

A smart black car rumbled up the road and came to a halt before him.

‘Evenin’, sir,’ the driver said.

‘Ah, Mr Chunk. I am so very pleased you found me.’

‘Not at all, sir. Always a pleasure to be of assistance,’ Mr Chunk said. He hopped out from behind the driver’s seat and opened the door for Patrice.

Patrice settled into the back seat with a sigh.

‘Where to, sir?’

‘Hmm. King’s Cross station. I think I might go up north to have a look at my factories there while I’m here.’

‘Very well, sir,’ Mr Chunk said as he took his place behind the wheel.

Patrice sat forward. ‘Actually, we might stop off at Madame Colette’s first. It’s on the way to the station, is it not?’

‘It most certainly is, sir.’ Mr Chunk gave a small chuckle of amusement.

‘Yes, I suddenly find myself in possession of a raging appetite and they do serve a splendid plate of roast beef there too,’ Patrice mused. It was true. He was feeling better than he had in a very long time. He sat back and lit one of the little black cigars he loved so much. He felt the smoke fill his lungs and he breathed out with a deep sense of satisfaction as he contemplated the current state of affairs.

Hugh Marsh had been turned into one of Clothilde’s undead creatures. It was unlikely he would survive the ordeal. That meant that Eleanor was alone. Yes, the Oracle was all by herself and unprotected. Stubborn, wilful and

immature, she was ripe for the plucking.

A slow smile spread across Patrice's face. Just think of what he would be able to achieve if he could use her to channel and amplify his newfound power. The thought sent shivers of anticipation through him.

But now was not the time to be hasty. He would have to plan it carefully. He could not risk anything going wrong again. No, he would take his time before making the next move.

'Mr Chunk. I have changed my mind. Could you please see if you can book an air ticket for me while I am at Colette's?'

'Very well, sir. First class?'

'If you can,' said Patrice. 'But speed is more important than comfort in these circumstances.'

'Where to, sir?'

'Venice - without delay.'

'Council of Warlocks, sir?'

'Indeed.'

'No need to say any more, sir,' Mr Chunk said as he negotiated the London traffic, which seemed to be inordinately congested around the embankment.

Patrice sat back in the comfort of his seat as he watched London go by. It had stopped raining and the whole city was shimmering and icy-wet under the bright light of the moon. The sight of it was extraordinarily pretty after the fog and ice.

Yes, despite the horrors of his capture and torture, things have gone very well for him indeed.

## Chapter Thirty-six

The monastery felt eerily empty after the deafening crash of the dirigibles outside. The gaping hole in the glass roof caused freezing cold air to fill the building. Elle shivered as they crept along the narrow corridors.

‘Stay close,’ Loisa whispered. ‘I still don’t trust this place.’

‘Neither do I,’ Elle said.

Outside, thunder rumbled ominously. Elle and Loisa looked at one another.

‘I suppose she is not dead after all then,’ Elle said as they reached the laboratory.

‘Dr Miller? Papa? Are you in there?’ Elle called.

‘Down here,’ the faint answer came.

Elle rushed down the stairs and into the laboratory. ‘How are things going?’ Elle said. Her voice echoed through the room, loudly.

‘Shh!’ the professor said. ‘We are at a very delicate stage of the procedure.’

Marsh was laid out on a long operating table before her. His handsome face was as pale and still as a wax death mask. Rubber and brass tubes protruded from his chest. The tubes were connected to a large machine that groaned and belched air into him at regular intervals.

Elle bit her lip at the awfulness of the scene before her. Seeing him like this was almost too much to bear.

‘Right, doctors, are you ready?’ the professor said, seemingly unfazed by the bizarre situation they found themselves in.

‘Wait!’ Elle interrupted. ‘Are you sure you have the correct heart?’

The professor sighed. ‘Yes, my dear. It was the one marked with the same number as that on the ticking device. The one that woman picked out. Now let us get on with it. We really don’t have a lot of time.’

‘Doctors, on the count of three,’ the professor instructed, resuming the procedure.

Dr Miller pulled back his shirtsleeves and reached into the glass jar before him. Carefully, he wrapped his hands around the heart suspended within the illuminated blue liquid. It was so strangely intimate an act, that it made Elle gasp. He handed the heart to Dr Smith who was bent over Marsh’s chest cavity.

‘Better look away now,’ Loisa said.

‘No, I need to see,’ Elle said, bracing herself.

‘One . . . two . . . three!’ The professor flipped up the connector switch and a series of valves started moving vigorously inside the professor’s device, which he had installed on to the side of the table.

‘Extracting the clockwork now!’ In one swift move, the professor lifted the clockwork heart out. The device whirred and spat globules of dark blood all over the white aprons the professor and the doctors were wearing.

Marsh jerked violently, but remained restrained by the fabric bindings that held him to the table.

‘Now, doctors. When you are ready,’ the professor said.

Ever so gently, Dr Smith eased the heart back into Marsh’s chest.

‘Insertion complete,’ he said, lifting his hands out of the way.

‘Reattachment sequence commencing.’ The professor flicked another switch



and the machine started humming. The probes cut, then sealed up tissue arteries and muscle.

‘Apply spark,’ the doctor said.

A squiggle of smoke rose up as they sent a little current of spark through Marsh’s heart.

‘Now, the rest of this is up to you, Hugh. *Will* your heart to start beating,’ the professor murmured.

Everyone stood very still as they watched for the needle of the beat measurement gauge to move.

Elle was too frightened to breathe. Then, in the space it took for a miracle to occur, the needle lifted.

. . . Thump-thump . . . thump-thump.

Marsh’s heart had started beating with the slow, steady rhythm that promised that all would be well.

‘Oh, thank goodness,’ Elle gasped. She wanted to jump up and scream, but she forced herself to stay calm. Instead she gripped Loisa’s hand hard. The Nightwalker was smiling from ear to ear.

‘Let’s close that chest wound,’ doctor Smith said. ‘Hold that side, doctor.’ He started removing the tubes, all the while stitching up the hideous gaping hole in Marsh’s chest.

‘Not so fast,’ a voice said behind them.

Elle and Loisa swung round.

*La Dame Blanche* was standing behind them on the stairs. She was panting and her white robes were stained with dark blood that oozed from the wound in her shoulder.

‘Oh, not you again,’ Elle said.

‘There is nothing more here for you,’ Loisa said. ‘Your airship has crashed and your army is defeated.’

‘*Au contraire*,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘The Warlock is *mine*!’

‘He most certainly is not!’ Elle said.

Before Elle could do anything, Loisa hissed and lunged at the Lady. They fell to the ground, growling and scratching at one another.

As quickly as she could, Elle ran to the metal cage and undid the chain that held the door shut. Clothilde and Loisa were still rolling around on the floor. Every now and then Loisa gave a squeal of pain.

Elle stepped around them. ‘Loisa! Quick. Now!’ she shouted.

Loisa pushed Clothilde aside and rolled out of the way. In that moment Elle grabbed Clothilde by her long white hair and shoved her into the cage with the undead, before slamming the door shut.

‘Not so much fun being in a metal cage, is it?’ Loisa said. She was kneeling on the ground, panting.

‘Loisa, are you all right?’ Elle said.

She nodded and rubbed her throat.

‘He’s waking up,’ the doctor said.

‘Loisa, hold this door for me, please,’ Elle said. She ran up to the table where the doctor and the professor were undoing the bindings that held Marsh.

Marsh groaned and opened his eyes.

‘Oh, my darling,’ Elle whispered.

His eyes, no longer milky white, focused on her and, for the briefest moment, she and Marsh connected.

‘He’s very weak and he needs time to recover—’ one the doctor started saying, but he was interrupted by Clothilde laughing.

‘Very good work, doctor, but you have no knowledge of this procedure and, without my will, he is not going to survive,’ she said.

‘Take cover!’ Loisa shouted in the split second before the cage exploded.

Clothilde rose up from the rubble in a whirl of white hair and tattered darkness. A terrible halo of blue lightning crackled around her as she hovered over them.

She lifted one bone-white arm and pointed at Marsh.

*By flesh and heart and skin and bone*

*The Warlock will be cursed to wander the borderlands alone.*

*By the four corners of this world and the next,*

*May he live yet may his heart not beat in his chest.*

*Ever searching, never to rest.*

*I call upon the spectres of fear and doubt*

*to cast all resolve and courage out.*

*May they curse those they may,*

*and let misfortune guide them, until the end of days.*

Clothilde waved her arms and an inky swirl of cloud boiled above them.

Hard, icy rain started pelting down, stinging exposed skin where it hit.

‘I cast this curse three times over!’ she screeched and pointed at them.

Elle held on to Marsh, trying to shield him from the harm with her body, bracing herself for what was to come. There was nothing else she could do as the bright blue bolt of energy hit them.

Clothilde started laughing again. ‘The Warlock is no longer your husband. He is mine. We will retreat to the Realm of Shadow for evermore.’ She was breathing heavily as she reached up into the air before her, as if she were going to open a set of curtains. Elle felt the barrier between Shadow and Light rip and she gasped.

‘I thank you, Oracle, for your life force. It makes opening the void so much easier,’ Clothilde said.

But before she could do anything more, a rush of air filled the room, pushing the rain and clouds out of the way. Elle caught the dank odour of rotting plants and forest floor as white light poured through the opening that Clothilde had created.

To everyone’s astonishment, Old Jack stepped through the barrier, carrying his lantern and a bundle slung over his shoulder. Without batting an eyelid, he shoved Clothilde out of the way and she fell to her knees.

‘What are you waiting for? Stop her, little Oracle,’ Jack said. ‘Use the silk around your finger. It’s the only way. Do it now, before it’s too late.’

Elle closed her eyes. She slipped her fingers round her wedding band, feeling for the invisible strand that bound her to Marsh.

‘I’m sorry, my love,’ she whispered and then, using all of her strength, she pulled at the filament to release it. She felt a sharp agonising pain in her chest, as if something was tearing at her insides. As the final strands of the bond between them split and fall away Marsh let out an inhuman wail beside her.

‘I love you. I will always love you,’ Elle said. Then, with resolve she did not know she possessed, Elle pulled at the strand. It came away into her hands,

thick and strong like a hangman's noose.

Before Clothilde could react, Elle rose up and faced her. The raw energy that poured through the rent was splashing through her. It felt as if she was standing under a waterfall that gushed and swirled around her, threatening to drown her.

She braced herself and found her voice. 'I am Pythia. I am the Oracle. Hear me!' Elle's voice boomed.

Clothilde looked up at her and her face filled with fear.

'White Lady . . . you have broken the laws of the two realms. You have interfered with the natural order of things. You shall be punished!'

Clothilde stood. She was still shaking, but her face had grown hard with resolve. 'I dare and I will. Do not think you can frighten me, madam. I am more powerful than you are.'

'You will heed me!' Elle said. 'Undo this curse and restore this man to his former self. This I command as the One who holds Shadow and Light together!'

'Never!' Clothilde spat. 'I do not care what you do to me, but the Warlock will be mine!' With another blood curdling screech she launched herself at Elle, clawing at her face.

The two of them fell on the floor in a cascade of Light and Shadow. They rolled around until they hit the wall on the other side. Clothilde rose up. She was holding Elle by the throat, pinning her to the wall.

'Now you will die, Oracle. And with this opening in the void, all Shadow creatures will be free,' Clothilde howled.

Elle gasped as the last of the air was squeezed from her lungs. Clothilde's

white bony fingers were digging into the flesh of her throat, choking her.

Darkness loomed on the periphery of her vision where Death waited.

‘No . . . you . . . will . . . not . . .’ Elle managed to say. Then, raising her arms, she looped the glowing rope in her hands around the Lady’s neck. She held both ends and pulled as hard as she could. Her mind went blank. This was a fight to the death. For both of them.

The Lady’s eyes widened with surprise as the rope seared through her hair and into her white skin. She made a horrible gurgling sound.

Purple electricity cracked over Elle’s forearms, singeing her skin, but she did not care. All she could think about was ridding the world of this evil woman once and for all. Elle gritted her teeth and held on to the rope for dear life.

Clothilde wailed and shrieked as they fought the other’s hold. Then, quite suddenly, the rope sliced cleanly through Clothilde’s neck. There was a massive blast of white light. The Lady gave a little gurgling gasp and then her head rolled and fell to the floor.

Everything went silent. *La Dame Blanche* was no more.

Elle fell to the ground, singed and wide-eyed.

‘Is it over? Is she really dead this time?’ Loisa sat up and looked about.

Elle did not answer, but around them small tatters of the Lady’s robes drifted down like soft little feathers. They watched as the witch’s body crumbled into a pile of ash.

Marsh grunted and rolled off the operating table. He growled and crawled away into the shadows.

‘Hugh!’ Elle croaked.

She held back, extending her hand towards him.

He grunted again and shuffled forward, pulling himself up to his full height as he stepped into the shaft of moonlight that fell through the huge windows.

The storm clouds had vanished from the sky.

Outside, the soft sounds of the Battle of Battersea reached them. From the whoops of joy, it sounded like the right side had won, but somehow everything, including the victory, felt hollow and distant.

Elle felt her heart constrict with fear and doubt as she beheld the effects of the Lady in White's curse.

Marsh's heart may have been back inside his chest, but the man was gone. All the vibrancy and vitality that had been such a quintessential part of him was washed out of his face. He stood perfectly silent, hunched up in his tattered carriage cloak. It was as if every part of him that had belonged to the Realm of Light was gone. Only remnants of Shadow remained in the wraith that stood before her.

'Please, let's go home, my love,' she whispered. 'We will find a way to fix this.'

He stared at her with a dark fierceness that made her blood run cold. 'I . . . can-not,' he said. His voice was nothing more than a hoarse rasp that sounded like it came from very far away.

'He is not your husband anymore, little Oracle,' Jack said softly behind her. He looked slightly contrite as he rubbed the front of his cloak which was none too clean. 'I hate to mention it at a time like this but now you owe me a third favour. Looks like I got here just in time. You should never have left me behind like you did,' he admonished.

Elle ignored the old Fey. She reached out to take Marsh's hand, but he stepped back, avoiding her.

'Must go to the Shadow . . . Better . . . Safer for you.' His voice came to her, soft and haunting, like the whisper of wind through conifers.

'Do not go any closer. He must go to the Shadow before it's too late and this portal closes. Wraiths do not survive for long in the Light,' Jack warned.

'Come with me. We can break this curse. Together we can do this.' Huge tears started running down her cheeks, unbidden.

'Don't be sad.' Marsh's eyes softened. 'Better I go . . . be free and forget me . . . better that way.'

'He is right. If he is truly a wraith, he will drain your life force away,' Loisa said.

'There will be nothing left of either of you before long,' Jack said. 'Come along then, sir, before it's too late. Wouldn't want to miss the gap.' He motioned towards the glowing rent in the barrier from which he had just stepped. 'Tell them Old Jack sent you. They will take care of you if you do.'

Marsh looked at Jack and nodded.

'No! Don't leave me, please.' Elle was weeping so profusely now that she felt as if her lungs would burst.

Marsh turned to look at her. A strange look of compassion crossed his face. 'I must go,' he said. As he turned, his face filled with colour. For a sliver of a second he was human and he smiled at her. Then he turned, stepped through the rent and disappeared.

'No!' Elle fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands. Her tears were mixing with the soot on her skin, dripping large black drops of sorrow on to



her clothes.

‘The black tears of a grieving widow. You should hang on to those. They are very valuable. Very rare too. Pure sorrow,’ Jack mumbled as he picked up his bundle.

‘Very well, if there is nothing else, I will be on my way then,’ he said as he hitched up his bundle. Everyone else ignored him. They were all too shocked to say anything.

‘Three times, little Oracle. You and I will meet again when the time is right.’ With those words, he slung his bundle over his shoulder and walked off into the night.

\*\*

The Clockmaker sits up in his bed, grasping his nightshirt. Something is amiss. Even here, in his safe, warm little apartment in Zurich it feels like an invisible hand is pressing into him, constricting his chest.

‘What waits in the darkness?’ he whispers. He shrugs his shoulders in disbelief at his own fear and makes to slip back under the comforting warmth of soft linens and goose down. The Clockmaker does not believe in ghosts or strange creatures that go bump in the night, for he is an artist and a scientist. He puts his faith in the things that can be proven. He believes in the power of money. The power of the Consortium he has created. All those financiers and businessmen, who click and tick together to make the world turn. It is his greatest achievement.

He does not see the wraith who waits silently in the dark. He does not even see the fine garotte the wraith holds in his hand. The wraith is ready to perform his unspeakable task without delay.

By then it is too late and the Clockmaker’s eyes widen in surprise for only an instant as the filament winds round his neck. The Clockmaker has time to make only half a choking sound before death takes him.

A single drop of ruby-red blood drops to the front of his pristine nightshirt, exactly in the place where his heart no longer beats. His body falls forward, lifeless.

The wraith does not flinch at the sight of the blood. Calmly he gathers up the lasso around his left hand. It is pure white and wound from the purest

strand of silk, such as can only be woven by a wyrd-weaver. The end is a little frayed, as if it had been ripped apart by some great force, but this does not matter. As he twists the filament, it shortens and slips around the fourth finger of his left hand where a ring once sat.

The wraith does not stop to remember such things, for they are now firmly in the past. All that remains for him is revenge. It burns within him, white and hot, like a forge, sustaining the empty husk that once was a living man.

With a whisper that reminds him of summer meadows and of grass, the wraith slips from the room into the night.

Even in this darkness, he only has a little time before he must return to the Shadow...and he has much work to do.

\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-seven

The days that followed what the newspapers were calling ‘The Battle of Battersea Park’ would always be shrouded in a haze for Elle.

Gentle hands conveyed her to the car. At some point, she was lifted out of the seat and put to bed. Doctor Miller’s face swam in and out of her vision as he administered sedatives and sleeping potions. Gentle hands applied bandages to the myriad of cuts and burns that covered her body. None of these ministrations did anything to ease the shock or numb the pain. Marsh was gone.

She drifted through flurries of days that wisped past. She looked on with cool detachment as if she were a stranger, observing her life from a distance.

Each new day was punctuated by a fresh headline that appeared on the silver tray next to her bed. The same tray that was later removed untouched.

The headlines told their own story: PLOT TO INVADE BRITAIN FOILED, one read.

MRS MATHILDA HINGES, NATIONAL HEROINE, TO BE HONOURED BY THE KING, said another. It had a picture of Mrs Hinges beside it.

ELECTROMANCERS OPEN REHABILITATION HOSPITAL ON BANKS OF THE THAMES, one said later.

And later still:

ASTONISHING ADVANCEMENTS IN HEART SURGERY PIONEERED.

Then: POLICE COMMISSIONER DISMISSED AMID ALLEGATIONS OF

CORRUPTION.

It had been discovered that Commissioner Willoughby had been doing favours for various nefarious organisations. The prime minister was said to be outraged and was proposing widespread police reform.

And even later: STRANGE KILLINGS IN EUROPE, ANOTHER RIPPER ON THE LOOSE.

A funeral was held and Elle stood silently and alone in a scratchy black dress next to the empty coffin as it was sealed up inside the Greychester mausoleum. She weathered the countless pats and caresses of affection and sympathy in the same way a tree weathers a summer storm. Stoic and unattached, she stared blankly before her, until all conversation ran out and the world went back to minding its own business.

Ducky had escaped the crash with nothing more than a few bruises and a dislocated shoulder. He had hugged Elle at the funeral and promised her that he would look after the charters till she felt better. The pilot of the other ship had not been so lucky. Elle never found out his name, but somehow she thought him to be the lucky one, for her life stretched out before her like a vast bone-bleached plain.

Marsh was gone.

In those weeks Loisa and Jasper became the best of friends. After a suitable amount of time, they departed in Loisa's new steam cab, now modified to accommodate two travelling coffins and emblazoned with her red family crest. Jasper had passed Loisa's test and had joined her in the world of the night as a companion, and was completing the training and rituals all young

Nightwalkers must learn.

Following the great battle, the professor finally confessed his feelings and proposed to Mrs Hinges, or Dame Mathilda Hinges, as she was henceforth known. Eventually they too departed for Oxford to prepare for a small wedding to be held at the local registry office. Elle had held the cream invitation card for a long time before she fed it into the fire. She watched the copperplate script, which advised rather formally that tea and cakes baked by the bride herself would be served afterwards, blister and disintegrate in the flames.

Adele had chosen to stay with Florica. She had made it known that fairies did not fare well in places that were infused with the kind of sorrow that dwelled within the walls of Greychester House. The travelling folk were always on the move, so it was not long until she disappeared entirely. All that Elle had to remember the fairy by was the small brass button that Florica had given her. It sat in a small ornamental porcelain bowl in the centre of Elle's dresser.

Elle took to sleeping in her secret chamber, curled up in a ball around a red velvet pillow. She clung to it like it was a life raft. Every night, she prowled the Shadow Realm. Her portal became so well used that small shadow creatures now waited for her to emerge in the hope that they could slip through into the Light without anyone noticing. She did not pay them any heed, even when one of the maids shrieked and swatted at a dip-dib who skittered across the marble floors and vanished into the dark night. On and on Elle wandered through the Realm of Shadow. Always searching. Always hoping to find him, but he was never there. She became pale and thin with dark hollows under her eyes, which revealed her unspoken sorrow. But nothing she did brought her any solace. Marsh was gone.

One morning, Elle woke and stumbled out of her lightless chamber to find that bright shafts of sunlight were shining into her room. She walked up to the panes and looked out into the street below. Everything seemed hazy and brown, a bit like the sepia of a faded photograph. It took her a moment to work out that the windowpanes were filthy. She walked over to the newspaper which was resting on the tray that had been left out for her as it was still every morning.

It was the fifteenth of May, 1904. Her twenty-fifth birthday.

Three months had passed without her even noticing. And still, he was gone.

She pulled on her dressing robe, hiding the pink scars that now marked her forearms.

On a whim, she decided to see who else was about. She pulled on a pair of satin slippers and padded down the hallway.

The house around her felt empty and hollow. Sheets covered all the mirrors and all the curtains were drawn. This was a house of mourning.

In the drawing room, no fire had been lit. Elle shivered at the sight of the abandoned bath chair which was back beside the fire.

She turned and walked through to the breakfast room. It was chilly in here, despite the brightness outside. She noticed that the plants in the conservatory had wilted and turned brown. Only a few brave ferns still clung to life in their dried-out pots.

Eddie came by, carrying a bucket, and stopped in her tracks. 'My lady!' she blurted and dropped her bucket.

'Eddie, is that you?' Elle croaked. Her voice felt rough and husky from not speaking

‘My lady,’ Edie said again.

‘Where is everybody?’

‘Well, ma’am, Neville has moved on. The professor did his best to give him a good reference, so he’s decided to join the army. The last we heard they were sending him to the Balkans to see if the trouble brewing there could be sorted out. And for the rest, well, it’s just me and Mr Caruthers left now. We do the best we can, but this is a big house to care for.’ She looked away, slightly embarrassed at the admission.

Elle sat down on one of the chairs and rubbed her face. Her skin felt greasy and her eyes scratchy. She realised to her dismay that she could not remember the last time she had brushed her teeth.

‘Would you like me to fetch you something, my lady?’ Edie said, shifting from one foot to the other, clearly becoming more and more distressed at the sight of Elle, half-dressed and wild-haired, wandering through the house like a lost soul.

This somehow jolted Elle out of her reverie. She focused on Edie who was still holding the bucket.

‘You know what, I think you can,’ Elle said. ‘Bring me some fresh towels. I would like to take a nice hot bath. And afterwards, I shall have some breakfast. Perhaps a cup of tea and some fried eggs. Shall we go see what’s in the larder?’

She had eaten fried eggs on that first breakfast she shared with Marsh on the day after their escape from Paris. She had had such a fight with Mrs Hinges about setting the table with the best linen. But somehow the memory of it gave her comfort.



‘Yes, my lady,’ Edie said and rushed off to tend to the task at hand.

Elle walked up to the windows of the breakfast room and dragged the floral print curtains open. A puff of dust rose up off them and drifted on to her shoulders, but she hardly noticed, for the sun shone through the windows on to the carpet in glorious bright shafts.

Elle stared up at the sky. It was the perfect blue of late spring and, judging by the speed of the giant white clouds that crept across it, with only a little headwind.

She took a deep, cleansing breath.

Today was a new day. Her life was beginning again and judging by the weather, it looked like it might be perfect for flying.

## Acknowledgements

In many ways, a second novel is harder to write than a first. The playing field changes, the demands on the author are different and with this new world comes a new set of challenges.

I can say without hesitation that *A Clockwork Heart* would never have reached fruition in time if it had not been for the magnificent team of people assembled behind me. Writing might be the most solitary of occupations but bringing novels into the world is very much a team effort.

So to Michael and Tricia, thank you again for everything.

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I have asked Mrs Hinges to bake strawberry tarts for all of you, but even such sublime confections don't adequately express my gratitude.

A CLOCKWORK HEART:

The Neuroscience of Writing Fiction – A New Approach

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

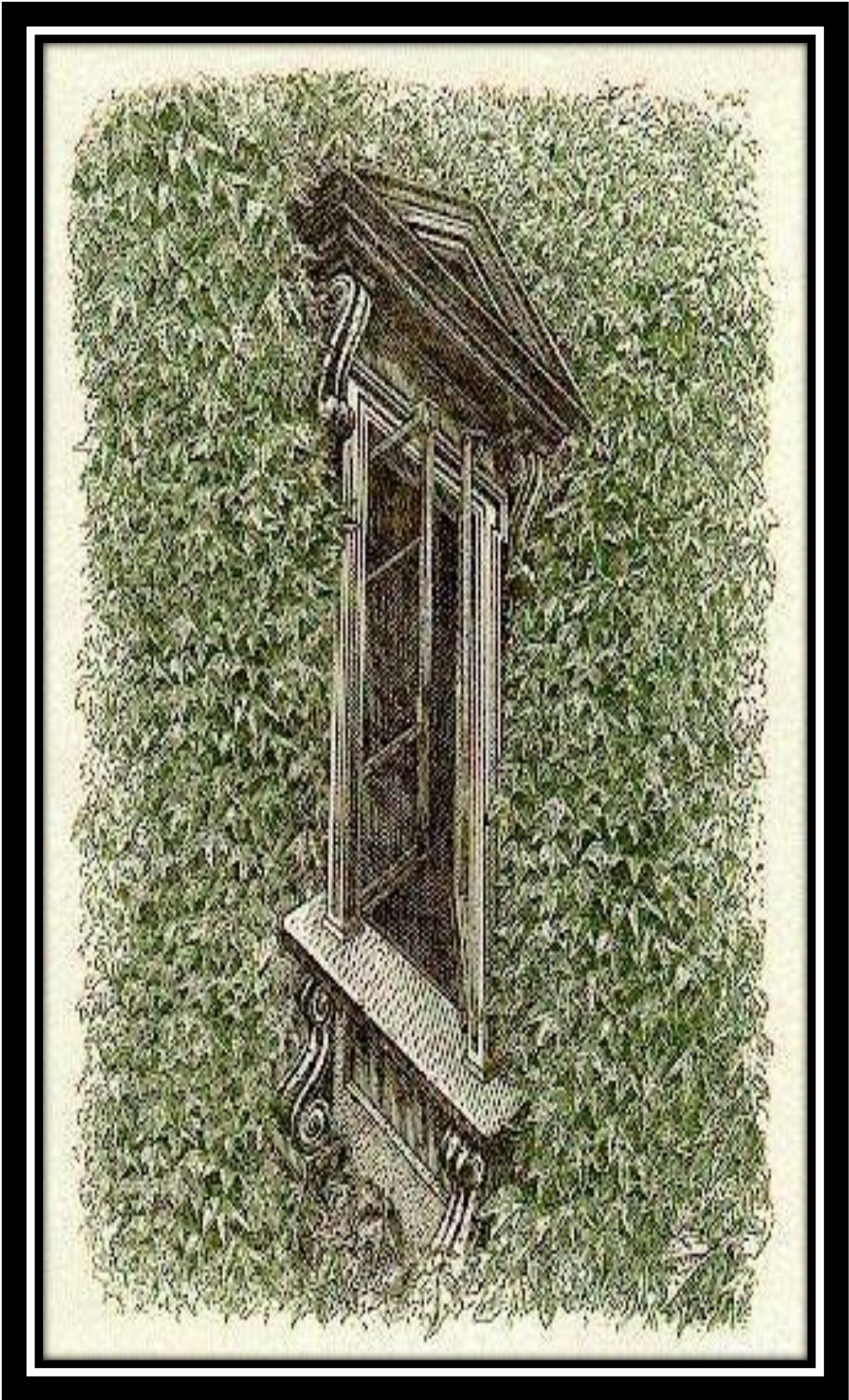
By

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11 November 2020

“Some books you read. Some you enjoy. But some books swallow you up, heart and soul.” ~  
Joanne Harris. (Harris, 2018).



## ABSTRACT

This is an investigation into what happens in the brain when we read fiction. Do common writing techniques work because they provoke profound neurological responses within readers' brains? If this is true, which of these techniques are the most effective. How could authors utilise these writing techniques to make their work more effective?

The brain reads in a specific decentralised manner by the recognition of letters, words and sentences that are translated into meaning within the auditory and visual regions within the cerebral cortex. The role, mechanism, and function of mirror neurons when reading is also examined. When we read, the brain does not necessarily distinguish between reality and the read experience. In response to auditory and visual stimulus the brain will trigger a biological body response, notably, Dopamine, Norephedrine, Oxytocin, Vasotocin and Adrenaline which the reader experiences as a physical response. This biological response creates the sensation of a dream-like state where the reader slips into the skin of the character and experiences the narrative as the character.

With the assistance of the principles of neurophenomenology, traditional techniques for writing fiction such as plot, character and crafting prose are evaluated in order to determine firstly why these techniques are effective, and secondly, how they are used in order to create an effective reader response. These techniques are measured against the function of mirror neurons when presented with harmony and dissonance in literature, the hermeneutic circle, the temporality of reading and the role of memory in the process and the paradox of the alter ego when we read. Techniques relating to creating strong characters, the importance of backstory and the necessity for specificity in writing are examined with reference to the neuroscience. The novel, *A Clockwork Heart* is reviewed in order to establish how these techniques manifest within the work and their effectiveness is considered. The writing process and the writer's journey is evaluated and reflected upon.

## CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>THE PROJECT JOURNEY .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY USED .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>RESEARCH SOURCES, CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGIES .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>PART 1: WHAT HAPPENS WITHIN THE BRAIN WHEN WE READ - CURRENT NEUROSCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND COGNITIVE MECHANISMS.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>An Overview of the Human Brain.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>The Bio-mechanical and Neurochemical Reading Process .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Neuroplasticity and Neuronal Recycling .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Beyond the Mechanics of Reading: Achieving the Dream State.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Mirror Neurons - The Case of Monkey See, Monkey Do.....	33
Mirror Neurons, Movement and Touch .....	35
Human Arousal.....	40
Pleasure Circuits – Why Reading Can be Addictive.....	45
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>PART 2: EFFECTIVE CREATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUES AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF NEUROLOGICAL BRAIN RESPONSE IN READERS.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Overview .....</b>	<b>52</b>
Identifying the “Fifth Element”.....	53
Story, Plot and Becoming the Character .....	53
<b>Readability .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Harmony and Dissonance.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Harmony and Dissonance on the Macro Level: Plot and Structure .....	61
Harmony and Dissonance on the Median-level .....	65
Harmony and Dissonance on the Micro Level.....	68
<b>Word Associations, Topics and Themes.....</b>	<b>70</b>
Word Associations .....	70
Topics .....	73
Theme.....	75
<b>Specificity in Writing and The Hermeneutic Circle .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>The Knife-Edge Phenomenon: Control, Uncertainty Risk and Beating the Odds .....</b>	<b>85</b>

<b>The Social Brain, the Paradoxical Interaction between Ego and Alter Ego and the Character Empathy Quotient.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>The Role of Memory and How a Neuroplastic Cognitive System Processes Linear Reading: Good Openings and the Importance of Back Story. ....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>PART 3: REFLECTIVE WRITING - THE WRITING AND PUBLICATION OF <i>A CLOCKWORK HEART</i> AND THE EVOLUTION OF MY OWN WRITING .....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>The Dark Female Protagonist.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Storytelling in Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) As Genre:.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>A Reflection on The Evolution of My Writing Process: .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>A Commercial Writer within the Traditional Publishing Model.....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>The Implications for Creative Writing Pedagogy. ....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>PART 4: OUTCOMES.....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>END NOTES.....</b>	<b>115</b>



## INTRODUCTION

This work comprises of a portfolio which includes my original creative work, *A Clockwork Heart*, a novel I wrote for the purposes of this research and this critical thesis that evidences my reflection on the creative work along with the contextual knowledge I gained from my research into the neuroscience of reading and writing fiction.

*A Clockwork Heart* is my second novel and I am fortunate in that it was published by Del Rey Random House in 2012 while I was busy doing my research. Along with its predecessor, *A Conspiracy of Alchemists* and its successor *Sky Pirates*, *A Clockwork Heart* is the second in a trilogy titled *The Chronicles of Shadow and Light*. In this thesis I document the writing of a novel, the evolution of my creative process as a writer and the influence my research has had on this process.

The aim of this project is to seek understand what happens in the brain when we read and what implications this has for authors – more specifically writers of commercial fiction. This project poses three research questions:

1. Do common writing techniques work because they provoke profound neurological responses within readers' brains?
2. If this is true, which of these techniques are the most effective?
3. How could authors utilise these writing techniques to make their work more effective?

This is a thesis in three parts: In Part One I provide a brief overview of the neuroscience of reading. It is necessary to have a basic understanding of how the brain works before we move on the next sections, so I will provide an overview of what happens in the brain when we read and the various neurological processes we use to read. In part two, I examine creative writing techniques and why they work based on the neuroscience set out in the first part. In part three, I reflect on *A Clockwork Heart* and my own writing process and working practices. Part four is a summary of my conclusions.

It must be noted that I completed the creative component of this project some years before I completed my research. This has given me the opportunity to reflect on how my writing processes and practices have changed over this time. As can be seen from the references at the end of this work, I have considered creative practices relevant to my own work as compared to practices within the wider context of the theory of writing fiction, neurophenomenology, some elements of philosophy, and the writer's craft. I believe that this is a new approach to the process of writing fiction as it focuses on *why* these techniques work as opposed to just accepting that they do. With this research, I have found the creative writing advice I wish I had been given back in 2012 when I wrote *A Clockwork Heart*.

In the section titled "Research Sources and Methodologies" below I discuss my research sources, and methods used to address and answer my research questions and the rationale behind the methods and sources used. I have also assumed that the preceding section of this thesis containing the novel has been read, so for the sake of brevity I will not quote long passages from the novel. I will simply reference the book where necessary. I have also confined my research to *A Clockwork Heart* and will not discuss the first and third book in the series as they fall outside the remit of this thesis.

## **THE PROJECT JOURNEY**

As a part time student, it has taken me a very long time to complete this research and it is therefore useful to have an understanding of the journey which has lasted over nine years. At the start of this project, I had many unanswered questions about the craft of writing fiction. In particular, I wanted to understand *why* the creative writing techniques I had been taught worked. I also wanted to know why some novels gained huge commercial success while others did not when they were ostensibly written to the same standard and used the same writing techniques.

As is often the case with second novels, I found the writing process of *A Clockwork Heart* a lot harder than my first novel, *A Conspiracy of Alchemists* which formed the subject matter of my MA in Creative Writing which I completed in 2011. Faced with the deadlines imposed by my publishers and the need to work full-time in order to support myself financially, I had to dig deep as writing to a tight deadline is physically and intellectually quite challenging. On paper, I was living the dream. I was writing my second novel after getting a notable

publishing deal with one of the biggest publishers in the world and completing my PhD. I had agents and editors behind me. I had readers of the first novel eagerly waiting for the second, and I did not want to let anyone down. Yet, in the midst of all these wonderful things, I suddenly found myself second-guessing everything I was doing. People told me that it was just a case of an author over-thinking things and that I should just get on with it, but I felt it was a bit more than that. In the end, I finished the manuscript on time and the book was published on schedule, but the questions I was asking myself did not leave my mind. I needed answers.

During the process of learning to write, most aspiring writers draw from various sources. In my case, it was a lifelong love of reading, a series of writing workshops and writer groups, a collection of “How to Write” books and what I had learnt in the Masters’ Degree in Creative Writing I completed in 2011. In all these sources on the Craft of Writing, aspiring authors are told to do things such as: open a novel with a strong opening sentence and to start a book with *mise en scène* action that “hooks” the reader, or to “create strong characters” or construct “a compelling plot” but surprisingly enough, we are never really given a clear reason why we need to do these things. Most writers I have asked also do not seem to know why we are given this advice. In fact, the most common answer to these questions was: “because it works”.

I wanted to know *why* and how these writing techniques work, so I started this research. In the process, I ended up creating the writing manual I wish I’d had when I started writing *A Clockwork Heart*.

Let’s use an analogy from the world of gastronomy: In order to make French onion soup, we are told to slice onions finely and fry them over a low heat in fat. If you follow these instructions, onions transform from sharp, crunchy and tear-inducing to something sweet, unctuous, and utterly delicious. The reason why this happens is a chemical process called pyrolysis - a type of non-enzymatic browning in which chemical compounds are broken down by heat without the use of a protein to catalyse or speed up the reaction. So, when we are cooking onions, pyrolysis is responsible for breaking down sugars by using heat. The heat applied to the onions during cooking causes the sugars present to break down into smaller units and once the temperature is high enough, the poly- and disaccharides (sugars) in the onion are broken down further into monosaccharides. This occurs when the bonds that link

the monosaccharides to each other break down by the application of heat. This reaction of breaking down larger sugars into single sugar molecules is what causes sautéed or caramelized onions to brown and develop such a sweet flavour (Common Sense Science, 2011).

It is of course perfectly fine to follow a recipe without questioning or understanding the science behind it. In fact, many accomplished cooks do just that, but the best professional chefs have an understanding of the science behind what they are doing. It surprised me that most authors – including myself - did not appear to have the same insights into what we do. Most authors use a combination of instinct and writing-technique “recipes” in order to create fiction without ever sparing a thought for the science behind what they are doing.

The resources I had been consulting lacked a certain level of rigour. I wanted to delve deeper into the subject to see what I could find. What is it that makes a novel compelling? Why is it that while most writers all use the same writing techniques, some published novels sell millions when others do not? Most publishing professionals also don't know the answers to these questions. I have asked many people within the industry and the answers I've received vary from “...they just do...” to “...creative writing cannot be taught” and “It's a case of being in the right place at the right time” or even “It's just a case of talent...”. These explanations were not very satisfying and to my mind, not very scientific either. Professional writers should continue to hone and develop their skills and I believe that having a deeper understanding of the science behind successful novels forms an important part of that continuing professional development.

I don't think that there is a writer alive who would turn down the opportunity to write a prize-winning or number one bestselling novel and with it, the prestige and rewards such achievements bring. It is an unfortunate fact that within the modern publishing landscape, it is almost impossible for most writers to make a living from their writing alone. Writing fiction is fast becoming an elitist profession reserved for the very few who are of independent means. (UK Copyright & Creative Economy Centre, [www.create.ac.uk](http://www.create.ac.uk), University of Glasgow, 2019). While the debate over the virtues of literary fiction versus the vices of commercial fiction rages on, it cannot be denied that commercial success opens many doors for writers who are not lucky enough to be of independent means. As a consequence, I found myself wondering if it was possible to identify that “elusive element” that makes the

difference for readers and the commercial success in publishing that follows if one gets it right.

I wrote this thesis as a way of gaining a deeper understanding into the craft of writing which I knew I did not have. In time, I hope that my work might assist other writers who may also be looking for the same answers I was.

So how do novels become commercially successful? Broadly speaking, a commercially successful novel is the result of a number of factors. First, there are a number of external factors which can be determinative such as a good title, for instance. Author Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) was originally titled *Men Who Hate Women*. In 2008, publishers changed the title and in doing so, started the "Girl"-title bestseller phenomenon that as lasted for over a decade (Archer and Jockers 2017). Good editing and an eye-catching cover design are often key. Publishers invest a lot of money in achieving this. Effective marketing and good publicity also make a difference to sales. One also needs the support of booksellers who will promote your book and reviewers in order to create the word-of-mouth awareness. In our social media-driven world, what other people think and say about your book can make or break sales. Unfortunately, within the traditional publishing context, most of these external factors are usually entirely beyond the control of the author. Alternatively, an author may choose to take control of the whole process and there are many self-published books that have done well, but, on the whole, there is not much that can be done about the fate of a novel once it is in the hands of others. These external factors are not infallible either. Even with sufficient backing from publishers, a book could still fail commercially. Conversely, a novel with almost no support could become a multi-million copy selling publishing phenomenon. The publishing world is certainly full of success stories where books have sold in their millions without the careful curatorship of a publishing team. E.L James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011) and writers like Amanda Hocking are good examples. Similarly, publishing circles are full of gossip about books that failed after large advances were paid and substantial budgets were spent on publicity Law (2019).

What is an author to do then? Do we just resign ourselves to the fact that it's out of our hands and let the fates decide? I think not. One of the best bits of writing advice I was ever given was: "Write a really good book and all the rest will all fall into place." The reason why this advice is so useful is because there are elements which make a novel successful which an

author can control. What we write and how we write it, really does make all the difference. It is just a case of knowing the correct techniques. During this research, it also became apparent that finding the formula to a best-seller was a quest that many have embarked upon. I have encountered people attempting to find a “secret formula” by using elaborate Excel spreadsheets to track every aspect of Jeffrey Archer’s novels all the way to esoteric meditations on the craft.<sup>1</sup> All of this research seemed unscientific and anecdotal. In my own research, I sought to adopt a more scientific approach but at that stage, I was still unsure as to what methodology to follow. I started out by reading and-re-reading my collection of works on subjects such as plot, character and writing good prose.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I noticed a pattern. These sources were all good at identifying each element of writing fiction. They then all offered examples of how authors who are good and who have achieved success do it. Unfortunately, none of these sources ever really answered the question as to why this was so.

I then thought to do my own research into the topic. I thought that if I looked at enough examples of good writing, then perhaps I could identify patterns that other researchers may have missed. The first problem with this approach was that I found myself facing a vast ocean of novels - more than I could ever read in my lifetime, so I decided to narrow my search by focussing on books with female protagonists in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Romance novels. I was particularly interested in the evolution of the Dark Female Protagonist in popular fiction, mostly because the protagonist in my own novels is a Dark Female Protagonist - the woman who subverts our traditional ideas of womanhood. The bad girl. The one who doesn’t follow the rules, but still ends up being the heroine, despite her flaws. I spent about two years reading every novel containing a Dark Female Protagonist that I could find but this line of investigation also did not yield any definitive answers. Apart from observing the historical evolution of the female protagonist against the backdrop of the historical development of modern feminism, I found no obvious patterns or correlations in relation to what made some books more successful than others that made sense. In fact, I ended up even more confused and disappointed than ever.

I realised that I needed to start over. While processing the heart-breaking reality of abandoning a few years’ research, I decided to approach the problem from a different angle. I took the decision to look at the craft of writing and how this relates to fiction. As I was already familiar with most of the seminal works on the craft of writing, I started looking for books on writing that were not in the mainstream. During this time, I attended a lecture by

Australian writer Nikki Logan on techniques writers can use to arouse reader when writing romantic fiction. She also published a short book on the topic (Logan and Davidson 2013). Nikki Logan's lecture and book was the breakthrough I had been searching for: I realised that as a writer I did not know what actually happens in the brain when we read. I had no idea how we go from small, black angular marks printed on a page to the explosion of senses and emotions that is reading a great book. I also had no idea how I, as a writer, made this happen inside my readers' brains when I wrote. It was at this point that I formulated my central research questions: Do common writing techniques work because they provoke profound neurological responses within readers' brains? If this is true, which of these techniques are the most effective? If I could isolate the most effective writing techniques, how would I, as the author utilise these in a way that provoked the biggest response in my own writing? At that point, I had already written *A Clockwork Heart*. In fact, I had written the third book in the trilogy, *Sky Pirates* and both books had been published. All three novels were quite successful commercially. One won an award. The others brought me financial returns, but I was still not entirely happy with my work. I felt as if there were parts of my own writing and writing process I did not understand and because I didn't understand what I was doing, I was not sure how to replicate what I was doing. In order to find answers, I decided to go right back to the beginning - into the most inner workings of the brain.

Reading is a series of definable neurological processes which are either pleasurable (the reader keeps doing it) or they are not (the reader gets bored and stops). The trick is to make the experience pleasurable. In order to achieve this, one needs an understanding of these neurological processes. It is possible for a writer to develop techniques that can be used in order to create a brain responses within the reader called the pleasure-reward loop (Biederman and Vessel 2006). Once a reader has finished reading a book they enjoyed, they will often seek to replicate this experience by reading more of the same by reading the same type of books or books written by the same author. As anyone who has experienced this will tell you, there are few experiences in the world as pleasurable as finding a book one could not put down.

I will also briefly discuss the dark female protagonist in popular fiction because when it comes to characters and empathy quotients (which I will deal with in detail below), it was most illuminating to discover that the DFP phenomenon has a foundation in neuroscience.

My own writing process has changed radically as a result of this research. I've come to realise that the process of writing is not a mystical, intuitive process. It is also not something one is either able to do or not. Instead, it appears to be a combination of natural ability, instincts, learned skills and a lot of hard work. Paradoxically, I have also found that there is no magic formula which will guarantee success either. Reading is a highly emotional and subjective activity and so there cannot be a one size fits all formula. Writing is art, so the subjective, artistic elements of writing fiction cannot be overlooked.

It is however possible to explain *why* certain techniques work and I do believe that every writer can utilise this knowledge to create stronger, more effective fiction.

### **A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY USED**

Over the course of my research, I have encountered the use of a number of concepts and terminology that are either confusing or contradictory<sup>3</sup>. These contradictions are certainly fertile ground for further academic research, but I have decided to omit these debates from this thesis.

It is worth noting that the terms listed in the paragraphs below are used specifically within the context of the neurophenomenology<sup>4</sup>. Neurophenomenology combines neuroscience with phenomenology in order to study experience, mind, and consciousness with an emphasis on the acts of reading and writing (Rudrauf, et al 2003). It is also worth noting that the subjects of neurophenomenology and literary theory do touch and sometimes even overlap, but because the focus of my research is on the craft of writing, I have not covered aspects of literary theory.

Terminology used here is also used in the same way in source works on storytelling and creative writing that focus on neuroscience. I have used these terms as I understand them within that context. The reason for doing this is for the sake of brevity, and to avoid becoming embroiled in tangential arguments which do not strictly fall within the ambit of my research. For the sake of good order, I have compiled a list of the terminology I have used. These are my own definitions, formulated as I understand them:



**Storytelling** – The collective term for the act of conveying a fictitious event or events involving characters in a structured manner to an audience across all mediums such as long and short commercial and literary fiction, films, theatre, television drama, and within the oral traditions.

**Narrative** – The chronological sequence in which fictitious events are related to an audience during storytelling and is usually the amalgamation of Plot, Character and Story(see below).

**Story** – The Story is the internal struggle and resolution of that struggle within a character during a set of fictitious events. It is how the protagonist deals with and resolves these problems internally and how the protagonist changes as a result (Cron 2016).

**Plot** – The external organisational structure by which events are delivered to the character in sequence (Maass 2002). Plot is also the placing of external obstacles in the way of a character or characters during a set of fictitious events.

**Character** – The individual role players in a work of fiction. More specifically the physical descriptions, names, personality traits, flaws and quirks drawn up for the role players within a narrative.

**Empathy Quotient** – The reactions of characters along with the emotional or internal rationale for these reactions. The actions and reactions of characters drive the plot forward. The empathy quotient is also the degree of neurobiological connection between reader and narrative.

**Successful Novel** - A novel that has attained a significant degree of success. Successful for the purposes of this thesis is a work of fiction which triggers the highest possible levels of brain response within the highest possible number of individuals that form its audience. It is worth noting that success is a subjective term and can mean different things to different people. Although the focus of my research is Commercial Fiction, I reluctantly use the term “bestseller”. I do so because it follows logically that successful novels are often commercially successful and bestsellers because they cause the highest level of positive brain response in the greatest number of people. It is worth noting that commercial success is just

one of the markers that can be used to measure the neurophenomenological efficacy of a work of fiction and not a goal.

I also acknowledge that traditional novels are classed in various categories such as Literary, Commercial, Genre or Mass Market fiction (Saricks and Wyatt 2002). While this might be important to booksellers, I do not believe that the distinction is relevant for the purposes of this research. It is true that I have focussed on commercial fiction, but one interesting outcome of my research is that same neuroscientific principles apply to all types of fiction, regardless of their category within the publishing industry.

**Cognitive Narratology** – It is necessary to briefly draw a distinction between Neurophenomenology and Cognitive Narratology. Cognitive Narratology is, broadly speaking, “...a focus on the mental states, capacities, and dispositions that provide grounds for—or, conversely, are grounded in—narrative experiences. This definition highlights two broad questions as centrally relevant for research on the nexus of narrative and mind: (1) How do stories across media interlock with interpreters’ mental states and processes, thus giving rise to narrative experiences? (2) How (to what extent, in what specific ways) does narrative scaffold efforts to make sense of experience itself?” (Cognitive Narratology (revised version; uploaded 22 September 2013) | the living handbook of narratology, 2018).

While the concepts do appear to be very similar, Cognitive Narratology deals with the way in which the human mind “knows” the world (Armstrong 2014). Cognitive Narratology and theories such as the Extended Mind Theory (EMT) (Bernini 2014). are specifically distinguishable from the study of Neurophenomenology as they tend to focus on the psychological aspects of reading.

**Neurophenomenology** on the other hand, is the search for answers which arise from “the hard problem”.

**The Hard Problem (of Consciousness)** very briefly, is the question of how physical and biological processes within the brain give rise to subjective human experiences and consciousness. It is that mysterious gap where biological processes become human experiences. For example: the cells in our eyes respond to stimuli in the form of light waves. Those stimuli are sent to the brain through a series of nerves which the brain interprets and

we “see”. What we cannot explain is how that process translates into the sense of elation at the sight of a vivid blue, wide, bright, cloudless sky. When we hear, our auditory organs experience auditory sensations which the brain hears, but we cannot explain how that translates into the sensual pleasure we feel when we experience the sounds a saxophone makes in the hands of a skilled jazz musician (Chalmers, 1995).

Through the working of a series of complex neural pathways that fire, we “feel” the agony of intense emotional pain, the sparkle of happiness or the meditative quality of a moment lost in thought. How this happens is the true mystery of the mind (Dehaene, 2014). The Hard Problem is both a scientific and metaphysical question. It is also possibly a question that we are not quite ready to answer yet. In fact, some experts have argued that we may never be able to solve the mystery (McGinn, 1989).

## **RESEARCH SOURCES, CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGIES**

I am fortunate in that there is a comprehensive, authoritative, and verified body of work that spans nearly a century of research on the subject of reading and the brain. For this reason, it would serve no purpose for me to seek to reinvent the wheel in terms of new research and methodologies. I also lack the resources (funding, subjects, and equipment) to replicate the many experiments which have been conducted over the last century on the various aspects of this field of research. I have therefore relied on the credible body of research which exists on the subject as it is sufficient for my purposes.

It is, however, worth noting that much of the research done in the field of reading and the brain is focussed on neurological disorders and disability. Popular research topics include dyslexia in adults and children, autism, brain damage in stroke patients, and the effects of degenerative diseases such as Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. For the purposes of my research, I have not sought to investigate what happens in the brain of a reader who has brain damage or a definable disability as these are all topics for separate research. For the purposes of this work, I have made the assumption that my reader is able to read normally and to a degree of fluency so as to allow them to comfortably complete the reading of a full-length novel within a reasonable space of time.

I have not viewed narrative from the perspective of a literary theorist. There is a comprehensive body of research on the psychological impact that famous novels have on human consciousness from a literary theory perspective. This is because the research focuses on the psychological reactions of the reader either as an individual or as society as a whole, but it falls short because it takes the writing of these books as a given.

In this research I have also not made a specific study of specific genre. This is because the focus of this critical thesis is on the craft of writing as it pertains to storytelling. *A Clockwork Heart* is both a historical novel and a work of Science Fiction with Fantasy elements. While it may have been marketed as Science Fiction, the novel does not fit squarely within in one specific genre. This brings me to the point of my research: the neuroscience and writing techniques I examine are universal and apply to *all* forms of fiction from high literary fiction to fan fiction. Personally, I also do not consider myself to be a writer who is pigeon-holed to a specific genre. In my writing career so far, I have written and published Science Fiction, Fantasy Fiction, Crime Fiction as well as Romantic Fiction and Erotica. I have also not confined myself to one specific genre. Instead, I have read widely during the course of this research and so I reference a cross section of commercial fiction whether it be crime, romance, erotica or science fiction and fantasy.

Instead, I have focused on the writing process from an author's perspective in general. More specifically, I have made a study of the existing neuroscientific and neurophenomenological research which examines how the brain reads. I have also examined how the brain responds to stories and I have applied this research to the common writing techniques (for example, such as constructing a plot, or creating a compelling opening) which writers use to create fiction. I have then considered the practical implications of this: how can I, as a writer, use neuroscience to develop my craft as a writer in order to create a more engaging experience for my reader. This engaged reading experience is achieved by the use of writing techniques which are specifically aimed at enhancing these neurological responses.

## **PART 1: What Happens Within the Brain When We Read - Current Neuroscientific Research and Cognitive Mechanisms**

### **Introduction**

The cosmos is going to implode one day. We are all going to die and everything we do is essentially meaningless. Nothing is real. We all exist within the dark gelatinous confines of our skulls and reality is nothing more than a perception. In fact, our reality is nothing more than the hallucinations our brains invent so we may manage and understand the sensory inputs we receive from the outside world.

This terrifying existential interpretation of our existence is fortunately not how human beings function. Instead, we live in a vibrant world where we go about our lives and our business, living, laughing, and loving, blithely ignoring the existential void that hovers over us. To acknowledge the void is to catapult into deep despair and possibly a mental-health condition. So how do we deal with this existential terror? The antidote is Storytelling. Our brains distract us from the horror by inventing goals and the rules we need to follow to achieve them. Each one of us is on a narrative journey: the story of our lives. Even though we have the capacity for many things, our brains are essentially just complex story processors (Haidt 2013). It's how we are biologically wired and so we tend to create stories from the moment we enter this plane of existence until the moment we leave. Often, we leave our stories behind for others. In fact, our stories are our only legacy. It is how we are remembered and how we live on in the collective consciousness.

The storytelling phenomenon can be observed everywhere we look. We hardly give a thought to the fact that the laws which govern our society, the money in our pockets, the company that employs us, or university where we study are all fictitious. We made it all up. So too is the way our society is ordered: marriages, the way we delineate our familial ties, the country we live in, the government we vote for, the religion we follow and the culture to which we belong. Even the jobs we do, the money we earn, our concept of time, the reason we fight wars and the Internet we spend so many hours browsing are all products of our imagination. One of the most fundamental parts of being human is the ability to treat made up things as if they were real, and then live our lives accordingly (Harari, 2011).

These stories and mutually agreed narrative constructs are pervasive across all aspects of human society regardless of location, race, or culture. We have also been doing this in one form or another for as long as humans have existed. Narrative constructs are reality as we know it.

So, what does this mean for storytellers?

E. M. Forster once famously wrote: “Curiosity is one of the lowest of the human faculties. You will have noticed that when people are inquisitive they nearly always have bad memories and are and are usually stupid at bottom. The man who begins by asking you how many brothers and sisters you have is never a sympathetic character, and if you meet him in a year’s time he will probably ask you how many brothers and sisters you have, his mouth sagging open, his eyes bulging from his head.” (Forster 1927). Admittedly, these words were written in 1927 in different times. *Aspects of the Novel* remains one of the seminal works when it comes to writing fiction, but with the greatest of respect, I think that E. M. Forster could not have been more wrong.

Evolutionary Theory tells us that our purpose is to survive and reproduce. On the most basic of levels, we are biologically wired to strive to be healthy enough to survive and to convince a member of the opposite sex that we are a desirable mate so we may perpetuate our species, but unlike other mammals we are highly social creatures. In order to secure a desirable mate, we need to have a proper understanding of social concepts such as attraction, status, reputation, and rituals of courting is required. Ultimately, this defines the brain's most fundamental objective: the need for control. Curiosity and control go hand in hand.

To maintain control, we need information. In order to get this information, our brains have evolved to focus on our physical environment and the people in it in a very specific way. By learning to control the world around us, we get what we want. It is this hard-wired need to control our environment in order to get what we want which places the brain on permanent alert for change or the unexpected. In other words, we are curious because change and uncertainty represent both danger and opportunity. We don't know what the outcome will be. We don't know if we will survive and thrive or not. This need to control things has made humans into an insatiably curious species. It is estimated that before the age of five, we ask around 40,000 explanatory questions of our caregivers (Storr 2019). In short, being curious is

one of the fundamental abilities that allows us to succeed in the world. Dismissing curiosity as base and the lowest form of humanity is to dismiss the very thing that allows us to succeed as a species (Kidd & Hayden, 2015).

One of the most tantalising propositions for the human brain is the gap between information we do and don't have. In a series of experiments conducted by Professor George Loewenstein, Professor of Economics and Psychology in the Social and Decision Sciences Department at Carnegie Mellon University, subjects were shown either full images of a person, or partial images of parts of someone's body (hands, feet, and torso). They were invited to click on the partial images until the whole was revealed. Loewenstein found that those who were shown the most partial of the images were more likely to keep clicking in order to see the complete picture as opposed to those who had the whole image from the start. What Loewenstein found was that there is a specific correlation between curiosity and knowledge. The more context we learn about a mystery, the more motivated we become to solve it (Loewenstein, 1994).

In addition to our primary objectives (survival and reproduction), the human brain also likes to play (Siviy, 2016). Our innate curiosity, the ability to solve problems, and the ability to learn by creating and telling stories were among the fundamental determinators to the evolution of our species. Storytelling is what distinguishes us from all other species on the planet – it is what makes us human (Cron, 2016 p1). In fact, Loewenstein identified four ways of involuntarily inducing curiosity in humans. These are: (1) the posing of a question or presentation of a puzzle; (2) Exposure to a sequence of events with an anticipated but unknown resolution; (3) the violation of expectations that triggers a search for an explanation; and (4) the knowledge that someone else possesses information which another individual does not (Loewenstein, 1994). To any writer, these four methods of inducing curiosity are the very foundations on which almost all stories are based. Interestingly enough, these are also the four cornerstones of crime and police procedural novels.

It can therefore be argued that the need for story is a fundamental human need. As humans, we need storytelling in the same way we need security and social acceptance. The vast repositories of folk tales, books, plays, films, and television programs stand testimony to this need. Storytelling is how we learn. It is how we communicate and how we order our society. In fact, it is hard to imagine how we could function or survive as a species without stories.

This is because the human brain is wired to receive and process these stories on the most basic of neurochemical and neurobiological levels.

We do most of our storytelling on a completely subconscious level. Writer Flannery O'Connor observed, "I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one." (Cousineau, 2010). As a general rule, most people have an undefined pre-conceived expectation of what a good story is regardless of their age. Anyone who has ever read or told stories to children would be able to attest to the fact that five-year-old will tell you just as quickly that a story is not good as an adult.

If these story expectations are met, readers will experience a sense of pleasure. They will like the story and invest in it emotionally. If these expectations are not met, they will experience a sense of disappointment. In fact, our response to bad storytelling is often rather emotional and most people will not put up with a bad story for very long at all (Cron, 2013). People booing and throwing cabbages at bad storytellers has certainly been well-documented over the ages. In order to create a successful work of fiction, an author needs to meet and exceed those fundamental story expectations. I have sought to understand how one does just that. In order to understand how this works, one has to have a basic understanding of how the brain works.

### **An Overview of the Human Brain**

The brain is a complex and exquisitely efficient system. As renowned neuroscientist Professor V.S Ramachandran - Professor in the Department of Psychology and the Graduate Program in Neurosciences at the University of California states: "*We have this three-pound mass of jelly one can hold in the palm of your hand, and it can contemplate the vastness of interstellar space. It can contemplate the meaning of infinity and it can contemplate itself contemplating on the meaning of infinity. And this peculiar recursive quality that we call self-awareness, which I think is the holy grail of neuroscience, of neurology, and hopefully, someday, we'll understand how that happens.*" (Ramachandran, 2009).

As the centre of our nervous system, the brain commands our consciousness, our vital operating systems such as breathing and circulation, our movement and reflexes and our



senses. Most of these functions happen effortlessly without us having to consciously think about it. The brain is also the centre for pain and the seat of our memories, thoughts, and feelings. It gives us the power of language and expression which allows us to communicate with others and interact with the world around us. The brain makes us who we are as individuals.

The brain itself consists of a number of divided and decentred systems that coexist and operate in conjunction with one another. What is interesting to note is that these different systems are not centrally controlled (Damasio, 2012). Instead, the various regions and systems interact with one another in complex and intricate ways. The neurological processes in the brain are more like groups of people at a cocktail party, interacting and mingling, than a symphony orchestra with a single conductor.

Figure 1 below shows a simplified diagram of the main areas of the brain. Each of these main areas consist of numerous sub-areas which operate in unison. For example, there are about 30 areas within the cortex that deal with vision alone (Ramachandran, 2007).

The cerebral cortex is probably the most well-known part of the brain and the crinkly pinkish-grey part. It is the part which springs to mind when most people imagine a cartoon image of a brain. The cerebral cortex is the seat of conscious thought. It is the area of the brain where thinking, sensing and voluntary motor skills are controlled. It is also the area where auditory and visual stimuli are processed. Below the cerebral cortex lie the thalamus and cerebellum. These areas convey visual and auditory stimuli to the cortex. It also controls primary motor function such as involuntary muscle movement and coordination. The cerebellum regulates autonomous movements such as heartbeat and breathing. Between the thalamus and the cerebral cortex, we find the hypothalamus, set deep inside the brain. It is the seat of our ability to remember things and form memories. Lastly, in the centre of the brain, a bit like a toffee apple on a stick, lie the septum and amygdala. The amygdala is the most primitive part of the brain and regulates our most primal instincts, such as the fight or flight reflex, aggression, and fear. Popularly, it is also called the “reptilian brain” because it is the oldest part of our brain in evolutionary terms and is thought to resemble the brains of reptiles.

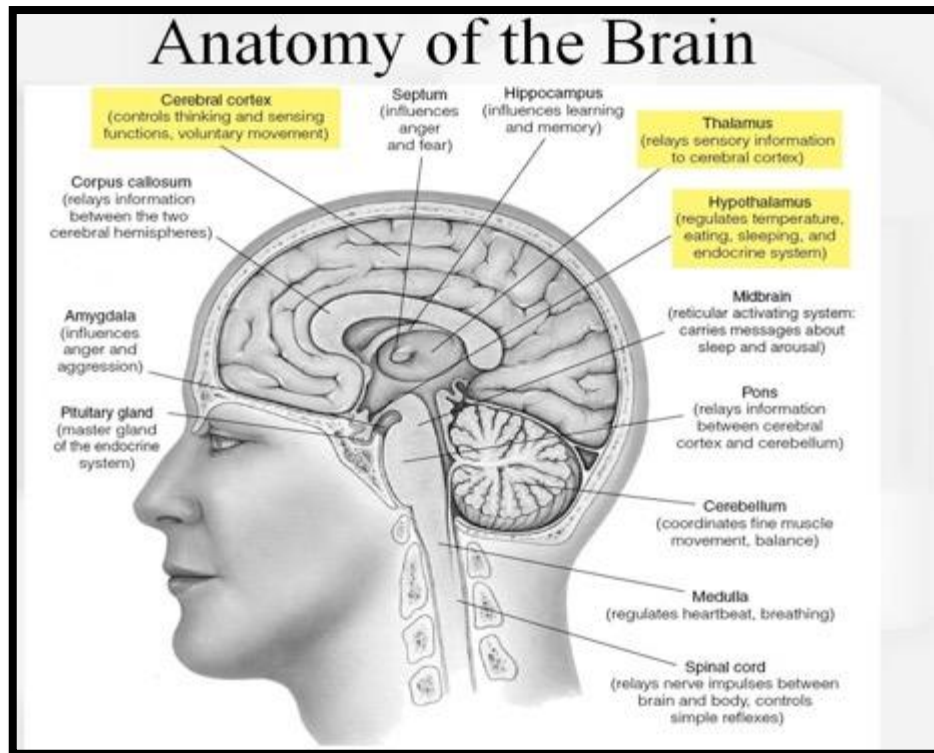


Figure 1. The anatomy of the brain showing the major regions and their basic functions. Source: Lifeinharmony. (2018).

On a molecular level, the brain is made up of neurons – specialised “electrified” cells that have the ability to transmit information from one cell to another. These neurons form connections with other neurons in order to perform the various functions the brain needs to perform. These connections are made by way of tiny electrical impulses that “fire” together in clusters. The clusters of neurons which fire together are called synapses (Neurons Transmit Messages in The Brain, 2019).

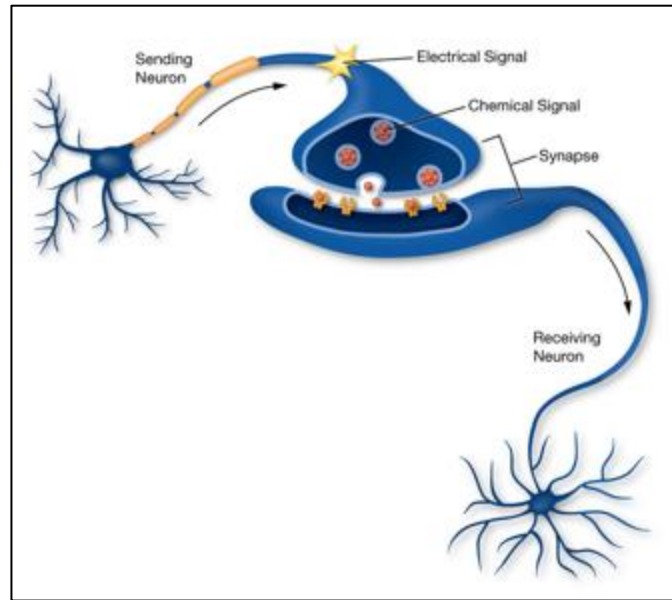


Figure 2 Simple depiction of a Neuron.

Source: <https://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/neuroscience/neurons>

It is estimated that there are around 100 billion neurons in the adult human brain. It is further estimated that each neuron is capable of making anything from 1,000 to 10,000 contacts with every other neuron. That's a very large number of connections. In fact, neuroscientists have calculated that the number of permutations and combinations of neurons that constitutes the brain activity of the average human exceeds the number of elementary particles in the universe. These synaptic connections in turn, make up a spectacularly complex network of simultaneously firing neurons which interact multi-dimensionally. Pioneering Canadian neurophysiologist Donald O. Hebb observed that neurons connect and group together in what looks like a network of cell assemblies or coalitions that constantly compete with one another, depending on what the subject is doing or thinking. Based on this observation he formulated what is today referred to as Hebb's Law. It's a rather catchy phrase: "Neurons that fire together wire together"(Ramachandran, 2009). This is important because this is how we form habits and reading, after all, is a habit.

Neurons also have the amazing ability to organise and reorganise themselves in order to complete specific tasks, such as, for instance, speaking a second language or learning to play the cello. Once the task is completed, or if the person stops doing the activity such as speaking that second language or juggling, the same neurons can disband and reorganise in order to do an entirely different task. This flexibility or ability to adapt is known as

neuroplasticity. This unique ability neurons have to group and regroup into a myriad of configurations is what gives us the ability to read, think and reason (Preston, 2008). It also allows us to do various different tasks without even pausing to consider what complex calculations lie behind each action.

### **The Bio-mechanical and Neurochemical Reading Process**

As a species, human beings have been around for about 200,000 years and while we appear to have been communicating verbally on one level or another for most of that time, we've only been reading text for about 6,000 of those years (Fischer, 2003) This is relatively recent in evolutionary terms. We appear to have a natural ability for language. From birth, human babies instinctively make noises. These noises become patterns of noise and eventually these patterns turn into speech and language. We do not however appear to have an instinctive ability to read. Reading is difficult and a skill we have to be taught. Anyone watching a child learning how to read will be able to tell you how laborious the task is. It is also a sad fact that even in these enlightened times, not every human learns how to do it (Armstrong, 2014).

Because reading is a relatively new skill for our species, the interplay between fixed brain functions and neuroplasticity is unique and it is this interplay between fixed brain functions and the neuroplastic adaptability of the brain which allows us to experience reading in the way that we do (Armstrong, 2014). We know all this because we are able to measure brain activity by using functional magnetic resonance imaging or fMRI scans. This is achieved by monitoring the fluctuating levels of oxygen in haemoglobin molecules within neurons (Dehaene, 2009). The brain literally lights up on the scan when areas of it are activated and it is these illumination patterns which neuroscientists use to study the brain.

While the brain does allocate certain neurons to specific inherent tasks such as seeing or remembering things, there are - rather disappointingly – no specific neurons or neural regions in the brain for reading. In fact, the act of reading is more of a “brain hack” than an elegant naturally evolved system. When we read, we are asking our brain to do something that it had not naturally evolved to do. In response, the brain cobbles together a series of neural processes which had originally evolved to regulate other functions in order to perform the task (Dehaene, 2009).

The process of reading starts with the eyes, but even properly-functioning human eyes have significant and surprising limitations. In fact, our eyes are so inadequate that it is quite miraculous that we have managed to develop the ability to read at all. For starters, humans do not use the whole eye to read. Only a tiny part of the retina called the fovea has the capacity to focus at a fine enough resolution for us to see letters. This area of focus is very small – so small that the eye is only able to focus on approximately two printed characters at a time. Below is a page from Samuel Johnson's work *The Adventurer* (1754) showing a computer simulation of the acuity of the retina.

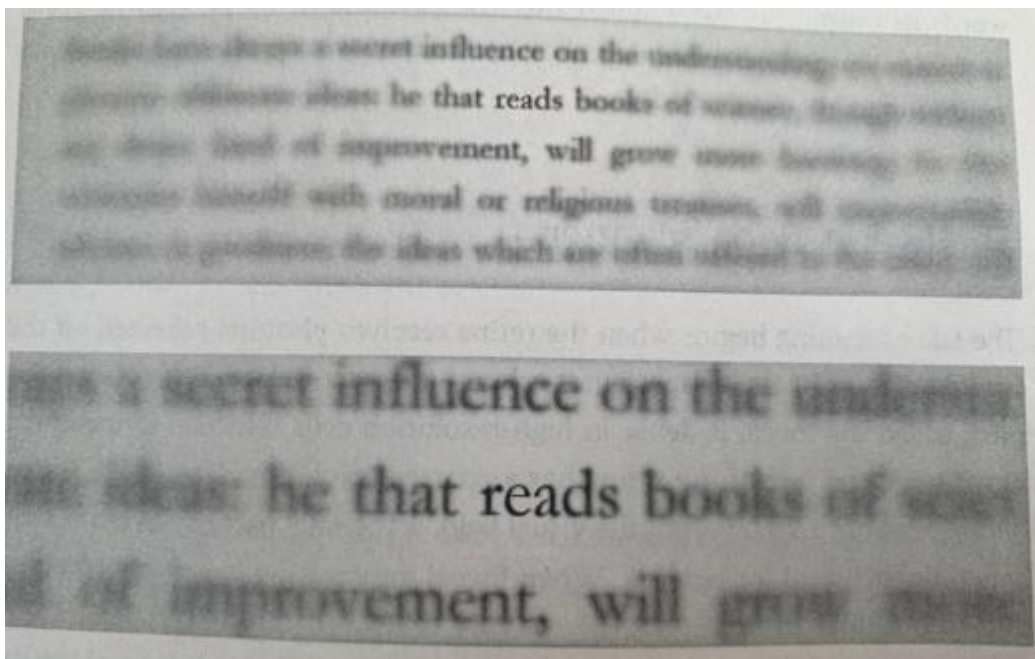


Figure 3. A simulation using an algorithm that copies the acuity of the retina.  
Source: Dehaene, *Reading and the Brain*

Because our vision is so limited we are generally only able to recognise a few words at a time. The eye is therefore forced to move backwards and forwards in order to gain context and meaning from the text (Dehaene, 2009). This is why, when watching someone read, we observe their eye movements as jerky to-and-fro, spasmodic movement. Despite our limited visual abilities when it comes to reading text, the brain is able to recognise words universally, regardless of variant spellings. We are also able to recognise words in different formats such as type text in different fonts or handwriting (Polk and Farah, 2002).

Once our eyes have seen the letters, the retinal neurons split the information up into information fragments and the information is then transferred to the left lower hemisphere of

the Cerebral Cortex (Dehaene, 2009). fMRI scans have shown that when we read, a narrow area just behind the left ear situated deep within an area known as the left lateral occipito-temporal sulcus, lights up. Because the area is roughly rectangular and narrow, neuroscientists have named this area the Visual Word Form Area or VWFA or the “letterbox”. This area is universal for all readers – regardless of the lettering system used (whether it be Western alphabet, Cyrillic or Chinese). The area within the brain also remains the same regardless of what method was used to teach us how to read. Once the information is received, the brain then cascades the information throughout the brain where the auditory, visual and memory areas of the brain are activated (Hickok, 2014). This is a decentralised process as can be seen in [Figure 4](#) below.

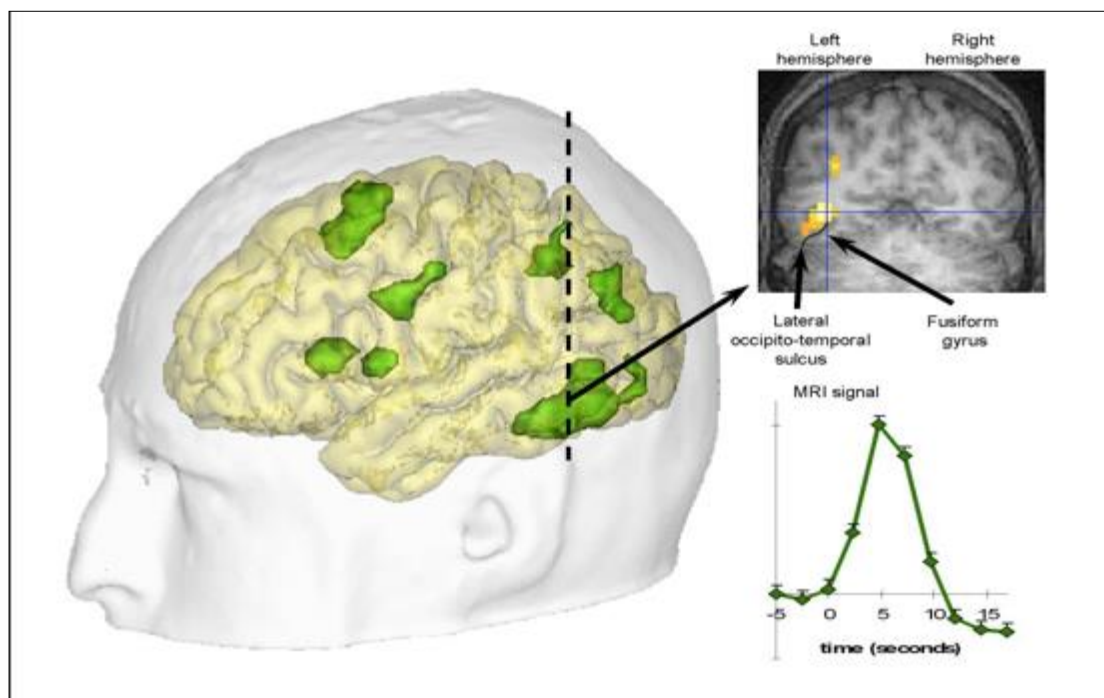


Figure 4. The Brain's "letterbox area" as highlighted within 5 second bursts during an fMRI scan.  
Source: Dehaene, 2009

This biomechanical and neurological process of information extraction when reading appears to be largely universal regardless of the language medium or cultural context. In the early 2000s theoretical cognitive scientist, Mark Changizi conducted an extensive comparative analysis of alphabetic forms in the context of reading and invariant object recognition. He identified a significant correlation in the frequency and patterns found in written shapes across 96 non-logographic writing systems. In one experiment, Changizi showed his test subjects the two images which appear in [Figure 5](#) below. He found that regardless of the language spoken, test subjects overwhelmingly associated round, vowel sounds such as

“bouba” with the curved, blobby image on the right. Conversely, subject associated sharp consonant sounds such as “kiki” with the spiky image on the left.

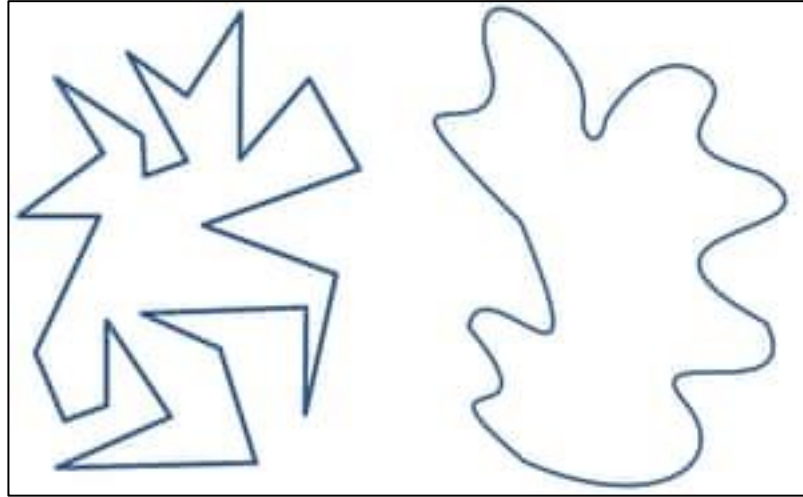


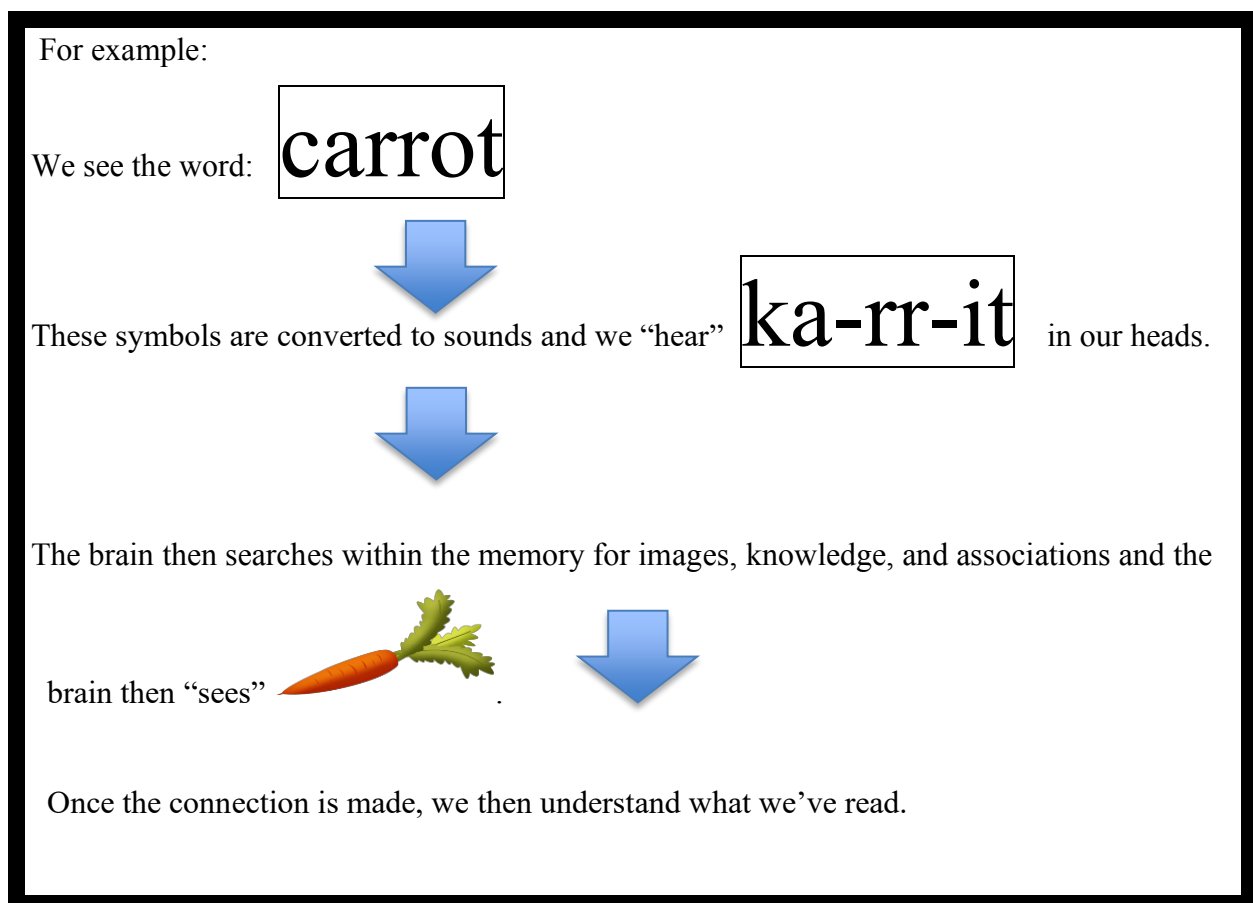
Figure 3: Images for KIKI (left) and BOUBA (right) as used in Chingazi's experiment.  
Image Source: *The Guardian*

This led Chingazi to conclude that letters or characters as we know them today were developed to mimic shapes found in nature. The reason for this is ease of recognition. The letters we use to represent sounds resemble natural forms which occur in nature because the visual centre of the brain is already accustomed to recognising these shapes (Changizi, 2006).

When the auditory systems and those areas associated with speaking fire into action, the brain decodes and converts the visual information into graphemes, syllables, prefixes, suffixes, and word roots also known as phenomes, or the sounds that make up language. The speech centre and those areas in the brain concerned with semantics or the attribution of meaning, most notably the memory, work together to link the phenomes to units of meaning. This in turn allows us to make sense of what we read by placing what we read into context (Dehaene, 2009).

Neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene also divides the process of reading into two distinct pathways. It should be noted that neither of these processes are entirely independent or complete. They also do not allow us to read all words. Rather, the two systems work together collaboratively - each contributing collectively to word recognition and pronunciation. The first pathway is the direct or visual-semantic route. We see and recognise letters, convert

them into words which are then directly translated into meaning. The second pathway is the phonetic-auditory route. Once the letters have been processed by the visual system, we “hear” the words. Once we “hear” the word in the brain, those sounds are then processed into words which the auditory part of the brain then recognises into concepts and meaning (Dehaene, 2009).



With trained experienced readers, the process is largely the first process: visual-to-meaning. The second phonetic-auditory pathway acts as a backup system when we encounter words which are not familiar. When we encounter a less familiar word, we default to recognising letter-to-sound by applying of those spelling rules we were taught when we learned to read. This sound recognition is then nudged up into the brain to higher lexical and semantic levels where we determine meaning. For English speakers, the sight-to-auditory-to-meaning reading pathway is somewhat problematic. The reason for this is because the English language has a large vocabulary and the irregular spelling of words within the language is common. The



variables between how a word is spoken and how it is written are high and often unpredictable.

In a linguistic study done into how effectively children read (Seymour and Erskine 2003), it was found that English and Danish school children at the end of their first year of learning had scores that would place them in the category of “disability” or “non-reader” as compared to their counterparts in Greece, Italy, and Sweden. The main reason for this was the vagaries and variances within the language medium. It seems that when it comes to reading, Greek, French and Italian speakers have it far easier than English speakers.

Following the visual and auditory decoding of written words, the brain accesses its orthographic lexicon or the stored “dictionary of word meanings” by engaging the memory. From the orthographic lexicon, the brain then moves to the Semantic lexicon where the mind extracts and cross-references the meaning of the information. This semantic meaning is then translated and recognised to have meaning. It is estimated that the average English speaker knows about 40,000 words. We also know roughly the same number of proper nouns, acronyms (HMRC, TBC, LOL) and trademarks (Coca-Cola, Hoover, Nike). This means that the average English speaker has between 50,000 and 100,000 items in their vocabulary. While reading, we are able to retrieve any of these in order to extract meaning in the space of a few tenths of a second (Dehaene, 2009).

### **Neuroplasticity and Neuronal Recycling**

As we have seen, the average human brain has a computational capacity which is truly breath-taking.

We know that certain neurons within the brain have specifically evolved to perform specific and designated functions, such as movement (motor neurons) and our involuntary functions such as heartbeat and breathing reflexes located in the cerebellum, but when it comes to our cognitive functions, things are not so clear. We know that the capacity to recognise visual shapes is a fixed feature of the cortex that is localized in particular areas of the brain

specialised for form, motion, colour and faces. These cortical functions work automatically, without having first to be learned (Armstrong, 2014).

However, as we have seen from the preceding paragraphs, reading is a mixture of inherited (inherent) and acquired brain functions that are sometimes difficult to disentangle (Armstrong, 2014). Reading is such a complex task that the brain has to assemble clusters of simultaneously firing, interconnected neurons that interact multi-directionally and in a reciprocal fashion in order to perform the task (Spolsky, 1993). It is the brain's ability to form these clusters of temporally and spatially distributed neurons (Keller, 2010) that gives it its unique neuroplasticity (Armstrong, 2014).

We know that neurons which pair off together to perform a specific task many times do end up wiring together in a more permanent fashion (Green, Crinion and Price, 2007). This presumably is to make it easier to perform the task again in the future. The more complex tasks we perform the more neuronal connections we make. An experimental study has shown, for instance, that bilingual speakers have more neuronal connections in areas of the brain associated with language use than people who know only one language (Green, Crinion and Price, 2007). It certainly seems that the more we do with our brains, the more our brain seems to be able to do.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. The brain is very efficient at disassembling and recycling these neural structures once the task is completed or abandoned in order to reconfigure or redeploy the same neurons to do something else. This is why we lose the ability to do something if we stop doing it for an extended period of time. Experiments have also shown that people who learned how to juggle showed differences in fMRI scans in their motor cortex as a result of learning the new skill, but these differences disappeared once training stopped (Goldberg, 2009). This repurposing of cortical areas in the brain is known as neuronal recycling (Deheane, 2009). When it comes to neuroplasticity, the brain does seem to have a use it or lose it policy.

Because reading is such a complex mix of brain functions, it tends to be a skill that stays with most humans for life and so the neural clusters and pathways we create and use to read tend to be more permanent than other learnt tasks (Kolb, 2009).

## **Beyond the Mechanics of Reading: Achieving the Dream State**

The good news is that once we know how to read, the act of reading very quickly becomes an unconscious task which we are able to do with little effort. Instead of focussing on decoding the text, we tend to focus on the ideas and images the words conjure in the mind. In his work, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardiner postulates that the act of reading fiction creates a powerful state of consciousness which he calls Active Dreaming. We no longer see letters and words; we see a train slicing through the snow-covered Siberian countryside. We also recognise and identify with characters as we would real people in a continuous and almost effortless manner (Gardner, 1991).

I believe that creating Gardiner's dream state is what most writers aspire to when it comes to writing fiction. There appears to be a scientific basis for the dream state and I would argue that there are techniques that can be used to create it within the reader. This brings us to Mirror Neurons and Arousal.

## **Mirror Neurons - The Case of Monkey See, Monkey Do**

Quite serendipitously, while Gardiner was theorising about the reader's dream state, a group of neuroscientists in Parma in Italy were conducting a series of experiments under the leadership of Dr Giacomo Rizzolatti. They sought to observe the neuron activity in the brains of macaque monkeys when they were handed a peanut. The peanut was placed inside a box and the monkey would press a button to retrieve it. Each time the monkeys retrieved the peanuts, their neuron activity was measured with equipment attached to their brains. They found that when the animals executed fine grasping actions when taking the peanut, they showed a specific increase in brain activity in area known as F5 where motor neurons are present (specifically, the neurons which control movement) (Hickok, 2014).

The scientists then expanded the experiment by placing various-sized objects inside the box to see if the size and shape of the object had an effect on neuron activity. In order to do this, the scientists had to remove the old item from the box and replace it with a new one at the end of each test. This happened while the monkeys were watching. The electrodes fitted to the monkeys' brains were also still recording data during these intermissions. The experiment was concluded without anyone thinking more about it, but when the scientists examined the

data, they noticed that a significant portion of the motor neurons they were monitoring during the main experiments also lit up and responded when the monkeys observed the scientists taking the items in and out of the boxes between experiments. When they compared the measured brain activity of the monkeys “doing” with the activity of the monkeys “seeing” it was as if the monkeys’ brains did not distinguish between physically grasping the peanuts and watching others perform the same action (Rizzolatti et al., 1988).

Somewhat baffled as to how this could be, Rizzolatti’s team set up a more formal experiment where the scientists performed a series of actions while the monkeys watched them to see if they could replicate the results. The results were the same. They found that out of 184 monkey neurons monitored and which fired when an action took place, around 87 of those fired in response to the visual stimulus when the monkeys observed the experimenters performing the same or similar grasping actions (Hickok, 2014). Rizzolatti had discovered mirror neurons.

Mirror neurons are to neuroscience what the discovery of DNA was to biology. What Rizzolatti’s team had discovered eventually came to be hailed as the holy grail of neuroscience. Mirror Neurons are a distinctive class of neurons that discharge both when an individual executes an act and when they observe another individual performing the same or a similar act (Acharya, and Shukla, 2012). What followed was an explosion of research where scientists sought to use mirror neurons to explain all manner of neurological conditions and phenomena ranging from erectile dysfunction and dementia research all the way to the somewhat esoteric study of self-awareness in dolphins (Hickock, 2014).

Put simply, mirror neurons have the ability to mimic experiences within the brain. Most sentient mammals have the ability to imitate observed actions, and in order to be able to do this, there has to be a neural link between observed action and an executed action of one’s own (Hickock, 2014). In the case of humans, the mirror neuron system is highly developed and nuanced. Humans can easily imitate observed actions and we use the neural link between observed action and an executed action of our own. From this ability to imitate, we are also able to innovate. This is relevant because imitation and innovation are the building blocks for creativity (Hickock, 2014). They are also the key to unlocking a wide range of skills – the use of language in particular (Arbib, 2005).

On a conscious level, we are of course aware that there is a difference between the self and the other we are observing, but it does seem as if some parts of our brains such as the amygdala, brainstem, cerebellum, and thalamus do not make that distinction. For the more primitive parts of our brains, there appears to be no difference between actual and observed experiences. This means that when we observe something, significant parts of our brains experience the things we observe as if they are happening to us directly. The brain also seems to respond to these observed experiences as if they are happening to us. This is significant because when it comes to storytelling, on its most basic level, we are observing other humans experiencing things in a defined sequence of events. It is this mirror neuron mechanism, hard wired into our brains from birth (Meltzoff and Decety 2003), that makes experiencing stories so powerful.

### **Mirror Neurons, Movement and Touch**

In order to understand the power of mirror neurons, let's do a quick experiment: it's early in the morning, and I have been working on this thesis since well before sunrise: My eyes are tired and a little prickly. My shoulders are a little stiff. I sit back and stretch and I yawn... a lovely, big, delicious yawn...

Are you thinking about yawning? Do you feel like you want to yawn? Are you fighting it? Go on... you know you want to...go on... ya-a-awww-n.

People often say that yawning is contagious. As soon as one person starts, very soon a whole room full of people will succumb to the reflex and they will all be yawning. It seems to be a reflex we cannot control.

This phenomenon actually has a scientific explanation. A recent study on the subject has shown that test subject shown a video of another person yawning experienced unilateral activation of the Broca's area 9 portion of the right inferior frontal gyrus of the brain. Broca's area 9 is situated in the front cortical lobe of an individual's dominant hemisphere. In most people this is the left upper part of the brain. It is called Part BA9 to be exact. Broca's Area 9 is about the size of your thumb and is situated roughly in the area that runs from behind the

eyebrow past the temple. Incidentally, this is the same area which scientists labelled as F5 in the monkeys' brains when the team of neuroscientists in Parma did their first historical mirror neuron experiment. Broca's area 9 is the part of the brain we activate when we yawn of our own volition. This area contains neurons and mirror neurons relating to movement. So, when we observe another person yawning, the mirror neurons in Broca's area 9 are triggered and before we know it, we're doing the same (Haker et al., 2013). What is even more interesting, is that Broca's area 9 is also the area directly linked to speech production and language comprehension. These mirror neurons are not necessarily only triggered when we see an action, they can also be triggered by suggestion: simply reading about yawning will cause the many people to feel the overwhelming urge to yawn (Dehaene, 2009). Even writing about all this yawning makes me yawn every time I work on this section!

Things go much further than just yawning though. Think about how all performed dance is often a series of greatly exaggerated movements. The same can be said for acrobats and gymnasts who perform in front of audiences. When it comes to witnessing or experiencing movement more seems to better. The bigger and more exaggerated the movement or the suggestion thereof, the stronger the mirror neuron response appears to be. What is even more fascinating is the fact that our mirror neurons also respond to imagined movement. In the same way we didn't have to actually see the yawn, we don't have to actually see the movement. The mere suggestion of movement or even the objects associated with the movement is enough to trigger a mirror neuron response (Armstrong, 2014).

This phenomenon is observable in almost every form of art. Figure 6 and Figure 7 below are both representations of the dance. Figure 6 is a stone sculpture of a dancing nymph from India from roughly the 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Observe the impossible rotation of the torso, the unrealistic contortion of the spine, and the exaggerated stance. All of these suggest that she is moving in the graceful movements of the ancient devotional dance of Bharatanatyam (Raga, 2019). We also seem to be so distracted by the suggestion of movement that we appear to ignore the physiological impossibility of the posture. The stronger the suggestion of movement in the sculpture or image, the stronger the brain response will be. The same can also be seen in modern Western culture as can be seen in Michael Jackson's moonwalk in Figure 7. Given what we now know about mirror neurons, it is hardly surprising that his gravity-defying dance moves took the world by storm.



Figure 6 Dancing stone nymph from Rajasthan, India, 11<sup>th</sup> Century.  
Source: VS Ramachandran, The Tell-Tale Brain (2011)



Figure 7 Michael Jackson's dance moves  
Source: PNGImage.net

In Figure 8 below we have an image of Wonder Woman about to destroy her nemesis. The exaggerated suggestions of action result in a corresponding heightened reading of the body language of dynamic posture (Ramachandran, 2012). In this image we have a young woman in what appears to be some form of physical confrontation with another young woman holding a deadly weapon. The unarmed woman appears to be in mortal danger. Who is she fighting? Why? Who will win? Wonder Woman, in this example, like most good art, takes things to the next level. In addition to the intimation of motion, our brains are responding to the story behind the image. It is this basic response which is the first step into Garner's dream state.

Because we are such a clever species, we have of course taken matters further. We do not only tell stories through visual art and interpretive dance. We have developed a highly sophisticated system of language and writing to tell stories and convey ideas. It is the system I am using right now and, as I have shown in the preceding sections, our brains have adapted to respond to these symbols the same way as we do to yawns and pictures.



Figure 8 Wonder Woman in an impossible action pose.  
Source: [www.designtaxi.com](http://www.designtaxi.com)

Mirror neurons are not limited to the observation of motion though. In the same way that there are mirror neurons for movement, there are also mirror neurons that respond to touch. For example, if somebody touches my cheek, neurons in the somatosensory cortex in the sensory region my brain fire and I experience the sensation of touch. The same neurons, in some cases, will also fire when I watch another person being touched (Ramachandran, 2009).

Neuroscientist Dr VS Ramachandran at the University of California, in his ground-breaking work on finding pain relief for amputees suffering from phantom limb syndrome, describes an interesting experiment: if you numb the arm of a patient with anaesthetic, that patient will still experience the feeling of someone touching them even though all the nerves that allow us to experience the sensation of touch have been disabled by the anaesthetic. This is not an



“experience” in the abstract or metaphorical sense - the patient literally experiences the sensation of touch in their mind. All that separates the patient being touched from the person touching them is the patient’s skin. Remove the skin and all the touch receptors (with anaesthetic!) and the patient experiences the other person's touch in their mind through the working of their mirror neurons (Ramachandran, 2012).

Another everyday example is when people go to the dentist. Even though the nerves surrounding area of the afflicted tooth are fully anesthetised, many patients will still say that they can feel the dentist working on the area and some will ask for more aesthetic because they can still feel pain. This is because they are sitting in the dentist chair imagining what the dentist is doing. This imagined experience is augmented by sight (maybe seeing the drill), sound and even smell and so thanks to the working of their mirror neurons in that moment, the pain and discomfort they feel is very real even though their actual nerves are completely disabled.

It has been recognised that those people who witness traumatic events such as the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York developed PTSD and other psychiatric injuries even though they were merely witnesses to the event (Shea, 2016). Another notable example is the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. In fact, the law courts ruled that those who witnessed the events and who developed psychological injuries as a result were entitled to legal compensation even though they were not physically in harm’s way. It is also interesting that even today, over 30 years later, that day lives on in the minds of football fans. (*Alcock v Chief Constable of South Yorkshire* [1991] (House of Lords)).

As humans, the workings of our mirror neurons permeate almost every aspect of our lives. We have the ability to dissolve the barrier between the individual experience and an experience shared vicariously with others. It is this mechanism which allows us to experience empathy with others because mirror neurons give us the ability to slip into someone else's skin in order to experience the world as they would. It is this ability to step into someone else’s place which allows us to tell and understand stories. Empathy and imitation are also two of the primary ways in which we learn. It is how we experience art, literature, pornography, music, and many other things.

The brain's mirror neurons are however only the beginning of the process. It is what our bodies do once they are triggered which is truly fascinating.

## **Human Arousal**

When one sees the term “arousal”, the temptation to associate the word with something sexual or erotic is almost instant. In fact, in the time that I have worked on this research, I have actually developed a speech tick where I say “no, not just the sexy stuff” every time I use the word in conversation about this research. In truth, human arousal is far wider and more complex than just the human urge to mate.

Broadly speaking, the human brain consists of two major parts: the “thinking brain” and the “feeling brain”. The “thinking brain” is the more recently evolved part of the brain and tends to be concerned with conscious thought, memory, and processing. The thinking brain is situated primarily the Cerebral Cortex and the Hypothalamus which is also the part where long-term memories are stored. The “feeling brain” is far older in evolutionary terms. These “feeling” parts are the thalamus, amygdala, and limbic system - a structure roughly the size of a peach which sits at the top of the brainstem at the back of the neck. The amygdala is a small organ within this structure. The “feeling brain” as we’ve seen is the most primitive part of the brain (Logan and Davidson, 2013).

We often erroneously assume that as beings of rationality and intellect, our brains are governed by the “thinking” part and that this thinking consciousness governs our emotions in the very Victorian belief that man as a superior species has command over himself in every sense. The very opposite is in fact true. The architecture of the brain gives the amygdala a privileged position. It acts as an emotional sentinel, receiving sensory stimuli first, before any other part of the brain. In times of threat and crisis, the amygdala has the ability to fully take over or “hijack” the thinking brain. It is a process we have very little conscious control over. In fact, the process is so quick that it is estimated to happen within a twelfth of a second long before the thinking brain has the opportunity to rationalise things. In what is a very effective and elegant defence system, the feeling brain receives the stimuli and responds within a split second, allowing our bodies the opportunity to respond while the thinking brain plays catch up by processing the information in the form of rational thought (Goleman, 1995).

In order to understand how this process works, it would be useful to do so through the use of an example.

Observe the image in Figure 9 on the next page:



Figure 9 - Source: <https://www.livescience.com/45329-spider-bites-weird-effects.html>

SPIIDER!

BIG HAIRY SCARY SPIIDER!

The stimuli produced by sight of the image comes in from the eyes and is immediately sent to the thalamus where it is processed by the amygdala (feeling brain) before the signal reaches the neocortex (thinking brain). Within a split second, the amygdala gauges the emotional significance of what we are seeing: is this important or is it something trivial which can be ignored? If it's important, is it safe or is it danger?

In the case of the scary, hairy, spider, fangs bared, ready to pounce, the amygdala will immediately register danger. Faced with the prospect of being attacked, we really have only two options: fight back or run away. The amygdala sends a message that cascades into the autonomic nervous system which sends signals to which the body responds. The adrenal glands release adrenaline, the heart might start beating faster in order to increase oxygen to extremities so we would be able to fight or run, the body might start sweating in anticipation of the need to dissipate the heat that might be created from muscular exertion in order to run away. The digestive system will stop working in order to divert energy to the limbs. In short, we are experiencing a stress response. This is also known as the fight or flight mode (Ramachandran, 2007). and it all happened within a twelfth of a second – before our consciousness has had the opportunity to moderate a response. In the meantime, the thinking brain will process the situation and register the emotions (in this case fear) about half a second after our bodies has registered a stress response.

This early response reflex is fine and well when it comes to running away from a sabre tooth tiger or stopping yourself from falling out of a tree, but our world has changed dramatically over the last 120,000 years. The amygdala, however, has not changed that much since those days and because it reacts with lightning speed and on an almost binary emotional level, our amygdala has become notoriously unreliable. In that small twelfth of a second before our rational brain catches up, the amygdala does not distinguish between a real spider and a picture of one. It just registers the shape of a spider and signals danger. The amygdala's response is so quick and so powerful it can in many cases impair the functioning of the prefrontal cortex's working memory. The same goes for the brain's executive function where rational thought and judgment sit. This interaction between the amygdala and the cortex means that that our emotions can overwhelm rationality because our amygdala "hijacks" rational mind in a perceived crisis. This is one of the reasons why we are unable to think clearly or make good decisions when we're emotionally upset or stressed. Neuroscientist Dr Matthew Lieberman has found an inverse relationship between the functioning of the

amygdala and the functioning of the prefrontal cortex. He had found during MRfI scans that when the amygdala is active with blood and oxygen, there is less activation in the prefrontal cortex. Our thinking power is disrupted and we suddenly experience deficits in our problem-solving ability, because a significant portion of the brain's blood and oxygen are in the amygdala instead of inside the prefrontal cortex. It is estimated that when the amygdala takes over, it is like losing 10 to 15 points off our IQ. Fortunately, the effect is temporary but it does illustrate how powerful the amygdala is. Any strong emotion, anxiety, anger, joy, or betrayal can trigger the amygdala (Torre and Lieberman, 2018).

As can be seen from our spider experiment, the amygdala can also be tricked. One can of course immediately point out that it is not a real Brazilian Wandering Spider - one of the most deadly and venomous spiders in the world, hiding in your bananas. It is just a picture. Our conscious mind knows that it is only a picture, but our amygdala does not make that distinction. It instantly responds to the image as if we are facing a real spider. In the split-second it takes for our rational brain to conclude that we are only looking at a picture and that we're perfectly safe, our amygdala signals that we are in imminent danger. A hairy 6-inch spider is about to leap into your hair and bite you, and so our feeling brain tells our body to prepare to fight or run. The amygdala signals the release of a potent cocktail of adrenaline and other hormones into our system. We may experience a sudden hollowness in the stomach... the hair raising up on our arms... or a shiver. In short, we have become aroused and in this case, it is fear arousal.

Of course, the intensity of the arousal response does vary greatly from individual to individual. Someone who loves arachnids and who has lived their life without fear of being attacked might experience a barely noticeable arousal response when they dismiss the image as a picture on a conscious level, while someone with a phobia of spiders might respond so intensely that the body shuts down and is unable to function in a full-blown panic attack.<sup>5</sup> Personally, I am not a big fan of huge hairy spiders, but the image of the spider makes the little hairs on my forearms stand up and I find myself experiencing a little shiver even though I have seen the image many times. My amygdala still sends a little shiver up and down my forearms every time I look at it.

We are able to measure excitement or arousal a person is experiencing by conducting a simple test. Scientists measure stress response by placing two electrodes on a subject's palm

to measure the change in skin resistance produced by sweating. This is called the Galvanic skin response test. The more we sweat, the higher our arousal (Schwartz, 1957).

Arousal spans the entire spectrum of human emotion. We can distinguish positive and negative arousal. Negative arousal is caused by negative emotions and experiences such as fear, panic, or anxiety. Cumulatively or experienced over a long period of time, Negative arousal is called stress. Positive arousal has to do with pleasure. Taken to the extreme, positive arousal may lead to addiction. There have been many studies in respect of arousal relating to subjects such as stress in the workplace, long-term trauma, PTSD, and various forms of addiction. This research falls outside the remit of this thesis. For the purposes of this research, I will focus on the positive side of arousal or the human experience of pleasure.

### **Pleasure Circuits – Why Reading Can be Addictive**

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp argues that the arousal process happens in a loop - or a process that resembles an upward spiral. As a general rule, our arousal tends to escalate. We experience sensory stimulus, such as seeing an attractive potential mate, an intriguing puzzle or something delicious to eat. This stimulus triggers the secretion of neurotransmitters which in turn act on the neurons. The neurons fire and respond, triggering the secretion of more neurotransmitters which in turn again stimulate the neuron and so on in an ever-increasing spiral. The spiral generally continues until the activity ceases at which point our arousal subsides and we go back to our normal state. The human arousal system is exquisitely modulated into elegant layers which allow us to play, have fun, focus on our work, be creative and employ our imaginations in a way that we experience as highly pleasurable. Similarly, the system regulates the extremes: When our arousal is low, we experience boredom and we become demotivated. When our arousal is high, we are said to become “hyper” or “wired” if we’re over-stimulated (Panksepp, 1998).

As humans, we are also able to anticipate arousal. We are able to imagine an event and the sense of anticipation or dread causes our amygdala to signal and we find ourselves in a state of pre-arousal as the body tries to prepare itself for what is to come. Good examples are the excitement before going on a romantic date with an attractive partner, the anticipation of

Christmas as a child, or that awful Sunday evening feeling of dread at the thought of going to work on Monday that we've all experienced at some point.

There are a number of amino acids, lipids and hormones which travel around the brain that act as neurotransmitters in the complex sets of systems and processes that allow us to function. The study of these neurotransmitters is a specialised branch of neuroscience and the interaction between these neurotransmitters, the brain, and the body is stunningly intricate and complex. For the purposes of this work, it is only necessary to understand the very basics and so I will seek to give a very brief overview of the neuroanatomy in order to provide insight into how we experience pleasure.

The first and probably most important neurotransmitter is *dopamine*. In very basic terms, dopamine is the pleasure hormone. Figure 10 below is a visual depiction of the dopamine release process. When certain parts of the brain are active, tiny brief electrical impulses (called spikes) race along long, thin information-sending fibres called axons. Axons have specially adapted endpoints called axon terminals. When these electrical spikes reach the axon terminals, they trigger the release of dopamine which is stored in the terminals in tiny membrane-bound blobs called vesicles. When the spike enters the axon terminal, it initiates a complex series of electrical and chemical events that result in the fusion of the vesicle membrane with the membrane of the axon terminal. When this happens, the contents of the vesicle (the dopamine) is released into the narrow, fluid-filled space surrounding the axon terminal. This space is called the synaptic cleft. The released dopamine then binds with the dopamine receptors on the corresponding target neurons and in turn, a series of chemical signals are released. Vesicles are able to reabsorb any unused dopamine which can then be stored for later use. The brain does this in order to maintain a balance. Too much dopamine will make the individual feel intoxicated or "high". Most Class A drugs stop the vesicles from reabsorbing either dopamine or other neurotransmitters such as serotonin. The drug causes the brain to overload on feel-good neurotransmitters which in turn causes feelings of euphoria or extreme well-being. Figure 10 not only shows the basics of how dopamine works as a neurotransmitter, but also how these dopamine transporters can be blocked from reabsorbing excess dopamine by certain drugs like cocaine which then in turn causes a bigger, longer "high" (Linden, 2011).



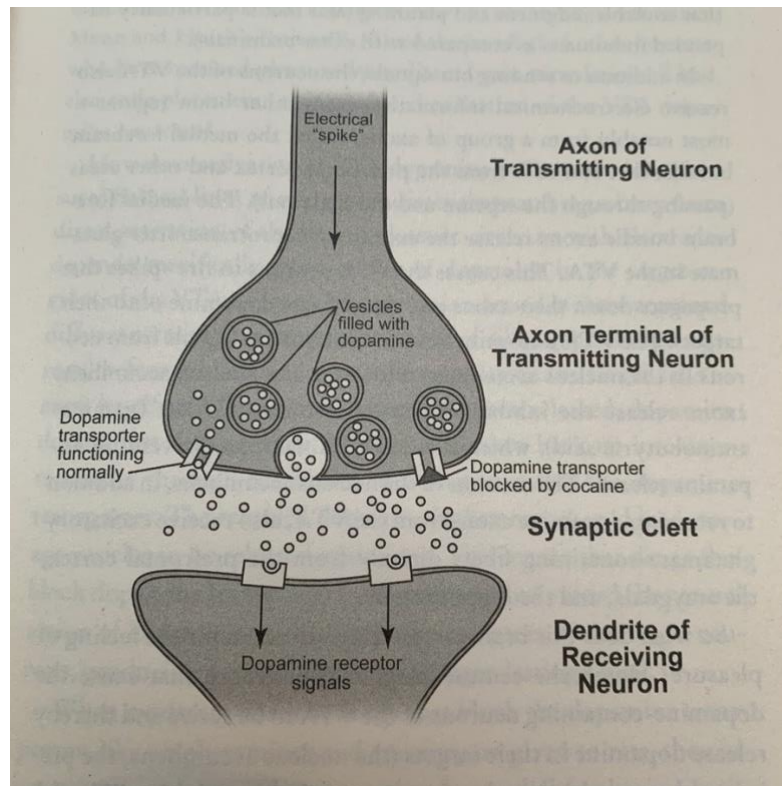


Figure 10 - A synapse that uses dopamine

Source: Linden, D. (2011). *The Compass of Pleasure*. 1st ed. New York: Viking. p17

Experiences that cause the dopamine-containing neurons to release dopamine to their target receptors will result in a sensation of pleasure in the individual. This action-reward dopamine cycle is also called the pleasure circle. We do something that causes the brain to release dopamine. This feels pleasurable, so we do it again in order to get more dopamine, and so on (Linden, 2011).

The sensation of dopamine-induced pleasure is especially prevalent in areas of the brain such as the amygdala (emotion), the hippocampus (memory), and the prefrontal cortex (decision-making). This is significant because these are exactly the areas which are engaged when we read. This is why reading is experienced as a pleasurable activity by many people. If you've ever picked up a book with the intention of just reading one last chapter in a book you could not put down only to look up some time later to realise that it was 4 o'clock in the morning and you've had no sleep, then you have experienced a dopamine pleasure circle. Dopamine is also an essential neurotransmitter as the brain relies on this for proper functioning. If we have too little, it can trigger degenerative diseases such as Parkinson's disease and an excess of dopamine in the brain is linked to the opiate receptors and addiction (Linden, 2011).

*Norepinephrine* is synthesised by the body from dopamine. It is primarily a stress hormone and affects those parts of the brain where attention and responding actions are controlled. Along with epinephrine, norepinephrine is also integral to the fight-or-flight response, directly increasing heart rate, triggering the release of glucose from energy stores, and increasing blood flow to skeletal muscle. It is released from the adrenal glands into the blood as a hormone, but it is also a neurotransmitter in the central nervous system and sympathetic nervous system where it is released by neurons. Too much norepinephrine leads to psychological difficulties such as anxiety (Rice.edu, (n.d.)).

*Epinephrine* also more commonly known as adrenaline, is a hormone secreted by the medulla of the adrenal glands just above the kidneys. Just like norepinephrine, strong emotions such as fear or anger cause epinephrine to be released into the bloodstream. This causes an increase in heart rate, muscle strength, blood pressure, and sugar metabolism and is also essential to trigger fight or flight response. Too much adrenaline can cause what is commonly called an “adrenaline rush” which can create behaviours in people similar to addiction. The popular phrase is “an adrenaline junkie” for people who do dangerous and exciting things in order to induce a spike of adrenaline in the body. In medicine, epinephrine is incidentally also used chiefly as a stimulant in cardiac arrest (Udel.edu, 2019).

*Oxytocin* is a peptide produced by the posterior lobe of the pituitary gland and is involved in a wide variety of physiological and pathological functions such as sexual activity, penile erection, ejaculation, pregnancy, uterus contraction, milk ejection, maternal behaviour, osteoporosis, diabetes, cancer, social bonding, and stress (Viero et al.,2010). It is believed that oxytocin is released when humans hug, touch, and orgasm. The release is present in both genders, but women – especially in and around childbirth - have higher levels of oxytocin. In the brain, oxytocin is also necessary when it comes to social recognition and bonding. The hormone is thought to be instrumental in the formation of trust bonds between people and it is also linked to feelings of generosity (Science, 2019).

*Vasotocin* is a hybrid of oxytocin and vasopressin (a hormone that regulates blood pressure and kidney function), and it appears to have the biological properties of both oxytocin and vasopressin. Like oxytocin, vasotocin is secreted by the pituitary gland and plays a significant role in parenting and pair bonding (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

Whenever we read a story that engages us, we experience a dopamine response; following the dopamine, the experience is further augmented by the other hormones such as adrenaline and oxytocin. Conversely, when we read a story that does not engage us, we do not get that hit of dopamine which causes us to feel pleasure. In fact, without that pleasurable injection of dopamine to help us engage, we quickly become bored and because reading is hard work, we get tired and eventually abandon the task. This may also explain why many people like to read a few pages to help them go to sleep at night (Logan and Davidson, 2013).

When it comes to stories, we tend to have pre-conceived expectations. This is because the brain actually releases dopamine as a predictor of how pleasurable an activity is going to be even before we do or experience it. The brain does this based on previous experiences. It remembers how much fun we had last time, measures an experience against the expectations we have and prepares and releases a corresponding amount of hormones as an anticipatory response. So, if an activity meets our expectations, our brain will drip-feed dopamine into our system and we will remain aroused and engaged as we expected to be. If an activity exceeds our expectations, dopamine surges and this motivates us to engage in the activity even more. We tend to perceive this surge as very pleasurable. If an activity fails to meet our expectations, our dopamine shuts off and we disengage often with feelings of disappointment. Good examples of this are the excitement we feel before going on a holiday abroad or receiving the tickets to an event we are going to attend. Anyone with small children will tell you all about the hormone rush children experience in anticipation of Christmas in December (Logan and Davidson, 2013) and (Archer, 2014 p49 – 51).

A study in 2001 measured levels of brain activity and neurotransmitter levels in people performing cognitive tasks - specifically the task of reading. Significant increases in extracellular dopamine concentrations were found (Fried, 2019). Anecdotal feedback from readers confirms this. Many people report that they read fiction because they find the experience pleasurable. They will say things like, “This book was so good, I could not put it down!” So, when we pick up a book, we have very specific expectations about what we are about to experience and our brains release hormones accordingly.

Is it possible to argue that different genres and types of literature may result in different combinations of hormones which have different effects on the brain? When someone reads an

exciting thriller or a horror story, would the reader's dopamine norephedrine levels increase both before and during the reading process? When there is danger and imminent death, would the body add a spike of adrenaline and we become nervous and on edge, waiting to see what happens next? When a reader reads about romance or relationships, would we observe an increase in oxytocin– the hormones which cause us to bond and feel close to the characters? Would a woman reading a romance novel release more oxytocin than a man? Could it mean one person might fall soundly asleep while reading James Joyce while another might find it gripping and life-altering? Is this why one person might lose the will to live when reading Shakespeare, but will “pull a sickie” and not go to school or work in order to read *Game of Thrones*? And when it comes to sexual arousal, the effects of a racy novel are infinitely observable, if not embarrassingly so. Do gender and age play a role? Might this be why men prefer crime novels and thrillers while women prefer novels which contain romantic story lines that involve interpersonal relationships? What is the relationship between horror novels and the amygdala's stress response?

Arousal is a private and immensely subjective experience. In general terms, this arousal experience may therefore also be influenced by biological factors such as age or gender. Such research would require significant funding and perhaps this is a subject for further post-doctoral study. Neuroimaging studies have however confirmed that due to the brain's marvellous flexibility and fluidity, multiple areas in the brain light up when stimulated by inputs such as reading (Nadal and Chatterjee 2018). Reading really is a whole-brain, whole-body experience.

It is also worth noting that deep within the forebrain lies an area called the striatum. Like the amygdala, it is part of our most primitive brain (the basal ganglia) and it controls aspects of our consciousness such as cognition, motor movement and in particular, our arousal-reward system during social interaction. In particular, the striatum lights up during stress-response arousal. The striatum is very important when it comes to storytelling as I will explain in more detail in the section below (Báez-Mendoza and Schultz, 2013).

## Conclusion

The mirror neuron system underlies all interconnectivity between humans. The fact that our brains, on the mirror-neuron level, do not distinguish between self and others causes the boundaries between science, philosophy, and metaphysics to become blurred (Ramachandran, 2009). The idea that there is no real independent self which is separate from others and that we are, on this level, connected to one another by our neurons forms the basis for many schools of Eastern philosophical schools of thought such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Ramachandran, 2009). This connection allows us to feel empathy and think creatively in the abstract. It is why we are able to tell stories and understand them. In our observation of others, the neuron is adopting another person's point of view. It is also this mechanism which allows us to temporarily become someone else and to experience the world as they would. It allows us to go into Gardiner's dream state and exchange our reality for another for a while.

How can writers use this knowledge in their writing? I seek to answer this question in Part Two below.

## **PART 2: Effective Creative Writing Techniques and The Engagement of Neurological Brain Response in Readers**

### **Overview**

Successful storytelling engages the mirror neurons in the reader's brain. In response, neurotransmitters are released which create a physical sensation of arousal. The reader experiences pleasure which forms the basis for the stimulus-reward cycle. The neurotransmitters also engage the interaction between the thinking brain and the feeling brain which stimulates our fight, flight, and stress response. The interaction between these neurological systems work to create an immersive experience for the reader.

In my reading of both published and unpublished fiction by many writers over the last 10 years, I have observed that writers often erroneously assume that they should strive to engage the thinking brain when they write fiction in the hope that the feeling brain to follow. I think this approach is wrong. In my view, the secret to a good story lies in adopting a back-to-front approach to storytelling. By seeking to engage the thinking brain first, we create a situation where the feeling brain might dismiss what we are doing as unimportant or irrelevant. If the feeling brain believes what we are doing is not important, then we face an uphill battle keeping the thinking brain from wandering and disengaging. Instead, we need to focus on triggering the feeling brain first. Once the feeling brain is fully engaged, the thinking brain will follow us into the story far more readily than the other way around.

It seems to me that the majority of successful authors seem to have an instinctive preference for a feelings-first approach to writing. I am not sure whether this is a conscious or unconscious choice, but I do believe that it is this ability to observe and empathise through the medium of story that draws people who have those innate skills into writing fiction in the first place, but even those with good instincts can still find room to hone their skills. The first principles of wiring fiction such as plot, character, and starting with a good opening also seem to confirm the feelings-first approach. We have seen why the “feelings-first approach” works, and so I will discuss how this approach can be used to take writing fiction to the next level.

## Identifying the “Fifth Element”

Gardiner calls it the dream state (Gardner, 1991). Dean Movshovitz, head writer for the Pixar film, *Inside Out* (2015) calls it the “mother lode” or “creating empathy” (Movshovitz, 2016). Lisa Cron, former literary agent with the Donald Maas Agency in New York, lecturer in Creative Writing at UCLA and researcher into the neuroscience of writing, uses a train analogy and calls it the “third rail” – the rail in the middle that is electrified or live and which powers the train (Cron, 2016).

For fun and in a homage to one of my favourite films, I will call it “the Fifth Element”. In the same way we require all the other elements (water, air, earth, and fire) to be present in order to found an environment for us to thrive in, so too does a narrative. I like this analogy because in the film, the Fifth Element is a woman. In early scientific studies, the fifth element was aether - also known as quintessence (Lloyd, 1968). It is that human quintessence that makes all the difference when it comes to storytelling.

Where does the process of enjoying a book start? I like to watch people and I've spent many happy hours both browsing for books and watching others do the same. Most readers will pick up a book, look at the blurb at the back and then perhaps read the first page of the work before deciding whether they like the book or not. It seems to me that these readers – completely instinctively - are looking to see whether it will be a good story that is promised by the author.<sup>6</sup> Because readers have such a spectacularly wide choice when it comes to books, these few precious moments in which a writer's work holds their attention are crucial. In order to engage the cognitive unconscious, and start the brain response process, one has to capture the reader at that fleeting, fragile point - sometimes even before they've read the first chapter. This is why the initial story hook and high concept of the story (as incorporated in the cover design and blurb) are so important. I will explain this in more detail when I get to the section on topic and theme below.

## Story, Plot and Becoming the Character

Defining the term “story” is a little tricky because it is such a familiar concept and so universally used, that it is difficult to formulate a formal definition. Neuroscientist Anthony Damasio comments on the matter:

*The problem of how to make all this wisdom understandable, transmissible, persuasive, enforceable – in a word, of how to make it stick – was faced and a solution found. Storytelling was the solution – storytelling is something brains do, naturally and implicitly... it should be no surprise that it pervades the entire fabric of human societies and cultures. (Damasio, 2012).*

Lisa Crohn defines story as what happens internally to the character as a result of external happenings and hurdles introduced by the plot. As readers and as humans we are fundamentally wired to empathise with our fellow man and by implication the fictional characters writers create. In fact, as social primates, we constantly crave an emotional connection with others around us. From a biological perspective, story is about the person not the events (Cron, 2013 p11).

Plot by contrast is what happens externally. It is usually a sequence of events or choices and in truth, for most readers the plot is just things that happen and they are quite right about this. Plots in their purest form are rather boring. They tend to be standardised – there are only two, seven or twenty standard plots, depending on whose advice you follow (Tobias, 1993), and they are endlessly recycled. This does not mean that plot is not important. Plot is after all the footprint and structure of the book. Story on the other hand - as Cron defines it - is the singular reason why we bother to read a book in the first place.

Most books and lectures on the craft of writing fiction will advise writers to ensure that the protagonist must move the plot forward. I've always found this advice to be quite baffling, because when you think about it, the character has no control over the things that “fate” (or rather the author) has in store for them, so logically it is not actually possible for the character to drive the plot forward. What the character can do though, is internalise and react emotionally to the plot. Based on these reflections and internalisations the character can then make decisions as to how they should respond to the things that fate/the author has thrown at them. The story then moves forward based on those decisions. It is this internal process within the character that is determinative to plot. It is also the internal process that captures the interest of the reader. We as readers want to know what the character would do in these situations because on the same level, we wonder what we would do if faced with the same obstacle. It is this interest in what someone else would do measured against what we would



do that is crucial to a successful story because this way we ensure reader engagement. It's what we really care about.

When we read a story which engages us, we don't just read about a character. Through the intricate workings of our neural wiring and particularly our mirror neurons, we actually become that character for the duration of the book. We experience their emotions as if they are our own. We slip into the skin of our character and live their life as if it were our own for the duration of the pages. Through the medium of fiction, we can become a gritty 1940s detective, a space vampire, or a 19<sup>th</sup> Century heroine without ever leaving our armchairs. This happens to varying degrees of success and intensity. If we love a character, we engage fully. If we don't, then not so much. This, in my view, is where the true magic of a successful story lies. The Fifth Element is these internal trials and tribulations of both character and self.

Writing compelling fiction is ultimately about balance. Jorge Luis Borges once said: "Art is fire plus Algebra." (Borges, 1962). On the one hand, one has the fire – the passion and desire to write; the desire to tell a story. On the other, the "Algebra" – the underlying rules and framework in which a story must exist. I think Borges was alluding to the Fifth Element and also the need for order, structure, and discipline in writing. One is nothing without the other. A story that is all structure and science without any passion or emotion would be exceedingly boring for most readers. Passion without structure and a framework to contain it, would be an incoherent mess.

Certain novels work for large numbers of readers not because of what they say, but what they *do* to people. It is that sensation of being transported away from who you are to someone else – that tactile, sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book (Radway, 1997).

There are, however, a few points worth noting:

- I am not seeking to reinvent the wheel when it comes to the craft of writing fiction. One of the interesting outcomes of this research was that most principles on writing fiction are established and sound. They work and have worked for millennia because

they have a neuroscientific basis. What I am seeking to do is explain why this is so and to augment what we already know about the subject.

- I have also focussed on writing commercial fiction. This is because I write commercial fiction and so I'm sticking to what I know. As I have said before though, I believe that these principles and techniques can be used in any story or any type of fiction.
- At the end of each section, I will briefly reflect on *A Clockwork Heart* as it relates to that specific section, but in order to avoid and I will discuss my own work more Part 3 below.

## **Readability**

This might seem obvious, and controversial in many ways, but readers are less likely to fall in love with a novel if the process of reading it is too onerous. As we have seen, reading is hard work for the brain. Reading also takes time and reading a whole book from start to finish involves a significant investment of time and effort on the part of our readers. In my view, writers have a duty to ensure that the investment required from the reader will be worth it. When it comes to reading commercial fiction for the purposes of recreation, the writer has to promise the reader that the process will be easy and enjoyable from the start.

Sadly, the surprising truth is that today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, around 15 per cent or 5.1 million adults in England, are functionally illiterate. This means that they would not be able to pass an English GCSE and most have literacy levels at or below those expected of an 11-year-old (National Literacy Trust, 2019). According to research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into poverty in the UK, 28% of adults have a standard of literacy of level 1 or below, the equivalent of GCSE grades D-G and 1 in 20 adults have the literacy or numeracy levels of a five-year-old, meaning they would struggle just to write a short message or to select a floor number in a lift (BIS Research Paper no 139, 2013). The average *Guardian* newspaper reader has a reading age of 14. Readers of *The Sun* have a general reading age of 8 (England.nhs.uk, 2019). To address this issue, there are a number of initiatives by the Government and organisations such as the Plain English Campaign and the National Literacy Trust to ensure that official documents such as medical information, legal documents, and insurance policies are written to reading levels which are accessible to all. Generally, this

would be a reading age of 11. The solution, it seems, was to make things easier to read rather than teaching people to read better.

These statistics are alarming and certainly ample fodder for sensationalist newspaper headlines, but it does serve to deliver a sobering message. As unpalatable as this might seem, the reality is that in order to create commercial fiction that will engage large numbers of readers, the first step is to ensure that it is written at a level that is accessible to the maximum number of readers. That means plain English written at a middle-grade level. This does not mean that there is no place in the world for advanced and challenging fiction. In fact, aspirational reading is a well-known phenomenon in the publishing world. People like to line their bookshelves with copies of Proust and Joyce that they will never read or at best, attempt to read but never finish. In the same way that literary works that appear on the Booker Prize List every year do sell, but a study done in 2013 showed that as many as 62% of people lie about books they have read in order to make themselves seem more intelligent (Parke, 2019).

Most public-facing professionals such as journalists, lawyers, people who work in advertising, brokers and medical practitioners have accepted that low reading levels are a fact of life. There are strict regulations in regard to treating customers fairly, and writing in accessible English is not only encouraged, it is often a legal requirement. Readers have become accustomed to reading information at a certain level in daily life. For authors, the reality is that if you want large numbers of people to actually read your book, writing it at a level that is accessible is a good strategy. It is interesting to note that a large number of commercially successful authors have backgrounds in journalism, advertising, and law. James Patterson dropped out of his PhD in advertising to write. John Grisham was a lawyer. Jessica Knoll was an editor at *Cosmopolitan* Magazine. Paula Hawkins, Terry McMillan and Kathryn Stockett all have degrees in journalism (Archer and Jockers, 2017) and E.L. James worked for the BBC (Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019). J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series was a middle-grade children's novel, but her books were read by the masses - adults and children alike.

In their research at Stanford University, Archer and Jockers found that most commercially successful novels (in their case, New York Times bestsellers) use short active self-assured verbs such as grab, do, think, ask, look, and hold. Characters more often love. Both genders spend, walk and pray. Women tend, read, imagine and hug. Men travel, assume, fly, drive

and kill (Archer and Jockers, 2017). Their research data is quite clear: simply written books sell. This does not mean that there are not many educated readers out there who do enjoy an intellectual challenge when they read. There is, and always will be a market for challenging literary works, but in order to increase your chances of writing commercially successful novel, it is a good strategy to write at a middle-grade level of around 11 to 14 years. If the average modern reader who is already pressed for time thanks to the pressures of modern life and the distraction of social and other media is presented with fiction which is impenetrable from a reading level perspective, they will simply deem the task of reading it to be “too much hard work” and set the book aside in order to do something else.

Where to pitch the readability of a novel is going to depend on the story and the writer’s own voice. In my view, this should be a creative decision at the beginning of a book, in the same way that Point of View or choosing the protagonist is. Fortunately, testing the readability of one’s work is actually quite easy. There are a number of document readability calculators available such as the Flesh-Kinkaid model built into Microsoft Word and the SMOG calculator used by the NHS and other organisations. These days, testing one’s work for readability is a simple case of uploading the document and clicking a button. Interestingly enough in researching these I noted that even Microsoft advises in their online help pages that most documents should be written to Grade 7 – 8 when tested, which is a reading age of approximately 14.

Personally, I am in favour of the use of plain English. In my former career as a barrister, I was trained to summarise and explain complex concepts in a manner that would be clear and easy for my clients to understand and writing clearly and with impact is a skill which has served me well for many years. Writing in plain English is also more difficult than it seems. When dealing with complex and abstract concepts, it is easy to succumb to the temptations of complexity and verbosity. In my view, the ability to express arguments clearly and elegantly in simple language shows true mastery of one’s subject matter. I also believe that the use of plain English forms the foundation of Gardiner’s contract (Gardner, 1991). Clean, accessible writing is reassuring to the reader. It is not intimidating and it invites the reader into the story. The author is saying, “Trust me, I’ll take you on a journey and I will tell you a story you will enjoy. Slip into my dream where you won’t even notice the words...”

Following this research, I have run *A Clockwork Heart* through a readability scanner and the text is pitched at Grade 7 which is around 14 years. At the time of writing, I did not specifically set out to write at that grade level, but it seems as if my natural voice (trained to write plain English) tends to settle at that pitch without me trying to do so. This is quite interesting because when publishers bought my books, part of their strategy was to market the books to both adults' science fiction and fantasy readers as well as the Young Adult market.

## **Harmony and Dissonance**

As is the case with most other art forms, reading is fundamentally an aesthetic experience. When it comes to aesthetic experiences and the brain, there is a complex decentred, multi-directional and reciprocally interacting stimulus and reward system within the brain that underlies this phenomenon (Skov and Vartanian, 2009). The stimulus can be divided into two broad categories: Harmony and Dissonance.

Harmony or Order and predictability make us feel safe. This is because it makes us feel in control of things. Change on the other hand tends to represent a threat. In very general terms, this is why most people do not like change. In order to maintain that feeling of being in control, we tend to be on constant alert for the unexpected change or Dissonance. Unexpected change can be either good or bad. If something unexpected happens, it can mean either danger or it could mean opportunity. Humans are fundamentally opportunistic. In fact, it is our ability to recognise change and use opportunities to our advantage which lies at the very heart of our progress as a species. We are hard-wired to react to change. This is why we are attracted to dissonance. It fascinates us. Dissonance sends our neurotransmitters into overdrive and this is why we find things that are novel, puzzling or unusual almost irresistible. Our curiosity is triggered by things that are not quite right. We can't help ourselves when that happens. We simply have to know why or what is going to happen next (Storr, 2019)

We experience harmony as recognizable patterns or as a suggestion of new relationships or associations in a way that fit together and make sense. When we activate particular modes of integrative, reciprocal neural interactions that are familiar from past patterns of fluid parallel neuronal brain processing, we experience these as harmonious. In other words, if we've seen it before or if it makes sense based on our pre-existing frame of reference, then it feels

familiar. The familiar is predictable. Predictable things are safe and comforting because we feel as if we can control them. This is why we enjoy things that go together like fish and chips or rhubarb and custard. It may also be why we like fictional tropes such as the hard-nosed police detective or the tall dark and handsome romantic hero. We may also experience harmony when the brain arranges things within cortical areas in new ways that make sense to us. An example of this is when we use metaphors (Archer, 2014). When, as Khalil Gibran once said, “All our words are but crumbs that fall down from the feast of the mind” (Gibran, 2013) we immediately make the connection between concepts such as “words” and “crumbs”. We understand the connection to “feast” in a way that fits together in a harmonious pattern. In response, our brain rewards us with a hit of dopamine which gives us a sense of pleasure at making the connection. Dissonance, as the opposite of harmony then, is the absence or disruption of recognisable patterns and associations. The brain likes Harmony. Harmony is safe. The brain hates dissonance. Dissonance is scary.

As with most things that involve the human brain, harmony and dissonance are not as binary as that. In fact, the situation is quite nuanced and we tend to perceive a range or degrees of harmony and dissonance on a spectrum as opposed to just one or the other. On the one side of this spectrum, we find complete harmony which is so uniform and ordered that the dopamine pleasure circuit slows down and even ceases completely. This is because the brain tells us that there is no change or opportunity and therefore what we’re seeing is not important. As a result, we lose interest entirely. Extreme harmony is usually experienced as dull or boring. Anyone who has ever had to plough through the long, carefully-ordered and punctuated sentences of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904) (James, 1973) might have to admit to struggling to stay awake. In contrast, on the dissonance side of the spectrum, chaos reigns supreme. The works of composers such as Arnold Schoenberg (his Suite for Piano Opus 25, in particular) or the sweeping dissonance that is Stravinski’s Rite of Spring, illustrate quite well that there are limits to what the auditory centres of the brain can endure. In fact, studies have shown that most people would struggle with Schoenberg because of the limitations of the brain’s auditory capacity (Deliège, I. and Sloboda, 1997). In the same way that too much harmony bores us, too much dissonance will make us feel unsettled and irritated. This is because the brain rewards us with a hit of dopamine when we solve a puzzle or when we work something out. When things are too harmonious, we tend to disrupt the harmony to make it more exciting, which is why kicking over a sandcastle is so much fun. Conversely, if there is too so much dissonance that we can’t solve the puzzle or work things out, the brain

gives up and directs its attention to something that makes more sense or is more exciting (Logan and Davidson, 2013). Again, when it comes to dissonance in literature, there are many readers who have tried and failed to make sense of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or the surreal works of Kafka simply because it is too much for our brains to process.

The brain has an increased concentration of receptors for chemicals such as dopamine, oxytocin and vasopressin in the areas where we connect memories with perceptions and associations. This means we are wired to derive pleasure from acquiring new information but only if it arrives in digestible nuggets and if we can reference the new information within a framework of existing knowledge that feels familiar to us (Biederman and Vessel, 2006). It is worth mentioning though, that just because a work of literature or art contains harmony or dissonance that are on the edges of the spectrum, it does not mean that the work is without merit. It is just that most readers do not possess the patience or the endurance to find such works pleasurable.

We love to find out new things and then fitting what we have learnt into what we already know. Thanks to its amazing neuroplasticity neuroscientists have found that the brain “plays” with harmony (the safe and familiar or that which we already know) and dissonance (the new information). We go back and forth between the new and the familiar in a game of checking and cross-referencing information and placing it into context. From gossiping about a neighbour to understanding the secrets of the universe, the majority of people prefer experiences which are both novel and richly interpretable at the same time (Biederman and Vessel, 2006). The objective seems to be to find that balance between the novel and the familiar. Most people seem to have a natural aptitude for finding that balance when it comes to stories. We know a good story when we see one, but when one tries to analyse how this the process works, it is surprisingly nuanced and complex. In my view, harmony and dissonance appear in multiple layers within a narrative. These layers of harmony and dissonance are also interconnected vertically to form a coherent whole.

### **Harmony and Dissonance on the Macro Level: Plot and Structure**

Because change is one of the foundations of life, it also forms the bedrock of any story. Change equals dissonance equals change. Change also usually sparks conflict and that conflict in turn becomes drama. On a macro level, harmony and dissonance is the rise and fall

of the highs and lows of the plot. If one plots those highs and lows on a graph, the high and low points on the plot curves emerge as the points of harmony and dissonance in the story. This up and down structural curve is ubiquitous when it comes to plotting and can be traced back to Aristotle (House, 1978). As can be seen in Freytag's pyramid from the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, these high and low points form a set pattern which has been repeated so many times over the centuries that most people expect them when they encounter a story (Freytag, 1970).

In his book on writing for film and television, John Yorke, the founder of the BBC Writers Academy, refers to the idea of harmony and dissonance when he argues that there is an essential midpoint in any narrative where something significant happens that transforms the story and protagonist in a profound way. He also proposes that all successful narratives have a hidden symmetry where the protagonist and antagonist and their rising and falling fortunes mirror one another (Yorke, 2015).

As alluded to earlier, Professor Matt Jockers and Dr Jodie Archer, in their research into the structure of novels at the Literary Lab at Stanford University ran a project which analysed novels by using a computer algorithm they designed. Their work was primarily focussed on the question as to whether a New York Times Bestseller could be identified and even predicted by such analysis. Their study showed that the algorithm could identify a manuscript as a bestseller with an accuracy rate of about 80% by identifying the literary elements that guarantee a book a spot on the bestseller lists (Jockers and Archer, 2017 p232). During the project they scanned approximately 25,000 manuscripts which included 19<sup>th</sup> Century novels as well as contemporary novels. The sample group contained both bestselling and non-bestselling novels. The algorithm and process they designed to do this research is based on a system called Sentiment Analysis. Sentiment Analysis is not new. Businesses such as Amazon have been using Sentiment Analysis of online data in respect of online reviews for many years to build and grow their sales algorithms (Jockers and Archers, 2017 p19-20). Archer and Jockers' Sentiment Analysis algorithm is a process of analysing a series of words and phrases in order to computationally identify and categorize opinions expressed by characters in a piece of text in order to determine whether the writer's attitude towards a particular topic is positive, negative, or neutral. Examples of these phrases are set out in more detail in the paragraphs below. These emotional beats and the highs and lows the characters experience as the plot unfolds were plotted on a graph. When the manuscripts are processed using these algorithms, the plot arc of the novel emerges in visual form on an axis that



delineates positive, neutral and negative emotion (Jockers & Archer, 2017). Significantly, Jockers and Archer’s graphic depiction of the plot correlates with the rise, fall, climax and denouement as depicted by Freytag.

In some novels the Sentiment Analysis reveals a perfectly balanced line with curves on either side. This curve appears to have an exact balance of highs and lows in a very specific and identifiable sequence. Archer and Jockers found that the closer to this perfect line a book falls, the higher the probability that the book is or will be a bestseller. In fact, two of the world's most commercially successful novels of all time, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Da Vinci Code*, lay precisely on this axis, almost perfectly balanced. What was even more fascinating is the fact that curves on the graph of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Da Vinci Code* were almost identical. This led Jockers and Archer to conclude that it is possible that a “bestseller beat” or “bestseller curve” exists (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

Figures 11 and 12 below show the setup, confrontation and resolution curves of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Da Vinci Code*.

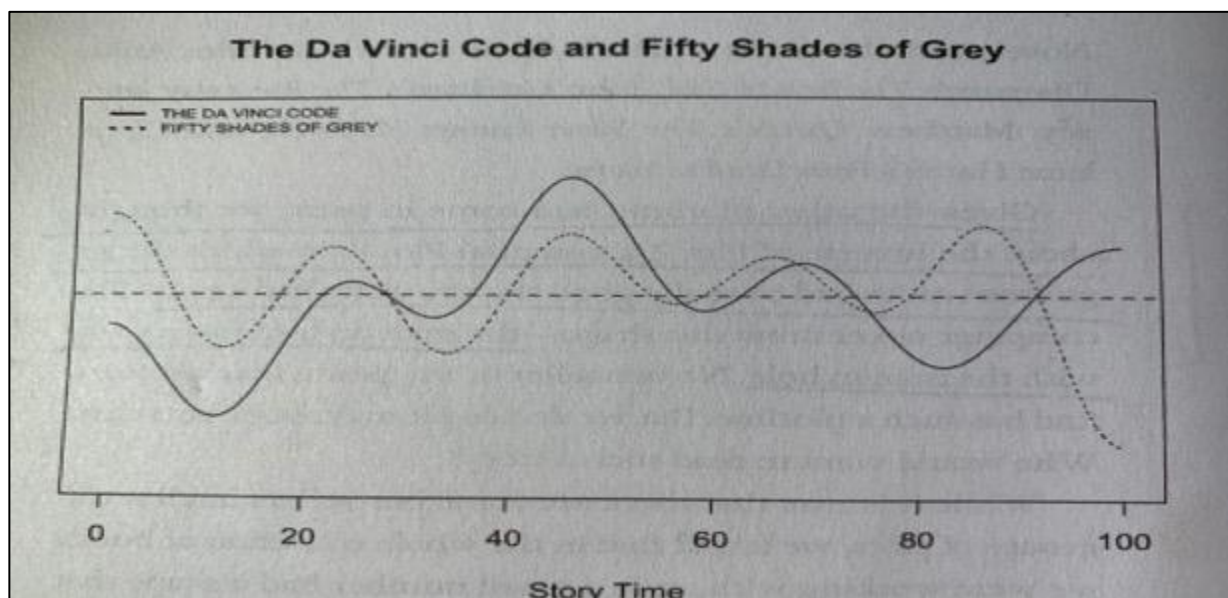


Figure 11 The Highs and Low beats for *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Da Vinci Code* (Jockers & Archer, 2017 p106).

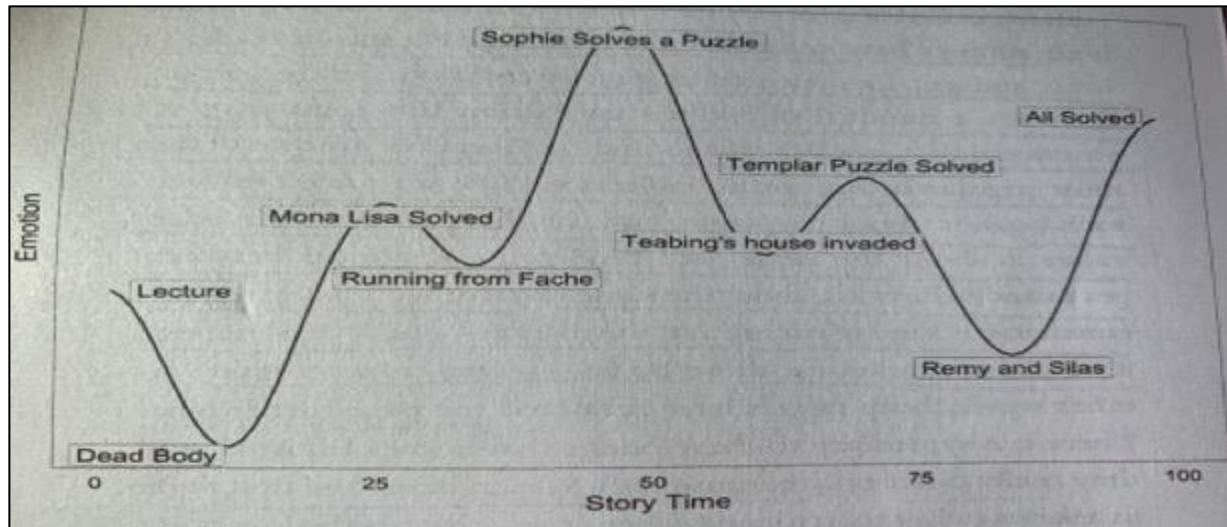
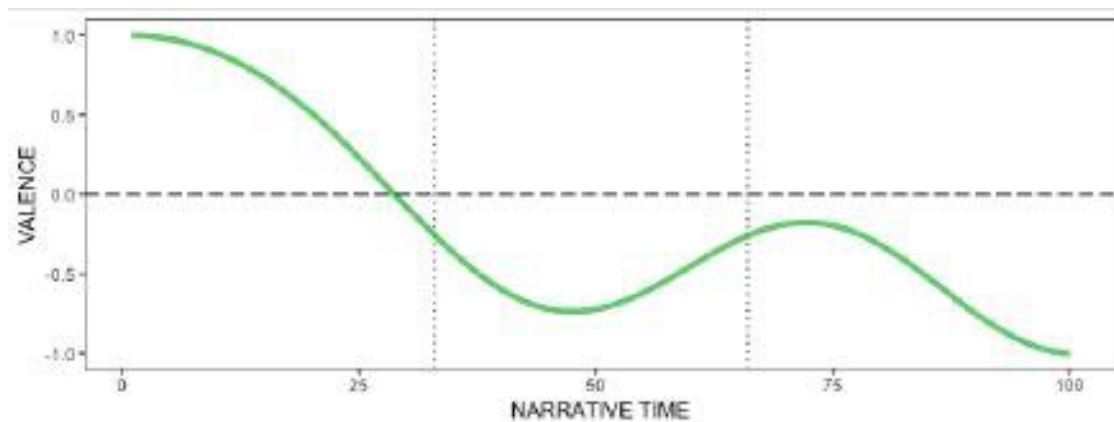


Figure 12 Emotional Highs and Lows for *The Da Vinci Code*. (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

One could therefore argue that when it comes to super-bestselling novels that it is not literary merit or quality of writing that is determinative of success, but rather this “page turner beat” or the balance between structural harmony and dissonance that lies at the heart of an optimal neurological read-response cycle within readers that makes the difference. While it might be possible to identify the page turner beat, I do not believe that it is possible to create a precise formula that will produce a bestseller on a write-by-numbers-basis. Even Jockers and Archer admit that there is no magic tea and that there will always be fiction that confounds even the most sophisticated algorithm (Jockers & Archer p29). Their research also focuses primarily on the North American commercial and mass market, so the model does not take publishing trends and the peculiarities of publication in other countries into account, but it does provide compelling evidence to suggest that there is a neuroscientific basis for their research: a carefully crafted plot that balances harmony and dissonance in a way that grips the reader’s attention does seem to capture the imagination of more readers than a plot that does not. To test this theory, I submitted *A Clockwork Heart* to Jockers and Archers to be scanned by their algorithm. The full report can be seen in Annexure A attached hereto. The graph for the plot and rhythm of *A Clockwork Heart* were as follows:

## PLOT



## RHYTHM

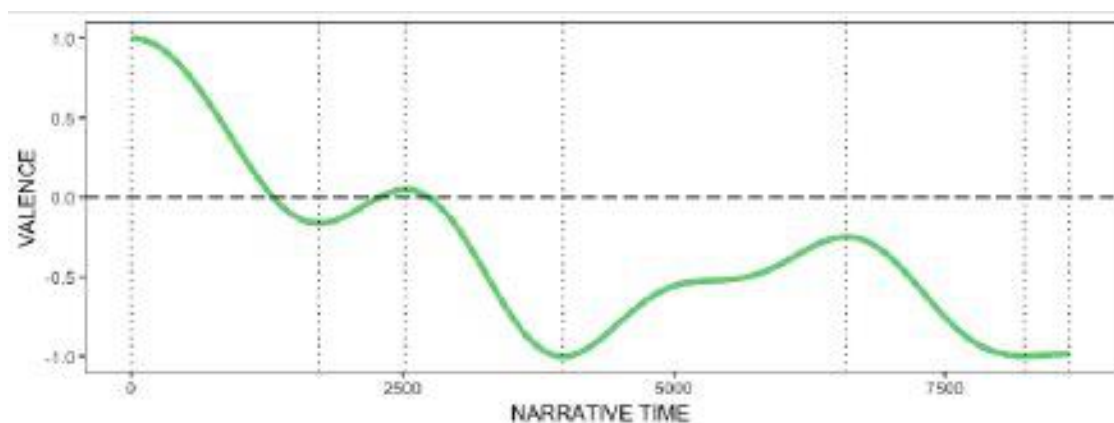


Figure 13 Plot Graph and Emotional Highs and Lows from Annexure A

It turns out that my novel did not have the curves of a New York Times bestseller, but it did have the same plot curve as many domestic noir novels which feature Dark Female Protagonists which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

### Harmony and Dissonance on the Median-level

Once the plot is balanced, it is time to go into the mid-level structure of the work. Said in another way, each one of the highs and lows created on the macro level should be broken down and balanced on a chapter-by-chapter or scene-by-scene basis. Writing gurus like Robert McKee have advocated the technique of breaking up sections into “scenes” and “beats” for many years. I first encountered this concept in a creative writing course I attended almost 20 years ago which used the terms “scene” and “sequel” (Patterson, 2020). At the time I knew nothing about harmony and dissonance within a neuroscientific context, but the idea of breaking one’s plot into a series of micro-plots called scenes and sequels made sense and it has always felt like a comfortable way of writing for me.

Scenes are active bursts of activity. Things happen. Fights, confrontation and dialogue – all the elements which create dissonance- are present. Sequels on the other hand are the quieter, reflective parts of the book. In sequels the drama subsides and very little action take place. Characters tend to turn inward. There is usually little outward dialogue between characters. Instead, we see characters engage in inner monologue where they reflect on their situation and on what happened. Ordinary things happen. Characters eat, sleep perform day-to-day tasks. The pace is slower and the reader feels more relaxed because the dramatic tension is lower. Scenes are at the apex points of the plot curves where the important incidents that drive the narrative forward happen. Sequels take place in the intervening spaces as we move from one important plot curve to the next. Scenes and sequels are equally important. We need these smaller ups and downs because it creates a rhythm which is the natural language of the brain.

Traditionally, writers tend to be taught to focus on scenes, because scenes are the place where all the action happens. This is because drama is all about the dissonance bearing “because”. The character has a problem at the start of the scene and they must either find themselves thwarted or educated that another way exists by the end of it.

Dissonance in mass market fiction tends to be easily understandable. It is quick and clear. The reader understands the problems the characters face and can see the solutions without too much effort. The dramatic tension lies in the question as to whether the character will reach that solution in time. In literary fiction, we tend to find dissonance that is slower and more ambiguous. More work is demanded from the reader because they are required to ponder the issues and make the connections themselves (Storr, 2019). Both techniques have merit if done skilfully. Clear, sharp dissonance has high impact because it creates maximum, nail-biting arousal in the reader. Slower, more ambiguous dissonance tends to stay with the reader for longer. We may spend months, even years ruminating about why characters behaved in the way that they have. Both approaches can be equally effective, What is important is to find the balance that suits the type of story you are telling. With sharp, high-impact dissonance, one has to guard against over-explaining things and being too obvious. With slower dissonance one must guard against losing focus and the dreaded “and then” of too many joined up concepts which may lead to confusion, surrealism, demanding too much from the reader, and boredom. Storr (2019) talks about “and then” explaining that human brains

struggle with “and then”. When one thing happens over here, and then we’re with a woman in a car park who’s just witnessed a stabbing, and then there is a rat in Mothercare in 1977, and then there is a man singing sea shanties in a haunted pear orchard, the brain just gives up because writer is asking too much of the reader with this lack of coherence.

When it comes to sequels, authors are often taught that they should avoid writing sequels because no one cares about the character’s downtime. This is not good writing advice, because in my view, the value of sequels cannot be overstated. Just like one cannot have only dissonance in a piece of music, a narrative made up of only scenes feels too intense and exhausting. As writers, we must give our reader a moment to catch their own breath and to take some respite. Having scenes and sequels is also essential for varying the pace of the drama. Without this balance, a story rapidly descends into melodrama (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

Jockers and Archer found that one of the most significant elements in bestsellers their algorithm identified was human closeness and human connection. These are the low-drama story elements where people communicate in moments of shared intimacy, shared chemistry, or shared bonds. These quiet, safe moments of human connection where drama is low, is where we really connect with fictional characters. The pervasive success of reality television programs such as *Big Brother*, *Gogglebox* and *Love Island* has shown over and over that we love to watch our fellow men and women doing ordinary day-to-day things – the same things we do. In fact, a good number of balancing sequels were found in almost every best-selling novel they analysed. (Jockers and Archer, 2017)

Writers need to give the reader emotional and intellectual breaks so they can keep up is just as important as explosive action scenes. The use of carefully crafted sequels creates fiction that is rich in detail. It provides the space readers need to trigger empathy and to bond with the characters. Bestselling authors seem to understand this. Analysis has shown that around 4% of John Grisham's novels covers everyday moments such as watching television or walking down the street. The everyday and the mundane take up around 12% or works by novelists such as Danielle Steele and Jodie Picoult (Jockers and Archer 2017). It would make for interesting research to establish whether there is a gender divide and whether fiction written by women has more sequels than fiction written by men. It would be even more

interesting to research whether male and female readers respond differently to scenes and sequels.

The scene and sequel patterns of a novel will depend on the type of fiction and the specific choices of the author. Based on my own anecdotal reading, it would seem that fast-paced thrillers tend to have more scenes in a row with fewer sequels. Romance novels tend to be scene, sequel scene in a regular pattern. More literary or introspective novels tend to have more than one sequel in a row.

Just as one has to be mindful of readability, it is also important to ensure that your scenes and sequels are structured in a way that is digestible for your reader. The average person reads between 250 and 400 words per minute. It is probably no coincidence then that that most modern works of commercial fiction are broken up into between 30 to 40 chapters. Each chapter tends to be roughly 4,500 to 7,000 words long and usually contains one or two scenes and a sequel – just long enough to coincide with the average concentration span of most people which is around 20 minutes (*The University Of Chicago, 2020*)

I was taught the writing technique of breaking my writing down into scenes and sequels in the very first creative writing course I ever did, over 20 years ago. As a result, I have always broken my novels down into scenes and sequels. In fact, when I write my outlines, I break the story up into scenes and sequels. If I want the story to move fast and I want my reader to be tense and aroused, I write two or three scenes in a row followed by a sequel. If I want to slow the pace down, I will write more than one scene in a row. This way of writing makes sense and feels natural to me. In *A Clockwork Heart* mostly has a scene - scene - sequel pattern which gives the story a natural feel.

### **Harmony and Dissonance on the Micro Level**

It is possible to balance harmony and dissonance right down to the structure of the prose: word choices, punctuation and sentences – the very vehicle through which the story is delivered (Jockers & Archer, 2017 p119. In order to gather data for their project, Archer and Jockers used scanning software similar to the software used to scan emails for key words. Using pattern recognition, they started with 20,000 markers. They then whittled the markers

down to 2,800 key markers which all feature in bestselling novels. The algorithm scanned everything: letters, commas, words, sentences, and chapters. They also looked at how many times an author uses words such as *a*, *the*, *in* and *she* (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

Jockers and Archer's scans identified a number of interesting results:

- (a) The word *do* is twice as likely to appear frequently in a bestseller.
- (b) The word *very* is half as common. The same is true for contractions and informal expressions such as *don't*, *won't* and *OK*.
- (c) Exclamation marks are less prevalent in bestsellers.
- (d) Shorter cleaner sentences and dialogue are more common.
- (e) The word *thing* occurs six times more often in bestsellers although no one is entirely sure why
- (f) Verbs such as *grab*, *do*, *think*, *ask*, *look*, *hold* and *love* are also significantly more prevalent in bestsellers, but it is the verb *need* that is the top verb that differentiates bestsellers from their less successful counterparts.
- (g) In contrast, the verb *wish* is the equivalent of *need* in books that do not sell in great numbers. This might be because the verb *need* is active and the verb *wish* is passive (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

Jockers and Archers (2017) also found that when dialogue is punchy with simple punctuation, even without speech tags, the speech sounds more natural. They use the following example:

*Imagine a scene where a man tells his friend that he is dating five women at once while sitting in a bar. The friend chokes on his beer and responds. These are two examples:*

*'I would be very surprised if you are still alive after that!'*

*-or*

*'Oh, I'd be really surprised if you're still alive after that.'*

The second response as set out above is the one that is more likely to appear in the bestseller. It's a very subtle shift in style but it sounds and feels more natural and the more natural the speech, the more impact it has on the brain (Jockers and Archer, 2017). The more natural-

sounding dialogue also speeds up the pace of reading in the same way that short sentences do. Clear, effective dialogue is more immediate, and it becomes easier for the reader to slip into the skin of the character. This becoming or joining of reader and character is one of the most powerful ways a writer can create arousal within the reader.

It also makes sense that the shorter and simpler the sentence, the faster the reader reads. The faster a reader reads, the more intense the reading experience. In fact, the use of short sentences and dialogue to create white space on the page is very effective in creating a sensation of rushed excitement for the reader. Many thriller writers, like Lee Child and John Grisham use this technique with great effect.

Jockers and Archer (2017) found that every author has a linguistic fingerprint which is very difficult to change or hide. What was even more interesting was the fact that Jane Austen's fingerprint – the simple use of syntax, absence of excessive clauses and simple active verbs – is remarkably similar to the fingerprint of Jackie Collins. So too, are the fingerprints of Tolstoy and Stephen King. In fact, the linguistic fingerprint is so clear that their algorithm picked it up even when these writers wrote in different genres and under pen names. When authors such as JK Rowling or Stephen King tried to write different genres under pen names, it was almost impossible to hide their linguistic fingerprint.

Jockers and Archer (2017) also found that in most commercially successful novels, the first sentence contains all the conflict of the novel in around twenty words. Active sentences are more prevalent in bestsellers than passive ones. Stephen King's perennial advice to not use adverbs seems to also ring true as they found that statistically, bestsellers have fewer adverbs and they found that the adverb to noun ratio is a significant indicator as to whether a narrative will be successful. The same is true for adjectives (King, 2000).

When it comes to prose, the message seems to be: Write clearly and concisely with lots of active verbs. Above all, avoid adverbs!

## **Word Associations, Topics and Themes**

### **Word Associations**

We smell and taste Proust's madeleines crumbled into lime tea and wonder about our existence, but few of us will give much thought as to why this is so powerful. Neuroimaging



has shown that brain structures and neuronal circuits mechanistically underpin symbolic meaning. Researchers have found that modality-specific “embodied” mechanisms appear to be anchored in sensorimotor systems. There are broadly four semantic mechanisms within our neuronal circuits that work together to process figurative language such as metaphor.

These are:

- *Referential semantics*, which establishes links between symbols and the objects and actions they are used to speak about. This means that the meaning of red tomato is a function of the meanings of “red” and “tomato will apply to anything that is both red and a tomato;
- *Combinatorial semantics*, which enables the learning of symbolic meaning from context. We are able to comprehend concepts such as “plaid” and “jacket” as separate concepts, but can also effortlessly integrate this information to create the idea of a “plaid jacket;
- *Emotional-affective semantics*, which establishes links between signs and internal states of the body. For example, when we read a text message such as “Why won’t you text me!” we are able to interpret this as anger or anxiety; and
- *Abstraction mechanisms* for generalizing over a range of instances of semantic meaning. We are for example, able to discern meaning of abstract concepts such as “employment” or “justice”.

These are all complementary mechanisms, each necessary for processing meaning (Pulvermüller, 2013).

Every word we choose when we write matters. As we have seen in the preceding sections, the act of reading triggers both the visual and auditory areas of the brain. This goes further than just the mechanical processing of the words through. In fact, word associations cascade and trigger multiple areas in the brain that govern sensory perception and memory. In the same way that reading the word *carrot* causes us to see the image of an orange carrot in our visual cortex, reading the words *garlic*, *cinnamon* or *jasmine* triggers areas within the olfactory cortex that evoke a sense of smell. In other words, when we read words associated with specific odours, we remember and experience smell (González et al., 2006). This happens even if the specific odour is complex and is difficult to describe in words such as *vanilla* (Iatropoulos et al., 2018).

Metaphors are also often processed as sensory experiences. This is especially the case for metaphors relating to touch. If I say, “*I’ve had a rough day*” the parietal operculum - the region of the brain that senses texture through touch - is activated. The same region is not activated when a similar sentence expressing the meaning of the metaphor is heard (Lacey, Stilla and Sathian, 2012).

Once these senses are triggered, the whole body responds. This is because the brain does not distinguish between real and not real on this level of consciousness. This is why reading the phrase such as “cinnamon bun” might for instance recall the sensation of sweet and make us feel hungry. Used correctly, word associations and metaphors work towards creating Gardiner's dreamlike state within the brain. These words work together to form the interior décor of the novel. If I was writing a story about 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bristol, words like *harbour*, *ship*, *water*, *seagull*, *rigging*, *wind* and *salt* would work to create the atmosphere and context to the story in a way that would make it real. Conversely, if I used eccentric 1940's language – words like *dotty* or *bunting* in a novel about the Ottoman Empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the story would feel strange and incongruous.

Jockers and Archer (2007) found with their algorithm that there are a number of popular word associations that feature in bestsellers. They grouped these into what they called word clouds with words frequently used. Word clouds have also been in use for many years. Bloggers, for instance have used the data from Search Engines to determine what search words people who land on their website commonly use to maximise web traffic. In the same way the algorithm analysed words commonly used in best-sellers Figure 13 below is a depiction of the most popular ones, which is self-explanatory. Words depicting human closeness, are particularly prominent and as I will explain below, correlate with the topics and themes commonly found in best-sellers.



*everything to save her family. It's a long and harrowing journey and it is only their incredible strength, love, and hope that pull Lina and her family through each day. But will love be enough to keep them alive?*

From the blurb, the topics for the novel can be identified as:

- The Soviet Union's genocide of the Baltic peoples of Eastern Europe during World War II;
- The separation of families during times of war;
- Hardships of life in prison camps; and
- Art as a means of communication .

Topic is the bridge between the story and the reader's experience. We buy books about veterinarians in Yorkshire or the Holocaust because we are interested in these subjects. Topics are relatable and they make the story we want to experience real. We want to know what it's like to practice animal husbandry in the North of England or to live through the Second World War.

Archer and Jockers (2017) found that topics appear to transcend genre. They have identified a top ten list of topics that readers prefer. The number one topic in bestsellers is work – in particular the work other people do. People also love to read about children, crime, legal quandaries, domestic life and closeness – often within a historical setting. Mostly, we like to read about the human condition: good and evil, nature vs nurture, the basic human truths in all their incarnations. We like to peer into the windows of other people's lives in the present, the past or the future because we want to know what life is or was like for others.

Conversely, topics like sex and eroticism are surprisingly low on the list of popular bestseller topics. In fact, Jockers and Archer (2017) found that most successful narratives had very little sex in them. Instead, human connections and pair bonding or relationships feature high with a small element of sex. We appear to be far more interested in the relationships between people than we are in the actual act of intercourse. Other popular topics are marriage, death, tax, vaguely threatening technologies, funerals, guns, doctors, work, schools, presidents, newspapers, children, mothers and the media. Unpopular topics include cigarettes, the gods, big emotions like passionate love and desperate grief, revolutions, existential or philosophical

sojourns and playing cards. Bestsellers also appear to favour dogs and not cats. Also, no unicorns, apparently .

Readers also seem to prefer fewer topics per book. Most best-selling novels have between two and four topics. Novels with fewer topics tend to be more focussed and organised. The brain hates dealing with “and then” follow-on concepts. We also don't like being distracted by tangential subplots that confuse us when we are focussed on a particular story. This is because a tightly organised and focussed narrative implies experience and authoritativeness on the side of the author which is reassuring to a reader.

Bestselling brand authors such as Stephen King, John Grisham, Patricia Cornwall, Danielle Steele, Jodie Picoult and Jackie Collins all create and follow a topic pattern that forms the basis for their brand. Roughly one third of all of John Grisham's novels deals with the law and the US legal system. One third of all of Danielle Steele's books deal with domestic life or more specifically time spent within the home. Added to the brand topics, these authors then introduce tangential topics and themes that are new and different in each book. The balance of new and old seems to be one third brand topic, two thirds new. This pattern works because our brains are at their most engaged when we can happily play in the spaces between that which we know (harmony) and that which is new (dissonance). Readers, when called upon to invest precious resources like time and money, really do like to know what they are getting. With this topic mix, brand authors seem to know how to deliver just that (Jockers and Archer, 2017).

## **Theme**

If topic is the *what* we are reading or the reason why buy a book, then theme is the reason *why* we keep reading. Theme seems to be the cousin no one speaks about when it comes to writing modern fiction, yet it is the very fibre of the narrative. It should be distinguished from genre which is the lumping together of books with similar topics, themes and tropes. Genre is really nothing more than a marketing tool which aims to make it easier for readers to find books that they typically like. As we have seen, topics tend to be more to factual. They are the subject matter of the story and most writers arrive at them either through life experience, research or more usually, a combination of both. Theme on the other hand, is a premise. It is

a theory posited, an argument explored and a conclusion reached and it transcends genre. Theme is the challenging of a belief or set of beliefs and finding the answer to that challenge by being allowed to see both sides of the argument through the eyes of both the protagonist and the antagonist. It should be noted that in this context, theme is not one-sided and the conclusion reached is not an objective one. Instead, theme is more nuanced. It is the writer's argument for and against the premise spoken through the characters. The conclusion is the writer's interpretation of the answer. Alfred Hitchcock famously said that a film is only as good as its villain. When he said this, he was not talking about character. He was actually talking about theme: A story is only as good as its counter-argument and it is within the testing of the thematic premise or idea that the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist arises. It happens organically through the act of telling the story – whether the writer sets out to write a book with a specific theme in mind or not (Yorke, 2015).

Let's take the example of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone With the Wind* (1936):

*Gone With the Wind* deals with topics such as the American War of Independence, life in the Deep South in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the impact of Slavery on people's lives and the tumultuous relationship of a Southern belle Scarlett O' Hara and her dashing beau Rhett Butler.

The theme of *Gone with the Wind* is Gumption. To put it in Mitchell's own words:

*If it has a theme it is that of survival. What makes some people able to come through catastrophes and other, apparently just as able, strong and brave, go under? It happens in every upheaval. Some people survive; others don't. What qualities are in those who fight their way through triumphantly that are lacking in those who go under? I only know that the survivors used to call that quality 'gumption'. So I wrote about the people who had gumption and the people who didn't.*

I don't know if Mitchell's definition of gumption is correct, but it doesn't matter. What is of interest here is how Margaret Mitchell's explores the ideas for and against the argument through her characters (Mitchell, Escott and Cuzik, 2008).

The reason why theme is so important goes back to our fundamental human need for control. Psychologist Roy Baumeister said that life is change that yearns for stability (Baumeister,

2005). Gardiner calls it the dream state. Psychologists call it narrative transportation. Stories become the means through which we can experience that loss of control without actually placing ourselves in physical danger. Research suggests that when we are transported our beliefs, attitudes and intentions are vulnerable to being altered – often in accordance with the mores of the story. Those changes and alterations are also likely to stay with the reader long after the book was read (Van Laer, 2015).

As humans we are prone to confirmation bias which means that theme, topic and word-associations tend to be tribal. We feel that sensation of neurotransmitter-reward when we encounter something that fits in with our existing set of beliefs and we tend to reject things quite ferociously when something does not (Nickerson, 1998). As a result, we observe the phenomenon where readers seem to like to read about the same themes and topics, the same author and the same genres over and over – sometimes to the point of obsession.

When it comes to commercial fiction, this confirmation bias is skilfully exploited by publishers. Specific sets of topics and themes are lumped together in categories and while characters and settings might change, each book is a variation on those themes. We call this genre. When a reader picks up a copy of their favourite author's book, their confirmation bias is often confirmed the moment they start reading. The reader feels a sense of reassurance and acceptance because what they are reading corresponds with what they already believe. In turn, the reward system is activated and they replicate the pleasurable experience. Because the last book was a positive experience, the reader will in all likelihood choose to read the same type of book again. As a social species, we all have a need for human connection in the form of thoughts and ideas (Storr, 2018).

Structurally, it is also important to ensure that plot and theme are synchronised. Thematically, when a character has that crucial change of heart towards the climax of the plot, the reader needs to have been given the whole argument both for and against the premise in order to understand the specific rationale behind that change in perception or world view. Without this insight, the reader will struggle to empathise with the character and the emotional responses they have. Without that empathy, the reader will fail to connect with the character. This does not mean that the prose should be clogged with long inner monologues or heavy expositional arguments. In fact, the opposite is true. The argument needs to be made subtly,

throughout the story in such a way that the reader is almost completely unaware of the fact that it is happening.

The true power of fiction lies in a story that pushes a reader outside their comfort zone without them feeling uncomfortable or betrayed. The most powerful stories are the ones that challenge and change a reader's confirmation bias by changing the way we see things or think about them. Ultimately, they are the most powerful way to change the world.

An analysis of *A Clockwork Heart* shows that the topics of the novel are:

- Life in Edwardian London,
- Feminism and Suffrage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century,
- fantastic and threatening technology; and
- negotiating the pitfalls of marriage.

The theme of my novel is loss and specifically a catastrophic loss. I examine what it is like to lose what it is that makes you a person and. Elle loses her husband, and she only realises what she has lost once it is gone and the story ends on a tragic note. Analysis has shown that catastrophic loss is not a popular theme. Perhaps this is because the odds, when it comes to catastrophic loss, are not on a knife edge and therefore does not engage the striatum as I have explained in other sections herein. The theme, however, was a choice. Because this is the second book in a trilogy, one is dealing with both the plot of each book as well as the story arc for the series. In my experience a trilogy tends to be structured as follows: Book One is the build-up. The second book is typically the darkest moment and the third leads to the big climax. Things had to go very wrong for my characters in Book 2 order to open up the plot possibilities for the third book.

### **Specificity in Writing and The Hermeneutic Circle**

Humans are a predatory species that evolved by hunting. This means our brains have evolved to be wired to focus on specifics. It follows then that when it comes to writing effective fiction, there is a whole layer of specificity in prose which is needed in order to engage the reader.



It is estimated that the human brain processes about 120 bits of information per second which is an astonishing amount of information. Our neurons are living cells with metabolisms which require significant amounts of glucose to survive. In fact, our brain makes up around 2% of our total body mass but uses around 20% of our total calories burned per day – more, if we our brains are working hard (Bryce, 2019). From a survival perspective, our brains are expensive to run. So, to prevent ourselves from falling into a state of extreme fatigue or madness, the brain has the amazing capacity to conserve energy by focusing on what is important while filtering out the irrelevant (Levitin, 2015). This is why we don't like to hear about nebulous or abstract concepts like poverty or socio-economic decline. We need specifics and context: we want to see the hungry children and the rats. This is why the need for specificity in writing cannot be underestimated. Without it, the reader starts to wonder, 'Why is this important?' 'Why is the character doing this?' 'This does not make sense.' 'I don't understand this'. The moment the reader starts asking these questions, the neurological connection between reader and text starts to degrade as the brain starts diverting resources to matters that have higher priority. The reader is no longer transported to the magical world of the book. Instead the reader drops out of the dream state and once this happens, the reader disengages with the narrative.

When it comes to specificity in writing, we are faced with this interesting paradox: the brain requires context in order to attribute meaning to something, and we need meaning in order to care enough to think about things or place them into context. Which brings us to the rediscovery and revival of the study of the hermeneutic circle by neuroscience in recent years. The hermeneutic circle, very briefly, stipulates that one can understand something only by comprehending in advance the relation to a specific part of the whole in which it belongs – even if one can only arrive at the whole by working through the sum of the parts (Armstrong, 2014).

The brain is also hard-wired to look for patterns and when it comes to reading, we know that readers have specific expectations of the whole. They want their expectations met. Both pattern recognition and expectations of the whole are hermeneutic circles which have a deep foundation in the cognitive functioning of the brain. In fact, literary scholar Wolfgang Iser describes reading as an anticipatory and retrospective process of building consistence and constructing patterns, which make sense to the brain (Iser, 1972).

A good way to explain hermeneutic circles, is by using well-known meta- pictures such as the one in Figure 14 below.

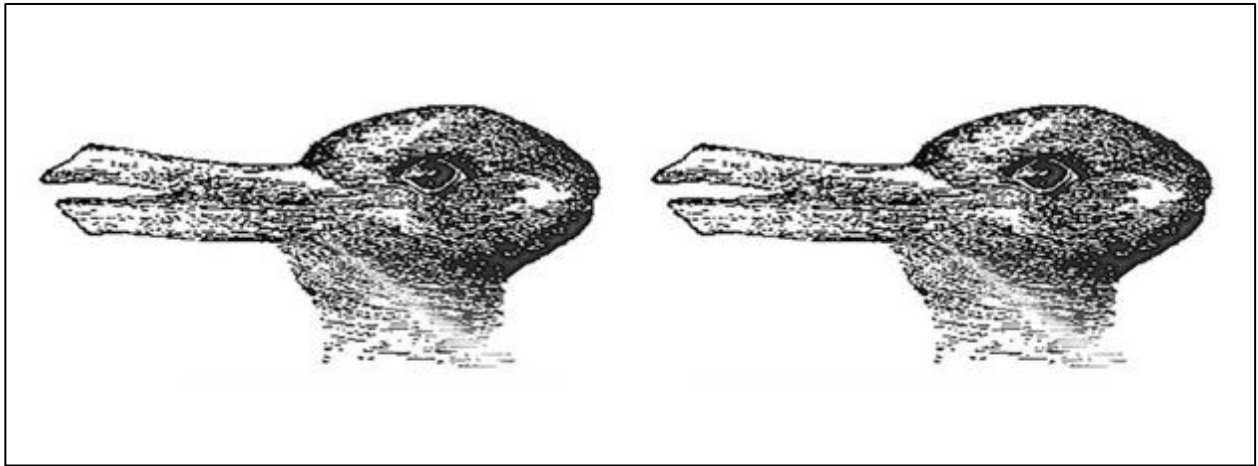


Figure 14 - Is it a rabbit or a duck? Source: Neuroscience News, 2018

Is this two rabbits? Or two ducks? Is it a duck eating a rabbit or a rabbit kissing a duck? The brain doesn't know. These paradoxical images are decoded by the visual centres in the brain in the cortex, but they serve as a great illustration of how the brain interprets information. If one were to prompt the viewer by suggesting an answer (for instance, it's a rabbit kissing a duck) the viewer's perception of the image changes immediately. I have touched on this in the previous section when I mentioned confirmation bias. Unless prompted, readers tend to interpret and understand information the way they want to see it and not always as it is (Neuroscience News, 2018).

These ambiguous states of pattern flexibility vary by degrees. The above, rabbit/duck image is highly variable and the brain will flicker frenetically backwards and forwards between the two images as it tries to make sense of what it is seeing. If you stare too long at the images you will find yourself feeling rather irritated by them eventually. This is because it is impossible for the brain to sort out the ambiguity. There are however more stable images, as can be seen the famous Kanizsa triangle below. These ambiguities are far less frenetic because the brain is able to solve the mystery and complete the triangle by filling in the blanks. Stories work the same way. As we read, we anticipate and fit what we learn against the backdrop of our expectations.

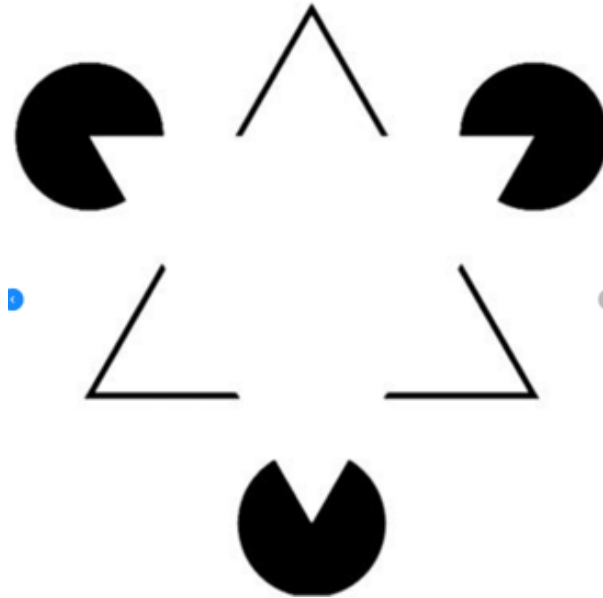


Figure 15 The Kaniza Triangle Source: Commons.wikimedia.org. (n.d.).

When it comes to visual art, I only need to provide the brain with the following visual prompt in order to complete the hermeneutic circle:



Figure 16 - Arguably one of the world's most famous smiles. Source: The Louvre, Paris.

Within a fraction of a second, most viewers' brains will have recognised the part as the mouth of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. In a split second, the brain would have filled in the rest of the detail and we will have recognised what isn't even there. As we have seen the brain loves recognising things and once that recognition is triggered, we become aroused and excited because we are able to complete the hermeneutic circle and understanding the context, triggers the pleasure-reward circuit.

Visual examples are useful to illustrate the point. As part of this research, I read an extensive list of novels published over the last 120 years or so in order to investigate the evolution of the female protagonist within the novel. One of the most obvious features I found was that literature become more visual as novels became more recent. I believe that photographs, film and the Internet, have made literature more visual. It has changed the way we write. If one were to compare a popular 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel such as *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins with a novel written more recently, such as Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, you will find that the one written 150 years ago it is filled with detailed descriptions and the older novel contains more exposition where the author paints pictures for the reader with words while the newer novel does not. I read a significant number of books from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century to date as part of this research as I explained in the sections on the Dark Female Protagonist below. During the reading, I have observed that in modern commercial fiction the writing style is more abbreviated with far less exposition. In my view, this is because readers 150 years ago did not have access to rich repository of images we do today. They lacked the visual references in order to complete the hermeneutic circle in the same way modern readers do, so the authors of that time had to take the time to create the images for their readers. Today, the need to describe things in detail is not so necessary. Modern writers simply need to signpost descriptions. Most readers today either know what the author means or they are able to search for a picture online with the minimum of interruption to the reading process. It is a trend that seems to be growing as our reliance on the Internet grows.

As Andrew Stanton, director and producer of the films such as *Finding Nemo*, *Toy Story* and *Up*, from Pixar says, "We're born problem solvers. We're compelled to deduce and to deduct because that's what we do in real life. It's this well-organized absence of information that draws us in." In fact, script writing duo Peterson and Stanton, call this the "Unifying theory of two plus two". In their view, one should "...make the audience put things together. Don't give them four, give them two plus two." (Stanton, 2012). When presented with  $2 + 2$ , we close the circle and get 4. Dissonance becomes Harmony because we are in control. We've solved the puzzle and we've earned our hit of dopamine as a reward.

A good story should be a hermeneutic circle. Things need to be left out so the reader can have a go at putting two and two together. On the other hand, the author needs to give the reader enough specificity in order to understand the context. There has to be enough information for

the reader to see both sides of the thematic argument and to understand why things are happening. The true art lies in knowing what to put in a story and what to leave out.

Lisa Cron (2013) in her works on writing and the brain identifies six areas of specificity when it comes to writing:

1. We need to know the *specific reason a character does something*. As humans, we are far more likely to remember or understand something if it is placed in context. Without at least a partial reason for doing something, the reader has no idea as to why this is relevant and so they tend to not care. But if you give a good reason, we are immediately focussed and interested.
2. When it comes using literary devices, we also need to know *what the literary device is supposed to illuminate*. Metaphors in particular only have resonance if we know what they illuminate. Readers simply disregard or skip over misplaced metaphors and if this happens too often, the reader again, gets bored and stops caring.
3. In the case of backstory, we also need specificity when *a character's memory is invoked*. The backstory or memories need to be specific to the story we are telling at the moment in order for the reader to respond emotionally. Most readers don't care about the character's tenth birthday or the colour of the balloons at the party unless those issues have a bearing on the story at hand.
4. The *reactions of characters to events*, occurrences or other characters has to be specific too. In order for us to create context we need not only to know how a character reacts to a situation, but also why. In other words, we need specific reasons why characters react to things in the manner that they do. Authors are often afraid to let the reader know what these reasons are - either in part or the whole for fear of perhaps giving away the plot or sacrificing dramatic tension. The opposite is in fact true: The more context we have, the more we are able to speculate and so giving the reader the why is essential in order to make them care.
5. Readers need to know *the specific possibilities that run through a character's head when faced with a choice or when the character struggles to make sense of a situation or event*.

We need to know that we are singing from the same hymn sheet as our character. Once the reader and the character's minds are one, the reader has the same options as the character when faced with a decision and the reader is likely to make the same decision as the character did. The moment the reader stops and thinks, 'hold on, there is a different, more obvious solution to this dilemma' or if the choices the character makes are baffling or confusing, the reader falls out of the dream state. The reader will very quickly become irritated, lose interest and disengage from the story.

6. And lastly, as I have already explained in the preceding section under theme, readers need to understand *the rationale behind the character's change of heart*. We need to know why characters change their minds - especially when it comes to the plot turns.

When it comes to specificity in writing and hermeneutic circles it is more a case of finding the balance. Foundationally, the writer has to give the reader enough information in order to create context, to bond with the character and to engage with the narrative. Once this base has been established there is ample room for the author to give the reader's brain space to play by speculating. This makes sense, because most of us are only really comfortable to let our guard to play when we feel that we are in a safe and stable environment. It's up to the writer to create that space for the reader.

In *A Clockwork Heart*, I think I made the mistake of fearing that I might give too much away if I gave the reader too much backstory and specificity. This is one of the dilemmas one faces when writing a trilogy. On the one hand, the writer has a whole first book which provides the full backstory for the next book in the series for readers. Readers who read the first book will have a lot of insight into the character, but those who did not, only had what information was before them. Finding a balance between too much and too little information and avoiding too much repetition of information from the previous book in the series is a particular challenge when writing a series. Some writers deal with this issue by writing the books as a series. They expect and assume the reader has read the preceding books and they merely provide very succinct reminders of what happened before. A good example is Mark Lawrence's *Book of the Ancestor* trilogy (Lawrence, 2017). Other writers choose to write each novel in a series as a standalone which can be read without having read any of the preceding novels. A good example is Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London*. I opted for writing a novel, that could be

read as a standalone but which fitted into the trilogy, but I am not sure I succeeded in this regard. When I did the rewrite for this submission I refined some of the aspects by creating more clarity around Elle's motivations. I did this by adding in more inner dialogue and by clarifying some of the protagonist's decisions and her thinking in order to create more context. I think this rewrite is better than the work that was published in 2012.

### **The Knife-Edge Phenomenon: Control, Uncertainty Risk and Beating the Odds**

As mentioned before, our purpose as a species is to survive and to procreate. While this might sound quite simplistic, these goals have become rather complex in our evolved society. It demands a deep understanding of social concepts such as success, wealth, attraction, status and courting. In order to achieve our purpose, humans have evolved a deep-seated desire to control their environment as far as they possibly can. We do this in order to ensure the outcomes we desire and in order to control our environment, we need to have the ability to adapt to or exploit those threats and opportunities which we come across in our day-to-day life (Storr, 2019). Uncertainty is the enemy.

In a 1927 essay, H.P. Lovecraft wrote that “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” (Lovecraft, 2013). There is, it seems, an underlying neurological basis for Lovecraft's observation. It lies deep within the forebrain in an area known as the striatum. Like the amygdala, it is part of our most primitive brain (the basal ganglia) and it controls aspects of our consciousness such as cognition, motor movement and in particular, our arousal-reward system during social interaction (Báez-Mendoza and Schultz, 2013). Research has shown that the striatum doesn't just control our dopamine reward system, it propels behaviour. In particular, it propels our behaviour toward positive outcomes like success, praise or acceptance and it propels our behaviour away from negative outcomes such as punishment and aversive consequences. Whether it be good or bad news we are expecting, a flush of dopamine activates the striatum equally.

In fact, the striatum has developed the unique ability to not only anticipate good and bad consequences but also to predict the odds of those consequences and it is at its most active, chiming most urgently when those odds approach 50%. This makes sense because we are called upon to use our intellectual and physical abilities and resources when the consequences

are least predictable. For example: in sports, players try hardest when they have a 50/50 chance of scoring or winning. When faced with foregone conclusions such as an easy win or impossible odds, the striatum does not activate, but if the outcome turns on a knife edge, the striatum lights up and chimes loudly.

Taking action is generally beneficial for us when negative consequences are unpredictable. For example: if you need to go somewhere, the traffic is good, and you're more likely than not to get to your meeting on time, your brain will tell you that there's no need to fret, rush and worry. Your anxiety levels will drop and you will feel calm. You will most likely travel to your meeting by not rushing or exceeding the speed limit. Meeting your expected aims is a foregone conclusion and so there is no need to worry. In the same way, if the highway is completely closed and you're in a bumper-to-bumper jam, or if the train is impossibly stuck or delayed and it's a foregone conclusion that you're going to be late, your brain will start signalling the same. Fatalistically, the situation is completely out of your control, so you might as well sit back and start rehearsing your apology. If the traffic situation is really touch and go, if you think you might just make it on time, that's when you'll try your hardest and feel the most aroused or anxious. You might speed up when driving. You might devise a way out of your jam by taking a shortcut and finding an alternative route. In fact, people go extraordinary lengths to succeed when the odds of reaching their goals are 50/50.

When faced with a 50/5 situation, we are out of control. The amygdala signals danger and the striatum is flooded with adrenaline and dopamine which will prompt you to do something – anything for that matter - in order to gain back control. This is because being in control of a situation immediately improves your odds of succeeding. In response, the sympathetic nervous system (the fight or flight system) which opens your sweat glands, dilates your pupils, and energises the action-oriented muscles throughout your body are all activated. In short, our striatum is responsible for our arousal systems and in day-to-day life. It is also the source of most of our daily stress.

What is even more interesting is that in experiments, people whose stress response mirrored actual levels of uncertainty performed better in designated tasks. Their sensitivity to uncertainty gave them an edge when it came to predicting which perils to avoid, even though they couldn't avoid all perils in the long run (De Berker et al, 2016).



Life is characterised by uncertainty. Our brains respond to the ever-present levels of risk by recognising when we're not in control and recruiting every available neuron we have in order to rectify the matter. Ultimately, we spend most of our existence seeking to gain, exercise and maintain control over our circumstances and lives. Because humans value control above all our other capacities, feeling powerless or out of control is often the cause for many mental health issues. Anyone who has lived through the Covid-19 pandemic can attest to how destructive uncertainty and powerlessness can be. Conversely, we admire others who are in control. We look up to them as our leaders. We congratulate ourselves or feel an immense sense of triumph and achievement when we learn to control our personal circumstances. Some people feel the need to control others – spouses, children, employees - which can lead to all kinds of interpersonal relationship problems. On a macro level, our entire modern civilisation is structured around controlling people and the resources available to us. War, politics and economics are all manifestations of our need to control things. Science, medicine and biology are all manifestations of our attempts to understand and control nature, our bodies and the world around us. Conversely, entire religions are built around meditation and achieving a state of letting go of control, thereby and rather paradoxically, gaining control again (Lewis, 2016).

When it comes to writing a good story, it is important to think about how much control characters have and to bear the odds in mind. A story in which the odds are too easy or completely impossible will not engage your reader's striatum or reward system. The odds of the characters succeeding needs to balance on a knife edge or as close to the edge as you can reasonably manage. This is the place where the story is at its most interesting. I would argue that the practice of writing stories where characters “overcome impossible odds” in fiction is sometimes a bit misplaced. If the odds are so impossible that the reader can't see a way out, then there would be no need for the striatum to chime and you won't get that intense reader engagement. A writer should be sure to give readers hope because the aim is to create the illusion of control. This is achieved by creating a situation where readers feel as if something can be done about a problem in a story. This done by providing enough specificity and by creating options in order to allow the reader to put two and two together. In doing so, the writer gives the characters a fighting chance and the characters should behave accordingly. If the odds are on a knife-edge and things could go either way and at that point the reader will be most engaged and have the most fun reading your story.

In *A Clockwork Heart*, Elle (my protagonist) and Clothilde (my antagonist) were evenly matched. Both were women physically evenly matched. Both characters straddle the realms of Shadow and Light and both have comparable supernatural powers. Both are able to manipulate the Realm of Shadow. Both women are also equally damaged and fragile. This means that either of the two could have won the battle. I believe that throughout the novel, I think I managed to ensure that the odds were at 50/50 in as much of the book as possible, because feedback on the book I received was that the story was very engaging.

### **The Social Brain, the Paradoxical Interaction between Ego and Alter Ego and the Character Empathy Quotient**

When it comes to writing powerfully creating characters with a strong Empathy Quotient (“CEQ”) is probably the most effective technique a writer can use when it comes to creating reader-engagement. We achieve this in two ways: The first is creating points of commonality between the reader and the character and the second is the use of Point of View.

In her seminal work, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee writes, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (Lee, 2010) In my view, it is this “climbing into the skin” of someone else which is vital to a powerful story. In order to maintain the bond, your reader needs to become your character and the ease with which the reader is able to do this, is what I call the Character Empathy Quotient. The easier it is for the reader to become the character, the higher the CEQ.

The reason this works is because Story *is* Character. Our brains are hard-wired to care about what happens to the character internally and as a result of the external pressures and challenges he or she must face through the mechanism of plot. We care because what happens to the character in effect happens to us while we inhabit their form.

Psychologist Timothy Wilson, in his work on the therapeutic value of stories (in particular, the stories we tell ourselves) says that a critical element of our wellbeing is how well we understand what happens to us and why (Wilson, 2013). While there has, for a long time, been a Cartesian focus on the self-reflecting individual, it is impossible to ignore the fact that everything we experience and process is filtered through the lenses of social life and culture.

In the Cartesian tradition, we might perceive ourselves as individuals, but as we have seen through the research of neuroscientists like Ramachandran our brains are fundamentally intersubjective and interconnected. Stripped of this social or cultural dimension we would not have the cognitive capacities that make us human (Iacoboni, 2008). While some may argue that the brain's social capacities are far too complex to be explained by a single neuron, we have seen that mirror neurons go far to explain how we connect and are able to interact with one another (Armstrong, 2014).

When it comes to reading, the distinction between self and the ability to empathise fully with the not-self cannot be overstated. Thanks to mirror neurons, these biochemical processes which allow us to empathise and interact socially in real life are fully transferrable when it comes to fictional worlds and characters. It is this ability to be transferrable which allows us to slip into the skin of the character and experience the world as they do. While we may be aware that the fictional world and the characters who inhabit it are not real, when it comes to a biological stimulus-response, the brain does not seem to differentiate that much between the real physical world and the one that is imaginary. There have been a number of headline-grabbing polls done over the years which have shown that around 22% of the population thought that Sherlock Holmes was a real person and more alarmingly, that 65% of teenagers thought that Winston Churchill was a fictional character (Brown, 2020). While the latter example might have more to do with the state of the education system, these polls do seem to illustrate the fact that the brain does not distinguish between fact and fiction. The truth of the matter is that our brains don't seem to care that some people we bond with are not real. Many famous people have a public persona which is vastly different from who they are in real life and we don't seem to care about that either. This is great news for writers, because it means that our reader is quite prepared to bond with our fictitious character as if it were a real person even when they know they are not real.

The challenge for neuroscience is to explain what phenomenology calls 'the paradox of the alter ego'. The paradox is that we experience reality as intersubjective – in other words, reality exists for everyone, but each of us has their own unique experience of it. It is within this interplay between the intersubjective communal reality and the solipsistic uniqueness of the individual where the paradox lies (Gallagher, 2006). We all talk about the sky and of ice cream, but I do not know whether my experience of the colour blue or my understanding of the flavour vanilla is the same as yours. Taken to the extreme, one might contemplate the

damage the algorithms that operate within social media has done to society as a whole. Those algorithms that are responsible for capitalising on this paradox and on people's confirmation bias by creating a bespoke news feed for every user has done untold damage to modern democracies with phenomena such as fake news and Internet memes.

Reading is particularly paradoxical. It is primarily a silent, solitary experience with no face-to-face human interaction. At the same time, it also allows us to know and feel the presence of others on a deep level. Reading uniquely allows us to bridge this gap between us and others as it allows the individual to see and experience the world through the senses of another. In fact, reading is one of the very few ways we are able to truly traverse our own solipsistic boundaries in order to slip into the skin of a character and experience the world as they do. We get to feel what the characters are feeling and we "hear" their thoughts in the real time of the narrative in a way which is not possible in real life.

Jean-Paul Sartre observes in relation to Dostoevsky's protagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, "The literary object has no other substance than the reader's subjectivity: Raskolnikov's waiting is my waiting which I lend to him... His hatred of the police magistrate who questions him is my hatred which has been solicited and wheedled out of me by signs" (Sartre, 1988). In reading, we find this marvellous paradoxical duplication of consciousness. In thinking the thoughts of others, the reader's consciousness temporarily recedes into the background. As Iser observes, it is a duplication of "selves" which involves an interplay between the "alien me" whose thoughts I re-create and inhabit and the "real, virtual me" whose horizons are temporarily changed by the experience (Iser, 1974). This mirroring mechanism of "self" and "not-self" and the mechanism of the hermeneutic circle (extending what we know to make sense of unfamiliar phenomena) results in an immersive experience which takes us to the point where the self is almost forgotten. We become the fictional character when we read. For example, when we read *Jane Eyre* we simultaneously marry and don't marry Mr Rochester in an existential oscillation between the self and the not-self.

This phenomenon is also particularly powerful when we encounter something of which we have previous knowledge and experience. A reader who did ballet in school will have an intuitive understanding of the pain and physical sacrifice needed in order to dance *en pointe* when reading a story about ballerinas. In fact, neuroscientist Iacoboni did an fMRI experiment measuring the brain activity of two groups of test subjects watching videos of

dancers. One group consisted of Brazilian capoeira dancers (Brazilian martial arts dancing) and the other group were classical ballet dancers. Iacoboni found that the ballet dancers had higher mirror neuron activity than the capoeira dancers when watching videos of classical ballet. The experiment was also gender specific. Female dancers responded more to watching other women dance *en pointe* than when they watched the male dancers performing lifts (Iacoboni, 2008). This research has led to the identification of what are called canonical neurons. Very shortly, these are neurons which our brains allocate to tasks or knowledge we acquire. They are also associative because they fire not only in response to the sight of a person or an object, but also in response to what the object represents in relation to past actions as well as ready possibilities for future actions. This brain activity forms the basis for what psychologists call affordance: merely looking at an object primes the human brain to perform the action the object affords (Anderson et al., 2002)

In order to bridging the distinction between “self” and “other” the writer must create a strong CEQ is creating a character which is nuanced and complex with many things they could potentially have in common with the reader. The more commonality we can create between the reader and the character, the stronger the bond between reader and character will be. One should however bear in mind that mirroring is highly subjective. The depth and intensity of the character bonding experience will depend greatly on the reader’s own knowledge, experiences and proclivities, but there are a number of universal commonalities which we all understand. For example, the majority of us will at some point in our lives have knowledge and experience of being employed, so when one reads about a character’s daily grind, we find commonality with the character because we know what working hard feels like. Similarly, very few of us exist in complete isolation or have no family at all and so the experience of family relationships and the drama they sometimes bring is universal. So too are the concepts of loving someone and being loved. These universal commonalities may be the reason why so many best-selling novels are about these commonalities such work and family, close relationships (Jockers and Archer, 2017). It seems that when it comes to creating a high Character Empathy Quotient, the old adage of “write what you know” might also be slightly misplaced. I think it should rather be “write what your readers will know”.

Once the bond is created the reader has to care about the character in order to maintain that bond. This means that characters have to be as realistic as we can make them – complete with flaws and imperfections. In order to achieve sufficient points of commonality, the character

must however be a vessel the reader wishes to inhabit. We do this by providing backstory to the reader. By understanding why a character is the way they are, we can imagine ourselves in that position and in response, we feel empathy. If we don't understand the character, or if the character does things we cannot empathise with, then we tend to cast moral judgement upon them. That act of casting judgement immediately severs the bond between self and not-self. This process is intimate and subjective. When we bond with the character, we will feel loyalty and affinity for them because an attack on the character is an attack on us personally. If we judge a character, then we will very quickly find ourselves disliking or even hating them. This dislike is often based on our own bias. With no bond, we very quickly grow bored and irritated and we will disengage with the story. Characters such as Sherlock Holmes or have such high CEQs that people believe that they are actual living characters.

Character authenticity has to be both factual and value based. As we have seen, one of the main reasons we read is to see through the eyes of the someone else. We want to feel what it's like to be a 17<sup>th</sup> Century pirate or an astronaut stranded on Mars. We want to travel forward and backwards in time in order to experience different worlds, but we want this experience to be authentic. It is therefore essential to make sure the factual details are correct and that character value systems are relatable. In modern fiction this has never been more important because readers have the same access to online information the author has. If you get something wrong, they will certainly let you know.

As we have seen with theme and topic, it is also important to ensure that that internally, the character reflects a set of values which is authentic to the writer. There is this interplay between true emotion felt in response to the story and the character's emotions as we experience them in the text. Iser calls it identification and it is a stratagem by which the author triggers attitudes and feelings within the reader (Iser, 1974). Emotional responses are tempered against the values and mores of the time in which they exist. We see the world not as it is, but how we believe it to be and so characters have to reflect those nuances. A character which is too perfect or true to a specific value system won't have a high Empathy Quotient. Nobody is perfect and so characters need to have flaws in order to be authentic. That authenticity is created by giving the reader insight into the character. On the other hand, a character can't be all bad either. A character whose values and mores are so abhorrent to our own internal system of reference, we will step away in fear and disgust. We won't want to know about them.

A good technique for creating a nuanced character with a high Empathy Quotient is suggested by Lisa Cron. She says that one of the fundamentals of creating a high CEQ is to ensure that a character must start out at the beginning of a story with a fundamental but understandable misbelief. This misbelief must be perpetuated and challenged throughout the narrative by the mechanism of the plot. All the decisions the character makes must be tempered by that misbelief in a consistent manner. The tension in the story must continue to build up to the point where the character's misbelief is fundamentally challenged by the events in the climax of the plot arc. In response, the character must then have that all important "A-ha! moment" where the misbelief is shattered. The character must realise that what they believed before was wrong. The point of the climax point in the plot arc of the narrative is therefore not an external event, but the internal changing of the character's world view. The misbelief is broken down and the character's belief system is changed. The denouement of the novel is the character's acceptance of this new state of mind and how they move forward based on this new belief (Creative Live, 2018).

An excellent example of this is the very successful novel, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman (2017). As a character, Eleanor Oliphant does awful things. She's an alcoholic. She is immensely insensitive to others (although not in a malicious way) and she has a dark side to her. She even goes as far as to stalk someone and yet as a reader, one finds so much empathy for her because her thought process and decisions are placed fully into context for the readers, we can understand her decisions fully. Her aching loneliness resonates so deeply that we don't judge her for her shortcomings because we understand. In fact, we would probably do the same things if we were in her situation. It is also significant to note that the theme of the novel is loneliness with topics such as childhood trauma, adults who have aged out of the social care system in Scotland and alcohol abuse. These are perfectly aligned with the protagonist's misbelief and the way that the plot is structured. It is therefore not surprising that the novel was an international bestseller.

This brings us to the use of Point of View. Point of View is the vehicle through which the readers experienced the not-self *vis-a-vis* the character. The intimacy of first person or the third-person limited point of view are in my view the most effective for creating a strong CEQ. With the use of "I", the writer invites the reader to make that connection between self

and not self. This may be why these two points of view are so popular in modern fiction and why so many best-selling novels are written from these two points of view.

Unreliable narrators deserve a mention. The unreliable narrator creates a situation where the self should realise that something is not quite right with the not-self character. On the solipsistic level, the reader may realise that the narrator is perhaps trying to pull the wool over their eyes, but because the reader has insight into the thought processes of the unreliable narrator, the interplay between self and not-self heightens and allows for scrutiny and self-reflection. The same goes for a villainous protagonist. If we take the example of the novel *Perfume* (Süskind, 1986)<sup>7</sup> We realise very quickly that the protagonist (and narrator) is a bad person who sees the world in a warped or differently way. We realise that he is not normal or like other people. We realise he is doing very bad things, but because we are given enough specificity in the writing, we are able to understand his thought processes. Once we understand where the character is coming from, we are able to make that connection. As humans we love the temptation to see how it feels to be truly bad without actually doing any actual harm. We love to explore the darker reaches of humanity through the medium of storytelling and from the safety of our own controlled space where there can be no adverse consequences.

Worth also noting is the second person point of view and the way it creates a bond between reader and character. It is seldom seen in fiction because sustaining the second person narrator for extended periods of time can be exhausting for both the reader and the author. I think this is because the almost accusatorial use of “you” is almost too much for most readers. The connection between self and not-self is almost too intense. A good example of second person point of view is award-winning author N.K. Jemisen’s debut novel, *The Fifth Season* (2015). It is one of very few novels I have encountered that manages to sustain the second-person point of view throughout the novel. In fact, N.K. Jemisen manages to maintain the second-person point of view for another two books to make up the trilogy. It is worth noting however, that even in these books, there are breaks where the point of view shifts to the third to give readers a bit of respite.

Without characters with high CEQs for the reader to care about, a story will not succeed, no matter how carefully the novel is plotted or how many clever literary devices are used. The reader will simply not care enough to keep engaging.



Good story trumps good writing almost every time (Creative Live, 2018). In fact, as long as there is a character with a high empathy quotient, readers seem to be prepared to forgive a rather significant level of transgressions of the writing craft. Book sales of publishing phenomena such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The DaVinci Code* - both novels have generally been deemed as examples of lower quality writing - seem to bear this out. Anyone who has actually read *Fifty Shades of Grey* will tell you that the protagonist says, “Oh My!” and refers to her “inner goddess” with irritating frequency. For the sake of brevity, I enclose a link in the bibliography of fifty more examples of bad writing from the book (Humphrey, 2017) to illustrate my point. This means that the quality of writing in the literary sense is not necessarily a bar to commercial success. Instead, the visceral response that readers experience when they engage in a good story cannot be overestimated. People read *Fifty Shades of Grey* because it felt good to do so. While the erotic aspects of the novel certainly raised a few eyebrows, we have seen from Jockers and Archer’s research (2017) that it was the pair bonding between the protagonist and the love interest that was determinative. The odds on the will-they-won’t-they interplay as the relationship developed and the vicarious experience of being swept off your feet by a billionaire into a life of extreme luxury and privilege was enough to hook readers in their millions.

I think that Dean Movshovitz, writer at film production house giant Pixar, summarises this concept as follows: ‘Strong, unique characters are the secret to a movie’s success. No matter what your story is, the events that construct it are happening to someone and, more importantly, the viewer must care about what is happening to and around them (Movshovitz, 2016).

In *A Clockwork Heart* my protagonist has a few issues when it comes to Emotional Quotient. Some readers gave me feedback and told me that they found her. Readers felt that they became irritated with her because she behaved like a brat and made very stupid decisions. Editorial feedback was also that I had made Elle too emotionally fragile and I did some character development in earlier drafts. At the time of writing, I erroneously thought that having my protagonist behave in an unpredictable or unusual way would make her different and “cool”. In retrospect, I now see that I was wrong. Although Eleanor Chance is feisty and strong and has many attractive qualities, I see now that unpredictable or inauthentic behaviour actually has the exact opposite effect to what I was trying to achieve. I think I now understand the idea of empathy quotient better and I have sought to change some of the

responses and reactions of my protagonist, Eleanor Chance, in the rewrite. In particular, I rewrote the scene where Elle and Marsh have their big fight. I did this by creating a more solid basis for Eleanor's fears and insecurities. This in turn gave the scene and the characters more depth and authenticity.

I think that the phenomenon of becoming a character can be quite powerfully observed at science fiction conventions. People will cosplay by dressing up like their favourite character. They will spend considerable amounts of time and money on making sure that their costume is just right. Often, they will be that character for as long as they are in costume. For a writer, there can be no bigger compliment than having a fan dress up as one's character.

### **The Role of Memory and How a Neuroplastic Cognitive System Processes Linear Reading: Good Openings and the Importance of Back Story.**

Without our memory we would not be able to read or understand stories. For writers it is important to be mindful of this fact because this aspect of the reading experience can also be utilised to create stronger reader engagement. The concept of time and how we perceive it has been the subject of much and long-standing debate for scientists and philosophers alike. When it comes to reading, Armstrong puts it as follows:

“The coherence of lived time as an integrated structure of differences (punctual phases) is a fundamental, self-evidence aspect of experience, it is also a paradox that begs phenomenological and neuroscientific explanation. This paradox is necessary in order to understand the concepts of reading and interpretation which both happen in time. As readers we experience text in time as a live event because meaning itself has a temporal element. We need this in order to attribute meaning to what we read. Reading, as in life, builds consistency and the to-and-fro movements of the hermeneutic circle – or better called – spiral is manifest the paradoxes of lived time.”  
(Armstrong, 2014).

The way the brain processes and perceives time can best be explained with the frequently cited case of a patient known as LM. The unfortunate LM suffered a stroke which left the motion-processing part of her brain damaged. With this injury, she lost the ability to integrate what she saw sequentially. For her, the world was a series of still snapshots, not dissimilar to

what we would experience under a strobe-light in a night club. This meant that she could not pour a cup of coffee because she literally could not see the water fill the cup and she would end up with liquid spilled all over the table. She could not cross the road by herself because vehicles which seemed far away a few seconds before were suddenly upon her. She had difficulty in conducting conversations because she could not read the lips of the people she spoke to. Sadly, the world for poor LM was a bizarre and terrifying place (Armstrong, 2014). Her circumstances do illustrate how this part of the brain works though: we do not experience time as a series of strobe-lit instances. Instead, it is more fluid in a bow-to-stern motion.

Philosopher Edmund Husserl describes this perception of time as moments characterized by retentional and potential horizon. Said differently, the concept of now is bordered on the one side by what has been (as we remember it) and what is to come (the various possibilities as we might imagine them). This retention horizon is not the recall of specific incidents, but rather an apprehension of what has passed. As humans our memories are broken into different categories. We have a working memory that can hold perhaps four to seven items. After that, we have the short-term memory that cascades into the long-term memory. The retentional horizon functions within this working memory – those few seconds where we hold things in the now. Memory is also in a constant state of flux because of the interactions of present and future that changes our perception and what we remember (Husserl, 1966).<sup>8</sup> We also project our expectations about how things in the present will complete themselves or play out in the protentional horizon of the “not yet” (Varela, 1999). These retentional and potential horizons enable us to do a number of things like listen to music as we need this mechanism in order to follow a melody. It also helps us do complex things like dance or drive a car. In the same way, when it comes to reading the reader follows the story by placing what is being read on a word-by word, line by line, paragraph-by-paragraph and chapter-by-chapter context in a temporal act of pattern formation. As Kierkegaard put it, “We live forward, but we understand backward...” (James, 2015).

What is interesting is that the brain likes to play within the boundaries of these temporal horizons because this is the place where we speculate. I have discussed in the preceding sections, speculation and the odds of something are all prime fodder for the brain’s striatum. It is this play within the temporal horizons which allows us to wonder what happens next. As writers this is important because we want our readers to speculate and wonder about what is going to happen next. In fact, we want them to do this until the very end of the story.

Creating this feeling of suspense is absolutely crucial for reader engagement and in order for this strategy to succeed, the process needs to start at the very beginning.

Almost every book on the craft of writing and on how to write novels has a section covering the fact that the first sentence of a novel should be memorable and also that starting a story with an interesting hook is crucial. These two principals have also been covered in every creative writing course I have done over the years, including the coursework in my Masters' degree. In fact, I have never encountered any credible writing advice which has not taught the importance of a strong opening. Based on what we know about neuroscience, I would suggest that when it goes further than just starting a novel with an interesting or intriguing hook. While reading might be a linear task, storytelling and writing are most definitely not. We have observed that the brain jumps forwards and backwards, referencing information constantly on many levels in order to make sense of what we are reading. The brain like to do this, so when we write a powerful hook, we immediately invite the brain to play and the reader is then engaged from the very first sentence.

Based on their bestseller research, Jockers recommends that the opening sentence should be no longer than twenty words. It seems to me that this approach makes sense on a neuroscientific level because a well-constructed opening sentence will trigger the brain's need to complete things or attempt to start closing the hermeneutic circle. The temporal cycle will be triggered and the brain will start engaging in play as the neurons fire, the reader becomes aroused as the pleasure circuits are engaged. A strong opening ensures that the reader is instantly curious, aroused and engaged and that is exactly what we as writers want.

In *A Clockwork Heart*, I started my story as follows:

Not all fairy tales end with Happily Ever After. Some begin that way.

I am quite proud of this first line. I think it succeeds in encompassing the whole narrative in a short, punchy sentence which catches the reader's attention. Book One in this trilogy ended with a romantic "happily ever after" as Elle and March confirm their love for one another and get married. With the opening sentence in *A Clockwork Heart*, I sought to show the reader that things were about to change and not for the better. I also liked the idea of subverting the fairy tale ending by turning the traditional romance trope its head. As Steampunk is by its

very nature subversive, I thought it was quite fitting. In this respect, I believe I succeeded in creating a powerful opening even though it was only once I had completed this research that I understood why the opening was so effective.

With a powerful opening sentence, we are immediately placed in the middle of the conflict and the brain is already asking, Who? Why? Where? What happens next? This brings us to the next point: Backstory. In her lectures on writing, Lisa Cron supports the well-established writing principle that one should start a story *in media res*. The story needs to start in the middle of something because this allows the reader to immediately ask questions and start the anticipatory part of the temporal cycle. Being in *media res* on its own is not enough though, we need context in order to start the process of closing hermeneutic circles and in order to do this, we need background information or back story (Creative Live, 2018).

Alan Burdick in his book *Why Time Flies* states that Neuroscientists interpret the brain as a time machine, and its core mechanism is to collect past experiences in order to predict the future (Burdick, 2017). In order to empathise with and understand the character and in order to start the temporal cycling within the brain, we need the background to the story. This is because we need specificity and context in order to understand what's going on. Through our protention and retention cycles, the brain avidly follows patterns in a manner that brings about cause and effect. We do this by postulating, *If this... then that...* We absolutely need knowledge of the past in order to make sense of the present and we need an understanding of the present in order to anticipate the future. Without it, we are unable to engage the forward-thinking part of the cognitive unconscious cycle of temporality. Without sufficient backstory, all the big dramatic things that are happening in front of us will have little or no meaning because we can't place them into context. We will also struggle to understand the character's decisions and actions because we won't know them well enough as a person. The reader will start asking, *'Why does this matter?'* or even worse *'Who cares?'* Without sufficient background information the story will be shallow and meaningless.

A good example of the power of context is Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. The author was asked to analyse her bestselling novel *Gone Girl* in order to establish how much of the book was back story. It turns out that just over 60% of the novel was backstory (Creative Live, 2018). The majority of the novel also provides rich detail in relation to why the characters are behaving the manner that they are by shifting the context through the use of point of view.

This creates the ideal condition for the brain to play and the reader to become aroused. The provision of significant back story also serves to create a high Emotional Quotient within the characters. It's hardly surprising then that the book has been so successful.

## **Conclusion**

In my opinion, the writing techniques I have outlined in this section all work to provoke neurological responses within readers' brains. By ensuring that novels are pitched at the correct level of readability, ensuring that there is the right levels of harmony and dissonance throughout the structure and ensuring that the topics and themes are effectively integrated we create a powerful structure for the story to play out in. We allow the brain to play by using specificity to allow the reader to complete Hermeneutic circles. We can create suspense by making sure that the odds balance on a knife-edge, but ultimately, I am of the view that the most important technique for creating maximum reader-arousal is the creation of characters with a high Emotional Quotient. This is because *Story is Character*, and the reader only really slips into Gardiner's dream state once they slip into the skin of the character in order to become part of the story. I believe I have demonstrated that the use of these techniques is not only effective in creating powerful and compelling prose but I have also shown that by studying the neuroscience that underlies these techniques allows the writer to gain deeper insight into why these techniques work. In this respect, I believe that I have reached the outcomes I have set for myself with this research.

I believe I have shown that stories are not just stories. By becoming the character and by living the novel, every book we read or write changes us and in turn, we learn and grow. This process of learning is as old as our species and it is how we ultimately change the world (Archer, 2014).

### **PART 3: Reflective Writing - The Writing and Publication of *A Clockwork Heart* and the Evolution of my own Writing**

In this section I will reflect further on my research and my writing process as part of my journey as a writer through the course of this research.

#### **The Dark Female Protagonist**

As my (now abandoned) investigations into the Dark Female Protagonist (DFP) formed part of this research, I will briefly reflect on this aspect. I do so because I think it is appropriate to reflect on this research. There are also links between neuroscience and the DFP. Jockers and Archer (2017) found links between the DFP and the best-seller phenomenon. In the last 20 years the literary world has observed the rise and sustained popularity of the DFP or the ‘Girl Phenomenon’. In my reading, I have observed the dark female protagonist appear and evolve over the last hundred and fifty years. In the nineteenth century, characters such as Catherine Earnshaw and Jane Eyre both emerged to form the bedrock upon which later DFPs would be modelled. In the 1930s we saw the emergence of the *femme fatale* such as Daphne de Maurier’s Rebecca, but the DFP really crashed into the collective consciousness in the late 1990s when Stieg Larsson’s *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* became a record-breaking bestseller. Since then, we’ve seen a steady progression of Dark Female Protagonists appear in best-selling novels, blockbuster films and popular television. Examples of memorable DFPs include *Twilight*’s Bella Swan blazing a trail in Young Adult fiction and her counterpart, Anastasia Steele in *Fifty Shades of Grey* which is an adaptive copy of *Twilight* for a more mature market. It is noted that both these novels are based on *Wuthering Heights* and specifically reference the work internally. Both protagonists are portrayed as aspirational Catherine Earnshaws – volatile, headstrong, but also very fragile. Other examples of the DFP are the sociopathic Amy from Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* and the alcoholic and unhinged Rachel from Paula Hawkins’s *Girl on a Train* which are highly successful Domestic Noir thrillers. The DFP pops up in historical fiction. We find Griet from Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Mary from Philippa Gregory’s *The Other Boleyn Girl*. In science fiction we have Essun, from NK Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* - the first trilogy where all three books won the Hugo, Nebula and Locus awards in three consecutive years. In TV and cinema, we’ve seen a procession of Dark Female Protagonists from the iconic Sara Lund in *The Killing* to the hapless Eve Polastri in the BBC’s recent *Killing Eve* (an adaptation of the *Villanelle* novels written by self-published author Luke Jennings). There is Offred from *The Handmaid Tale*.

Handmaid's Tale and even the mighty *Star Trek* franchise has jumped on the bandwagon with Michael Burnham in the latest series, *Discovery*.

What all these female characters have in common is that they are women who are different. The DFP is not sweet, compliant, or docile. She is displaced from the traditional feminine place in society. She is a misfit. She disrupts the accepted and typical placings within the social system. She is internally complex – often damaged, traumatised and outwardly challenged. These protagonists are always internally conflicted and damaged to some degree. Themes such as abuse and alcoholism are common, but despite their damage these characters are extremely competent. Often, they are trained, clever, and resourceful. They manage to do extraordinary things because they are different. Despite their flaws, they experience the same ordinary things most people experience. This makes them relatable. Modern readers are fascinated by the woman who has turned. The DFP seems to comply with the requirements of her place and role in society, but below the surface this brokenness causes her to be subversive. Gone are the days of the shiny golden heroine. The dark female protagonist likes to defy the norm, but in a more sinister way. She seeks revenge. She takes action to get what she wants. She also does not get her glorious happy ending either. The most a Dark Female Protagonist can hope for is to end up being slightly less broken in the end. This gives the DFP a very high Character Emotional Quotient. This is not surprising because we are hard-wired for gossip and there is no better gossip subject than a woman who misbehaves. It is really easy to slip into the skin of a DFP because we understand how she feels. In a way, I think we recognise ourselves in these women because we feel the same way, but we are not brave enough to be that woman and to break the bonds that hold us without any fear of the consequences. The DFP is a vehicle to be the rebel heroine with no risk or consequences. The DFP provokes very high levels of arousal in readers and as we've seen, high levels of arousal make for successful fiction. This may explain why the Girl-phenomenon has been so spectacularly successful.

I have always found myself drawn to the dark female protagonist and it is therefore not surprising that Eleanor Chance is a DFP. The Steampunk genre is by its very definition subversive and so it is the perfect environment for a dark female protagonist. Unfortunately, when I created Eleanor Chance back in 2009, I did not fully grasp what the parameters of the dark female protagonist were, but I knew I wanted Elle to be different. I wanted her to be and a real woman beauty and flaws included. Elle evolved into a DFP instinctively during



my writing process. Eleanor is not compliant or docile. In fact, she is feisty and actively avoids the constraints and conventions placed on women in Edwardian Society. She wears jodhpurs and is a pilot which defies the traditional feminine role in society as mother and wife. In the Shadow realm, Elle faces the awful future and fate that befell the Oracles before her and she fights against this with everything she has. The fact that she straddles both the Realms of Shadow and Light makes her a misfit. Her unwillingness to do what the patriarchy tells her to do (in this case the Council of Warlocks) causes her to disrupt the accepted and typical placings within the social system.

Elle is internally complex and damaged by the death of her mother and the benign neglect of her father. The draw of the Shadow Realm challenges her to navigate these hurdles in order to find happiness and live a normal life. Elle faces tremendous internal conflict. Her relationship with her mother and the Oracles is dysfunctional. She struggles to communicate her needs to her husband and she is faced with impossible choices. In fact, *A Clockwork Heart* starts where Elle is forced to choose between doing the career she loves and the love of her life. Elle is also brave. She has a strong moral compass and she tries to do the right thing.

I believe that my instincts were right when I created Elle, but I think that I was clumsy in the way I handled some of the aspects of this character. The result was that readers did not bond as securely with Elle as I had hoped. Instead, they ended up feeling exasperated with some of the terrible decisions Elle made. This is because my character's behaviour was not properly contextualised and I did not give the readers enough insight into the reasons behind the character's decisions and behaviour. As a result, readers struggled to empathise with Elle. I now understand how to create characters with a high empathy quotient, and in order to apply these principles, I have gone back into the manuscript and I have made some changes to Eleanor in the rewrite to this submission. I have made her more sensible, less bratty and more emotionally resilient. I also added more context so readers can understand her decisions better. She remains flawed and imperfect, but I think she is more relatable now. It is also worth noting that I wrote the third book in the series, *Sky Pirates* in 2014 which allowed me to do further character development. There are, however, only so many changes one can make before the integrity of the work as a whole becomes compromised and so for this work, I have taken things as far as I can.

### Storytelling in Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF) As Genre:

Jockers and Archer (2017) found in their analysis that Science Fiction and specifically Fantasy novels are less likely to be best-sellers than other genres such as crime fiction, general fiction or biographies. Their analysis is based on sales on the New York Times best-seller list and is focussed on the US book market, so the data needs to be considered within that context. It is however significant to note that the rest of the publishing world tends to follow the trends set with the New York Times bestseller lists, so the findings are significant for that reason. There are of course examples of SFF which contradicts this trend. George RR Martin's *Game of Thrones* fantasy series has been stratospherically successful, but it should be noted that the series was written in the 1990s and only gained traction on the best-seller lists once the books were made into a TV series. Also, notably, Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, which while highly successful to the point of being a seminal work of Science Fiction since it was first published in the 1980s also saw a revival when the book was remade into a television series. It is notable that both these works focus on human closeness, human relationships and power (the need for control).

Compared to contemporary general fiction, science fiction affords the writer the opportunity to introduce additional topics by incorporating these into the world building. Often these topics are high-level concepts such as political ideologies and intrigue, an ethical dilemma or relatable debates such as for instance, climate change or environment. This gives SFF an allegorical quality which distinguishes it from other fiction. Within worldbuilding, the writer also has the opportunity to pose the premise for a debate which arises directly from the rules of the world. In fact, ancient rock art and long-surviving stories such as the Epic of Gilgamesh or Beowulf suggests that Fantasy Fiction is the oldest form of storytelling. In fact, the telling of fantastical tales is as old as humanity itself. As we have seen humans we are hard-wired to tell a stories or parables that contain a lesson, often through the use of an imaginary world or imaginary creatures, so these stories do have a way of capturing our attention.

So why do SFF novels fare worse than other fiction on the best-seller lists? For starters, I think there are external factors such as the stigma attached to the genre in that SFF is for children and should not be taken seriously. From a neuroscientific storytelling perspective, I think it may be due to the fact that the fantastical worlds that SFF writers build could be a barrier when it comes to optimal reader engagement. This is because the reader has to do that

extra bit of work in order to understand where they are and what the rules are that govern the environment in which the story plays out first, before reader engagement commences. This an extra step of closing of the Hermeneutic circle in relation to the settling or world delays Gardiner's dream state. Many readers don't like this and so they prefer "more realistic" stories (Jocker & Archer, 2017).

What stories in novels such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have in common is that they are about people, their lives, their work, and their interpersonal relationships. These people may live in a fictional world that operates on different rules, but because the focus of these books are on the people, the reader will to focus on what arouses them. We all love a bit of gossip and intrigue, regardless of whether it happens in Westminster or Westeros. Literary snobbery and pre-conceived ideas on good taste aside, I believe that there is no reason why a SFF novel, with characters with a high Emotional Quotient, written with a focus on human closeness and which allows the reader to close that hermeneutic circle and create that connection the mirror-neuronal network cannot be every bit as successful as any novel in other genres.

### **A Reflection on The Evolution of My Writing Process:**

When I started writing *A Clockwork Heart*, I did not set out to write a commercial bestseller. In fact, as novels often do, *The Chronicles of Shadow and Light* came about quite randomly. In my case, as a result of a writing exercise in a workshop and the fact that at the time I had been looking for Steampunk written for women by women. In 2009 when I conceived the series, the Steampunk genre was dominated by mostly male writers writing for men. Because I could not find very much that was good to read, I decided to write some Steampunk of my own. I had a story in my head and I wanted to tell it.

I was very fortunate in that publishers were also looking for steampunk novels, written for women by women at the time and so Penguin Random House offered to publish my books. Writing a novel under contract with tight publication deadlines most certainly had a profound impact on my writing process. Suddenly, I found that I had graduated from being an unpublished writer, writing a novel for myself without any pressure, to writing commercially

and worrying about reviews and readers. Writing to a deadline is a very different experience to writing as an unpublished author.

As my historical research into this genre progressed, I found that there were problems with Steampunk as a genre. Steampunk is contentious because of its link to Colonialism and the loaded topics of racism, misogyny and classism. Most steampunk authors tend to turn a blind eye to the squalor and depravation most of the poor suffered during this time. The same goes for the dark side of British Colonialism and its abhorrent mores in terms of racism, classism and misogyny. This meant that one of the challenges I had to face during the writing of the novel was to find the balance between historical accuracy, realism and what people want to read against the backdrop of a controversial period in history.

The subject of World Building is a discrete and substantial subject of its own. As a more detailed analysis of this subject falls outside the remit of this research, I will merely reflect on World Building as one aspect of the evolution of my own writing progress as I experienced it. Personally, when it comes to creating context I find worldbuilding the easiest part of writing Science Fiction and Fantasy. For me, the world in which my characters exist springs forth instinctively. I do not spend vast amounts of time designing fictional worlds in the Tolkien tradition as I don't think this is necessary. I believe that by keeping things simple, the worlds I write about become quirky and charming. As authors, we have the ability to select which elements of reality we'd like to include. As long as the world makes logical sense and as long as it's internally and externally consistent, the writer has the freedom to create whatever they wish. For *The Chronicles of Shadow and Light*, I decided to set the series in a specific historical period and in a world where everything that appears within Victorian Gothic fiction is true. For this I did a lot of historical research. I also decided to delineate the world between the realm of Light which represents enlightenment, technology, industry and progress and the realm of Shadow which represents magic, the ancient world and the organic. I liked the irony that the world of Shadow seemed to be more enlightened than the world of Light.

I also did not want Elle to be omnipotently powerful because I think it makes for a more interesting story when her abilities are limited. In a time when women were starting to exert their power and independence in a world where they were still controlled by men, it made sense to have Elle controlled by men who did not fully understand what she was about. This

is why I created the Council of Warlocks. The decision to do this also created fertile ground for conflict.

I also did not want the middle book in a trilogy to have a happily ever after ending like the first book. For me, the idea of a dark protagonist was perfect given that the story was set right in the era of the fight for women's' Suffrage and the beginnings of modern feminism. I wanted to offset male-female conflict in the first book slightly and so I created a female antagonist as a counterbalance to Elle. What was interesting was the fact that both my protagonist and my antagonist faced the same toxic masculinity, but it did not unite them. Instead, their attempts to internalise the misogyny and to carry water for the patriarchal society they live in, made them mortal enemies.

I do believe that I achieved what I set out to do with *A Clockwork Heart*. Sales for the book were acceptable and the novel has the highest rated reviews of the three novels in the series. It also spent two weeks on the Amazon bestseller list for its genre. In that sense, at least for me, the book was a success.

As I have stated before, my research for this PhD continued for years after *A Clockwork Heart* was written and published and as my research into the craft of writing progressed, my focus shifted from an emphasis on formal writing techniques to storytelling. I realised that my reliance on executing writing techniques perfectly was wrong and that there were elements of *A Clockwork Heart* that I was not entirely happy with. I also think I could have delivered a more polished novel if I had been given more time by my publishers. This issue has bothered me for years, but once the book is out on the shelves, there isn't much that can be done about the matter. As I have stated before, I have given the novel another editorial polish using the knowledge I have gained from this research. With this editorial pass, I have sought to incorporate some of the techniques I have discussed in this critical thesis. Changes included:

- Tidying up dialogue in order to create more pace and impact;
- Editing passages of prose in order to include more specificity, so the writing is sharper and will allow for readers to connect with the writing better;
- I have re-wrote the scene with the fight between Marsh and Elle at the start of the novel in order to raise Elle's Emotional Quotient.

- I also re-wrote some of the passages in which the antagonist, Clothilde. In particular, her inner monologues. I tried to make this character more rounded and more by portraying her motivations better.
- I re-wrote the scene where Elle spots Clothilde at the Opera for the first time. I felt that the writing in this area needed some tidying up.
- I also did an edit of the dream scene where Elle meets Jack on the plain of crows. I added more specificity in order to create more impact.

It must be remembered that this was an editorial pass and not a full re-write as I there was only so much I could do without changing the integrity of the original work. I also had continuity to consider and too many changes would cause the story to be out of kilter with the rest of the series.

During my research, I actually contacted Professor Matthew Jockers at Stanford University and we had a useful and interesting discussion about our respective areas of research. He invited me to submit my manuscript which he ran through his model which I did. I was interested to see what the algorithm would say. I attach the full report marked as Appendix A.

As can be seen from the attached report, the Jockers and Archer algorithm found that because this work is Science Fiction, that it was unlikely to be a best-seller, so I failed at the first hurdle. On further examination however, the analysis yielded some surprising results. The report found that the plotline of *A Clockwork Heart* had the curves similar to novel such as *Gone Girl* and *Girl on a Trail* which feature Dark Female Protagonists, albeit on at a much lower frequency.

The report states that *A Clockwork Heart* had a total of 11 themes. They were: Countryside, Darkness, Psychic, Aristocracy, Heartache, Expressions, Senses, Body, Hallways and Household Furnishings. Compared to best-sellers, who have between four and six themes, this is too many. The analysis also found that the themes tended to be more negative than positive, which is also an indicator that the book would not be a best-seller. I was aware that the book was dark, and this had been an artistic choice, but I did not realise how dark the story really was.

The report also found that I tended to use weaker words, more often found in non-bestsellers as opposed to strong words. I am not sure if this is because the book is not written in American English, but it is correct that I tend to over-use leech adverbs such as “very” and “really” which is not good writing.

The word analysis rated the book by awarding it stars in each category. Five stars is a potential best-seller. *A Clockwork Heart* scored as follows:

Character Agency ☆ ☆

Overall Mood ☆ ☆

Plot Shape ☆ ☆ ☆

Style ☆ ☆

Theme ☆

Topical Focus ☆ ☆

My plot, it seems, was the strongest part of the book which is surprising because I have always struggled with plot. Themes was the weakest, which I also did not expect because I have always believed that my writing was highly thematic and rich. It seems that it is a little too rich to be a bestseller though and when I could learn from this is to focus themes a little more.

Overall, I believe that my writing has become more mature and rounded because of this research. I have grown from Novice to Journeyman in the process. In researching the neuroscience, I have gained a deeper understanding and mastery of my craft as a writer.

Going forward, I fully intend to use what I have learned here in my next work of fiction. As Neil Gaiman famously said, “...a novel can best be defined as a long piece of prose with something wrong with it”. I am fairly sure that I had written one of those.

### **A Commercial Writer within the Traditional Publishing Model**

It is becoming harder and harder to be a full-time author. According to the Society of Authors’ recent surveys, the average income of an author in the UK is less than £11,000 per

year and has been so for at least a decade. For many, these earnings are often far lower (Society of Authors, 2019). The bleak reality is that there is more pressure than ever on authors than ever to achieve a measure of commercial success simply to be in a position to practice their craft and everyone is looking for something to give them the edge.

There is hope though. Technology has changed the way we consume stories. We are now able to enjoy stories across multiple media platforms such as eBooks, audiobooks and even book apps on our phones. The human appetite for stories is as voracious as it has ever been. New roles are emerging for storytellers and the story-telling model is changing with our changing values. In a climate which is somewhat Darwinist, the challenge for authors is to adapt to these changes or disappear.

I still do not believe that there will ever be a magic formula which one can follow in order to write a novel which will be guaranteed to achieve commercial success. I think there are too many variables to make this possible but understanding why these techniques work has had a transformative effect on my writing. I feel as if I have a deeper insight into the workings of fiction and because I understand the processes and why they work, I find that I am more confident as a writer. I feel that I am able to write better and this can only be a good thing.

### **The Implications for Creative Writing Pedagogy.**

Just as the publishing industry is changing, so too is there a corresponding imperative to change amongst those who mentor and teach creative writing. Over the last few years, I have had the opportunity to teach various creative writing modules for students. This has given me insight into the learning and teaching of creative writing. Sadly, it is so difficult to earn a living out of one's writing, many talented writers give up on writing for financial reasons. Being a writer is increasingly becoming the privilege of those who are of independent financial means and we are in danger of losing voices and stories of people who are not from that very specific and privileged background.

I think that understanding *why* writing techniques work might help aspiring writers and story tellers gain a deeper understanding of their craft. A deeper understanding of the craft brings



with it, more confidence and mastery over one's stories. Perhaps the time has come to stop relying on luck and instinct and to start being a little more scientific in our approach.

## **PART 4: Outcomes.**

In this thesis, I sought to answer the three following questions:

1. Do common writing techniques work because they provoke profound neurological responses within readers' brains?
2. If this is true, which of these techniques are the most effective?
3. How could authors utilise these writing techniques to make their work more effective?

The answer to the first question is yes. As we have seen, there is a solid neuroscientific explanation for why we love stories. In fact, our brains are hard-wired for story. Stories engage us, they arouse us and they give us pleasure. They are what make us human. Common writing techniques, such as constructing a balanced plot, creating characters with agency, and writing strong openings do work because they are tools of storytelling that provoke a favourable reader response. I believe that I have demonstrated that neuroscientific concepts such as the mirror neuron mechanisms and human arousal can offer a plausible explanation as to why these traditional writing techniques work.

In answer to question two: The most effective writing techniques, are well-constructed Plots and creating compelling Characters and providing good Backstory and context. We have seen that creating strong openings and aspects such as writing effective dialogue, making sure that a story has the right balance in relation to theme and topics, the correct pacing and specificity in one's writing are crucial for reader engagement. These are all traditional writing techniques which are well known to most fiction writers, but when seen in a neuroscientific context, the focus is different. The purpose of this research is to understand *why* these techniques work and I believe I have demonstrated this throughout.

The question as to why these techniques work ties into the third question which is how one may use this knowledge to improve one's writing. I believe that one can use the principles of neuroscience and neurophenomenology in order to gain a deeper understanding of the traditional writing techniques to then augment them.

The principles of Harmony and Dissonance can be applied to the principles of plot construction in order to make sure that the highs and lows of the story are balanced in such a

way that will grip the reader. In the same way one can use the principles of harmony and dissonance to pace the writing and to ensure the correct word choices. Certainly, Jockers and Archer's research (2017) shows just how important harmony and dissonance is when it comes to creating a bestseller.

We've seen that semantics has shown that word associations, topics, and themes form the backbone of a novel and how choosing words and ideas with care could make or break a novel when it comes to reader engagement. I've also demonstrated how the full thematic debate needs to be presented for the reader in order to ensure that the story makes sense and that a satisfying conclusion has been reached. It's not about whether the debate is objectively correct, it is the author's interpretation of the debate which is interesting to the reader.

I have demonstrated how important the hermeneutic circle is for the brain and that we need to give the mind space to play in order for our reader to be fully engaged. The odds in the story should be balanced at 50/50 in order to engage the striatum. All of these factors should ensure that the reader's brain is secreting lots of pleasurable dopamine which renders them fully engaged and aroused.

I have explained how the interaction between Ego and Alter Ego creates a vehicle for the reader to become the character and how much the brain allows us to slip into the skin of- and become the character in a story. I have also set out how important it is to ensure that the reader *wants* to become that character and how we achieve this by creating characters with a high Character Empathy Quotient. I have shown how important it is to provide enough backstory in order to allow the reader to understand the character's decisions and reactions. I have also shown how humans enjoy living vicariously through characters because it allows them to experience the world without consequences. This is why providing the reader with the correct vehicle to do so is essential.

Lastly, I have shown how memory works and why the brain's neuroplastic cognitive systems work in order for us to process the task of linear reading. I have demonstrated that this is the reason why a good strong opening or hook is important and that the forward, backward motion of our memories is the reason why we need foreshadowing and back story in order for us to have an immersive reading experience.

I believe that these augmentations to the traditional writing techniques can only serve to strengthen one's writing.

As a writer, it is therefore possible to create more powerful fiction the targeted use of writing techniques to provoke that brain response.

Personally, this research has completely changed my approach to storytelling and my creative processes. It has allowed me to gain a deeper insight into why these techniques work. As a result, my writing has improved. I have a stronger voice and my focus has changed. I have moved from emulating examples of other writing to creating my own original work.

Every work of fiction gets to the point where no more can be done and think I have done all I can with *A Clockwork Heart*. Sometimes we are bound by our artistic choices, even if they were made in ignorance at the time. While it's not perfect, the manuscript I have submitted for this thesis is as far as I can take things.

I had to take a sabbatical from writing fiction for personal reasons and in order to devote myself to this research. In fact, the course of my PhD was not a smooth one. In fact, I have had to face a number of personal challenges and very difficult circumstances during this time. I believe that my next novel will be very different to anything I have written before. In fact, my entire approach, from initial concept to outlining and writing will be different to the way I approached *A Clockwork Heart*. In future, in order to tell a good story, I will seek to write books that create maximum engagement and maximum emotional and autonomic response in my readers.

Whether this will make me a number one bestselling author remains to be seen. It would certainly be wonderful if I did, but it's better to not take aim at windmills. As Gene Wolfe once told Neil Gaiman, "You never learn how to write a novel. You only learn to write the novel you're on." (Imasuen, 2016)

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Jeffrey Archer spreadsheet guy is a legend within a certain well-known London literary agency. He really did spend thousands of hours cataloguing every single one of Jeffrey Archer's novels in a spreadsheet. Then, based on that data he then attempted to write a novel himself. Sadly, his work was mostly in vain because he did not manage to produce a successful novel as a result.

<sup>2</sup> My collection of works on the craft of writing is extensive and the number of books I have consulted are too many to reference for the purposes of this thesis. I will however refer to the seminal works later as they become relevant.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the term "agency" as it relates to character as I will explain more fully below.

<sup>4</sup> The Hard Problem is the process of how neurobiological systems and neurochemical reactions transmute into human consciousness as I will explain in more detail going forward.

<sup>5</sup> Anecdotally, Nicky Logan in her seminar on the topic I attended in 2014 reports that this actually happened. In her presentation she showed an image of a snarling wolf. A woman with a fear of dogs started screaming and had a panic attack in the auditorium during one of her seminars. I have chosen the image of a spider as I think it creates a stronger amygdala response. Certainly, it does for the writer!

<sup>6</sup> This is based on my own anecdotal research by watching readers in bookshops on weekends.

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# Your Personalized Manuscript Report

Archer Jockers: A Unique Book Consultancy

2019-01-22

## Introduction: Who We Are

Jodie Archer and Matt Jockers founded Archer Jockers in 2017 following fifty years of combined experience in the book world and the success of their book *The Bestseller Code*. Both have PhDs in literature. Jodie has worked as an acquiring editor at Penguin, and as the lead of research for Apple iBooks. She is a novelist herself under different names. Matt is a leading expert in text mining. He brings advanced computational methods to understanding novels. He has been a Research Scientist and software engineer in iBooks at Apple, and he is now a Professor of English, faculty member in the Data Analytics Program, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Washington State University. Archer Jockers works with authors, editors, and publishers to better understand their work and to bring success and reflection on contemporary novels into a crowded market.

## The Bestseller Code



*The Bestseller Code*, which has been translated into eight languages, provoked an international media response, likely because of the interest in how big data can help further evolve traditional industries. The goal of the book is to show readers some of the secret sauce of bestselling novels. It is not a how-to book. Instead, it demonstrates what data and its interpretation can do to show writers their work from a whole new perspective. It introduces a bird's eye view of plot, analysis of thematic makeup and focus, in depth understanding of the markers of style, and much more. The 3000 data points we gather show writers and editors much more about what they know: plot, theme, style, setting, and character. And those same data points help us to predict how well a book fits into the current bestseller marketplace.

## Reviewers have said that our work. . .

- “May change the publishing industry” — *Guardian*
- “Lays bare nothing less than the DNA of bestsellers” — *The New Statesman*

- “Reveals the diverse directions in which popular fiction may be taken” — *The Atlantic*
- “May be required reading for anyone involved in making and selling books” — *Sydney Morning Herald*
- “Is entertaining and educational for anybody interested in the business of books” — *Digital Book World Daily*
- “Is an intriguing read and its analysis of what makes a plot tick and how readers are grabbed is compelling.” — *Literary Review*

## Our clients have said

- “As I’m looking at this report, I’m blown away ... it’s so thorough, and I’m thrilled ... I think fiction authors will be thrilled by the service because it offers some things that a developmental editor wouldn’t be able to see ...” —**Kelton Reid**, author and host of *The Writer Files* podcast.
- “We all think we have a feel for language, character and narrative structure but to see these elements graphically exposed is a revelation. If you are writing for the market, the Archer/Jockers algorithm knows what’s required. It provides the sound foundation on which you can build your castle in the air.” —**Stephen Whitehead**, author of *The Last Bronte*
- “Matt and Jodie provided me with detailed feedback on many aspects of my novel draft, including character, plot, style, and thematic makeup. I learned a great deal from their feedback letter and from the video conference. Now I have the information I need to complete a revision of my novel. I highly recommend Archer Jockers!” —**Christina LaRose**.
- “Archer Jockers provided excellent analysis for my novel currently undergoing editing for publication. I was thrilled to see the work analyzed using a quantitative method benchmarking it against bestsellers. The result was very helpful insight and advice I’m certain will have a dramatic impact on the published novel’s quality and appeal.” —**Craig DiLouie**
- “I just wanted to say thank you for your insightful and inspirational analysis of my story, *Time Fluke*. Thank you also for the excellent marketing advice. You two make the perfect team.” —**Talmage Moorehead**

## About our process with you

We work with single manuscripts at the writing, acquisitions, and editing stages. We also work with books in series, and with publishers who want to reflect on a whole area of their list or their publishing strategy in relation to past success in the market.

If you submit a single manuscript as a writer, we give you the most in depth, data-driven view of your book currently available. Writers tell us this data is invaluable in editing, pitching, adding and deleting scenes, developing characters with more self-awareness, and fixing flat moments of plotting. Editors might choose to give us a manuscript doing the rounds to discuss its likely success. Agents might send us a manuscript to help determine whether they want to take on a new writer. The reports we provide stand alone, but we also offer one to one consultation with Jodie. In these sessions, Jodie takes writers deeper into what all the data points mean for their novels. If an editor is trying to move their writer into a particular area of the market, we provide additional analysis to compare a new manuscript to specific comparative titles that are already in the marketplace.

## The Seven Areas of a Novel

The report about your manuscript that follows is divided into the following overarching sections:

1. Plot & Emotional Development of Story
2. Overarching Theme & Focus of Topical Detail
3. In Depth Character Personality Analysis
4. Likelihood of Character Success with Readers
5. Personal Writing Style compared to Bestselling Style
6. The Settings of Your Novel
7. Star Ratings & Likely Market Success

## Your Book

**Client Name:** Liesel Schwarz

**Title:** A Clockwork Heart

**Genre:** Historical Science Fiction/ Fantasy

**Main Characters:** Eleanor Chance, Hugh Marsh, Viscount Greychester, Adele, Patrice Chevalier

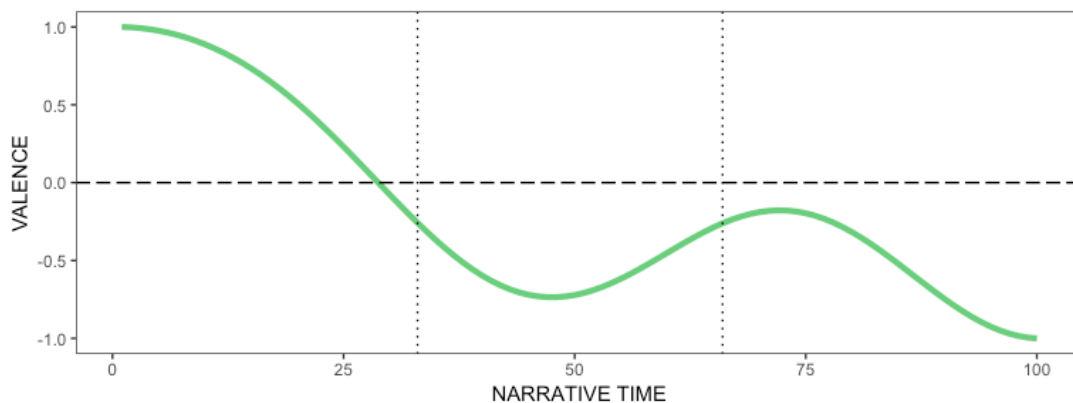
**Synopsis:** Book Blurb from publishers: FOR BETTER OR CURSE. That might as well have been the wedding vow of Elle Chance and her new husband, the ex-Warlock Hugh Marsh in the second book of this edgy new series that transforms elements of urban fantasy, historical adventure, and paranormal romance into storytelling magic.

**Anything else we should know:** This manuscript is part of my PhD thesis which concerns itself with what happens when we read in the brain and character agency. I am interested to see how the results of your model tie in with my research.

## 1. Plot & Story

A bird's eye visual representation of your book's plot shows you where readers will likely find the book "flat," "slow," "page-turning," or even "unputdownable." These graphs are designed to make it easy for an author or editor to see precisely where the strengths or weaknesses of a story are, and where it might be unbalanced. A writer can see the underlying structure of the book, not only from the perspective of key structural moments (half way point, beginning of Act 3, and so on), but also with consideration of the reader's emotional response to the work. Upward slopes mark moments where the reader will be following the plot through a hopeful or increasingly positive path. Downward dips show a turn in events toward the negative. The horizontal axis in the middle of the graph is a reference line that shows emotional neutrality. Events close to this line are about as dramatic or exciting as drinking a glass of water. Our analysis of the bestseller list over thirty years shows that writers do best when they have action both above and below the line, and when the graph looks balanced. These graphs can be useful guides for authors to revise areas of flatness and to accentuate moments of tension and release.

We create a visualization of your plot shape in two ways. First we look at the traditional three act structure that all writing teachers address. In the image below we are seeing the shape of *A Clockwork Heart*.

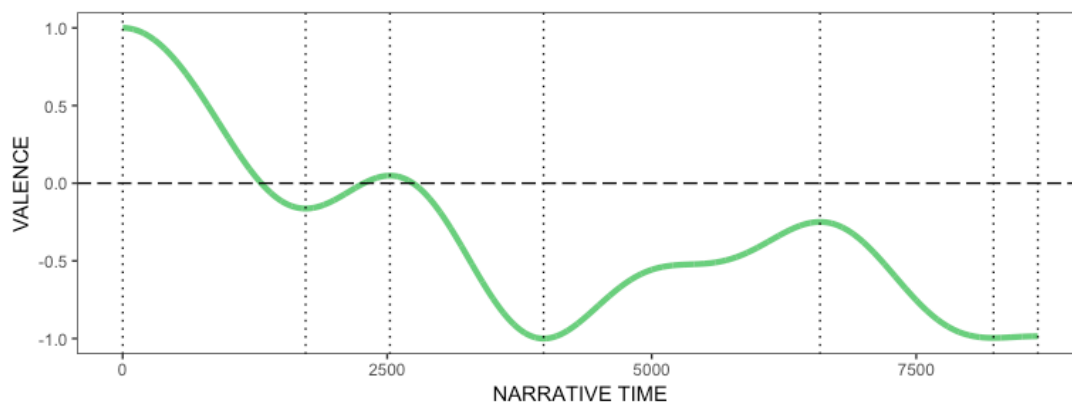


Act One takes us to the first dotted vertical line. Act Two takes us to the second dotted vertical line. Act Three takes us to the novel's close. It's useful to look at these three segments individually and compare them. We like to see a "peak" or "valley" in the line at the 50% mark, to show a well-structured half way point. We also like to see some symmetry or considered relationship between the shapes of Act One and Act Three. These are indicators of a satisfying story. Genre novels should explore the emotional terrain above and below the neutral line up to positive 1 and down to negative 1. These are page-turner books that sell. Literary novels might not have the same highs and lows of emotion, but they should avoid lack of symmetry and avoid long flat areas of the green plot line: readers complain that such novels lack plot movement.

## The rhythm of your book.

Novels have a natural rhythm: chapter breaks, paragraph breaks and changes in narrative focus create them. Rhythm often shows us where a reader will put a book down and start a different activity, be it sleep or making a cup of tea. The question is whether or not the reader will pick it up again and read on. The next graph is all about helping a writer get the pages turning, and keep them turning at an even pace. If a writer achieves the best of the three act graph, and the best of the rhythm graph, he or she has the perfect skeleton of a novel. These books are rare and always do well, typically instantly and enduringly. The perfect skeleton is indicative, of course, of good character development and balanced theme: no area of a novel is independent of the other interwoven parts.

Below is a more detailed picture of the plot in *A Clockwork Heart*. The vertical dotted black lines show your novel's beat. Obviously, the more evenly spaced they are from 0 to 100 percent of narrative time (or page count), the more balanced and satisfying the story and reading experience. The highs and lows of the green line express the emotional range of your work. If most of the line is above the neutral horizontal axis (at 0), you have written a mostly positive book, even if there are highs and lows. A mostly negative book, with the plot almost always under the horizontal line, tends not to do well in today's market. We encourage writers to think about their graph in relation to their own genre.

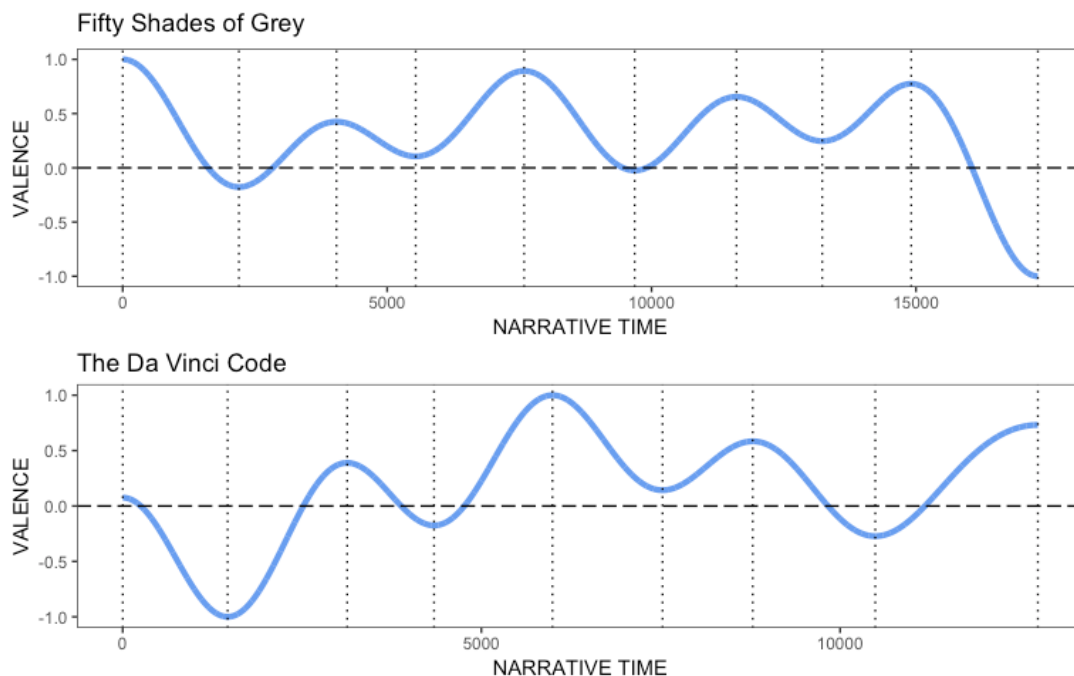


## Comparison to international smash hits in fiction

Here are two recent plots that sold into the hundreds of millions of copies. Note their similarity despite coming from different genres with very different themes. The most notable difference is the negative ending for *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Since this book is the first in a series of romance novels, the inversion of the typical happy ending of course compels the reader to buy book two as soon as possible. A dark ending like this one is a good device to “hook” a reader into a series.

Note that both of these famous novels have a regular beat: a sharp change in emotional direction happens at regular intervals, and at similar intervals when we compare the two books. Each act has three emotional turns, sharp enough to be noted by the reader. These turns create page turners. While most people don't compare these two books, our data has shown that their similarities help to explain their success. Few adult novels of the past

twenty years (if any), have sold as well as these two. We encourage writers to reflect on these graphs and see that they can work in any genre.



## 2. Theme & Focus

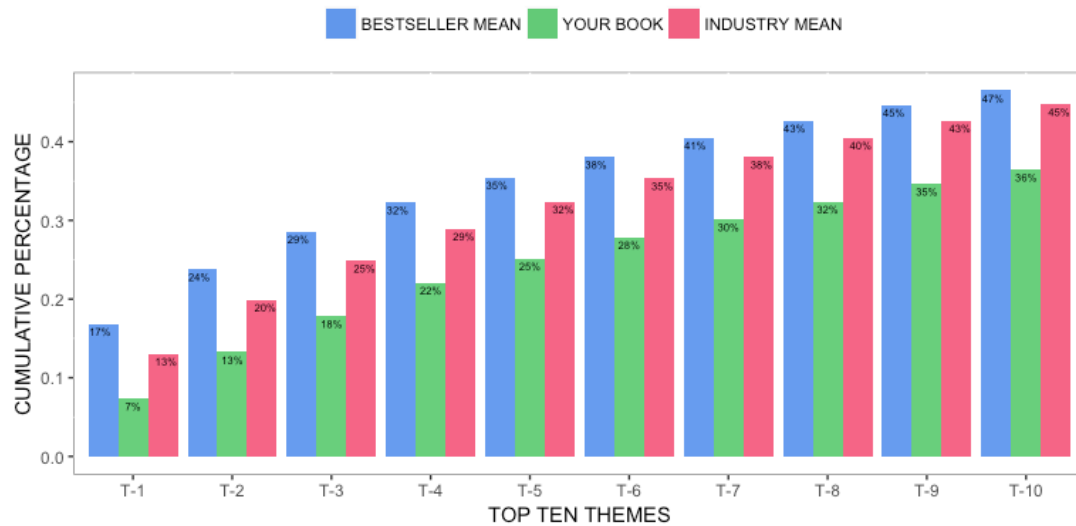
Our research for *The Bestseller Code* revealed the importance of topical focus and thematic relevance. Top selling novels achieve the focus and clarity that prevent unwieldy narrative that never wants to end. This is achieved by topical focus, which in turn is achieved when an author chooses the prevalent topics of his or her novel very consciously, and limits them. It is surprising to new writers that most top sellers have only three or four focalizing topics that claim 30% of all the pages of the manuscript. New writers tend to introduce too many topics, and thus the plot line becomes hard to control, or else the characters appear weak or the book “ends too soon” or “just won’t end!”

### Topical Focus

We use two proprietary models on every manuscript to show you your topical focus and your overarching themes. We also show you how your choices relate to bestselling fiction. The next graph shows how *A Clockwork Heart* compares to the market in terms of topical focus. The average topical makeup of top bestsellers is shown for comparison in blue. The average of all published contemporary novels is shown in red (including some self-published books). Your book is shown in green.

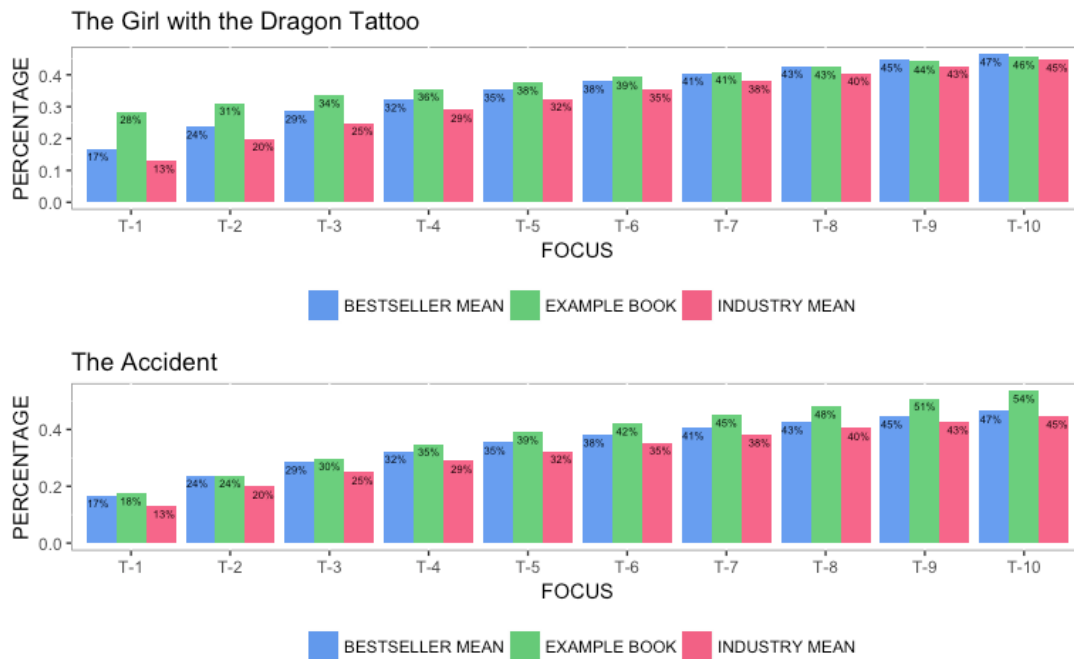
Notice that, on average, bestsellers achieve the goal of 30% with just three to four topics. This goal means the reader will know clearly “what the book is about.” Other published books in red achieve this more slowly. These make more nebulous reads, and are harder

for publishers to package successfully. Regardless of what your topics are, if it takes you too many topics to get past 30%, we suggest some editing for focus. You can typically achieve this by deleting some scenes that have nothing to do with your most prevalent topics, or else you might add more dialogue or description around your top topics.



## For Comparison: A Scandinavian crime novel and an American romance

These two example novels, by Stieg Larsson and Danielle Steel, hit the lists with the help of their thematic focus. Notice how they achieve topical focus more quickly than even most bestsellers. Both of these books sold enormously well. If you have green bar graphs like these for your own novel, you are doing very well. These graphs, plus the balanced plot graphs we have discussed, likely mean you are in with a very good chance of finding a wide audience for your work.



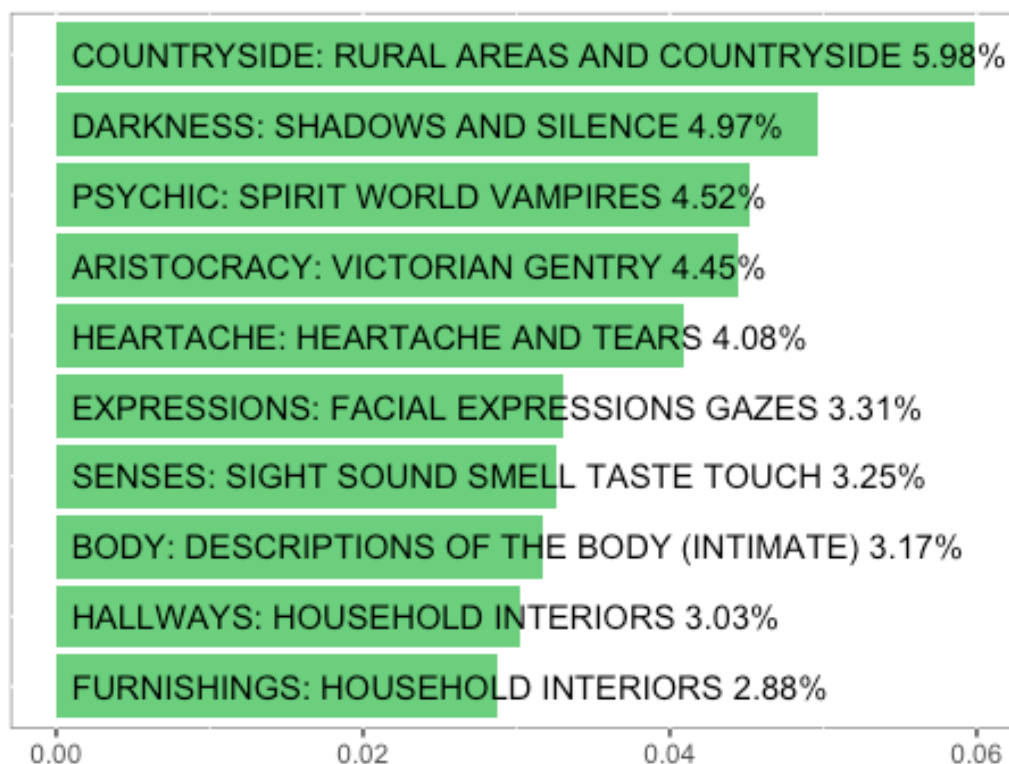
## Your Manuscript's Top Themes

When we look at a novel's themes, we like to see topics that group together to make genre or direction. Serial genre writers tend to choose similar top themes for each of their novels (e.g. John Grisham and the law), and they achieve difference in their novels by making the most of possible variety after the 30% mark. One novel about law might handle race as a more minor theme. Another might handle women's rights. Themes can arrive from setting, character vocation, everyday objects, the environment, the discussion points between the characters, and so on.

In addition, the icing on the cake is to identify a pair of contrast, or high tension, themes within the top six. Examples include "children and guns," or "sex and church." Any fruitful mix will do for bestselling. Contrasting themes evoke different emotional or mental reactions and give both the reader and writer a lot to delve in to. Here are the top themes in *A Clockwork Heart*. You can think of these themes as a kind of composite picture of your dominant topics—each theme is made up of different topics. The labels we use in the graph are approximations based on your word choices, and it may be the case that two or more themes are close variations of each other.



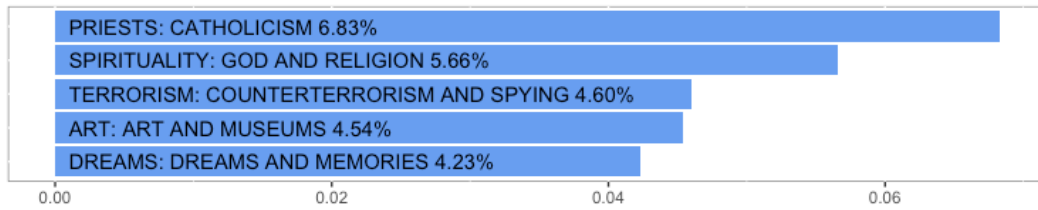
## Dominant Themes in A Clockwork Heart



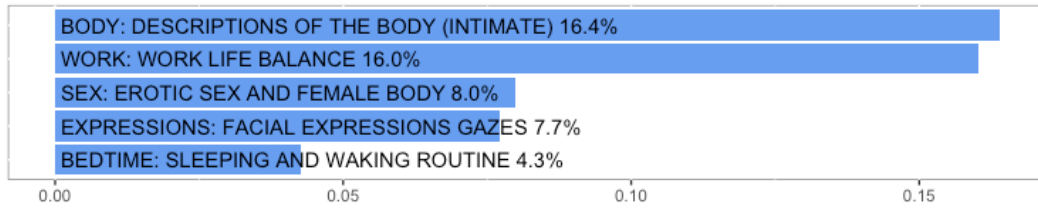
### For Comparison

Here are the top themes from two books that hit the lists and stayed there. With *The Da Vinci Code* we would lump together the top two themes, since they are so similar, and then note the contrast between these two themes and the third and fourth. Priests and terrorism instantly suggest emotional or intellectual tension. That's the start of a potential page turner. Art, as the next topic, gives the opportunity for some erudition or scholarship which might cool the heat of the contrast of the other two topics. The *Fifty Shades* graph tells us that the role of women is central to the conflict. Sex and the body set against work like balance for a woman (romance vs leisure) has been a top selling pair in women's fiction across sub-genres for a long time. The best you can do for your novel with this graph is to set your imagination on all the tension that could be created between the top five or six themes, and then go back to your manuscript to ensure dialog and scenes reflect that.

#### DOMINANT THEMES IN THE DA VINCI CODE



#### DOMINANT THEMES IN FIFTY SHADES OF GREY



## Your themes in the market

We compare your book's most frequent themes to the current book market. The table below shows which of the themes in *A Clockwork Heart* are positive or negative indicators of big success in the adult fiction market. Of course, there is always that book that surprises us all with a new set of themes, but these almost always sit on top of a strong plot line. We suggest editing that makes more of the positively indicated themes.

LABEL	DESCRIPTION	YOUR BOOK	INDICATOR
Countryside	Rural Areas and Countryside	5.98%	+
Darkness	Shadows and Silence	4.97%	+
Psychic	Spirit World Vampires	4.52%	-
Aristocracy	Victorian Gentry	4.45%	-
Heartache	Heartache and Tears	4.08%	-
Expressions	Facial Expressions Gazes	3.31%	+
Senses	Sight Sound Smell Taste Touch	3.25%	-
Body	Descriptions of the Body (Intimate)	3.17%	+
Hallways	Household Interiors	3.03%	+
Furnishings	Household Interiors	2.88%	-

## 3. Character Personalities

It goes without saying that character can make or break for a new author. If topics are tight and discursive enough to maintain interest, then we usually find a strong, attractive character temperament to go with those themes. We also need strong characters to drive a plot, along with the work of a narrator, into the desirable plot shape.

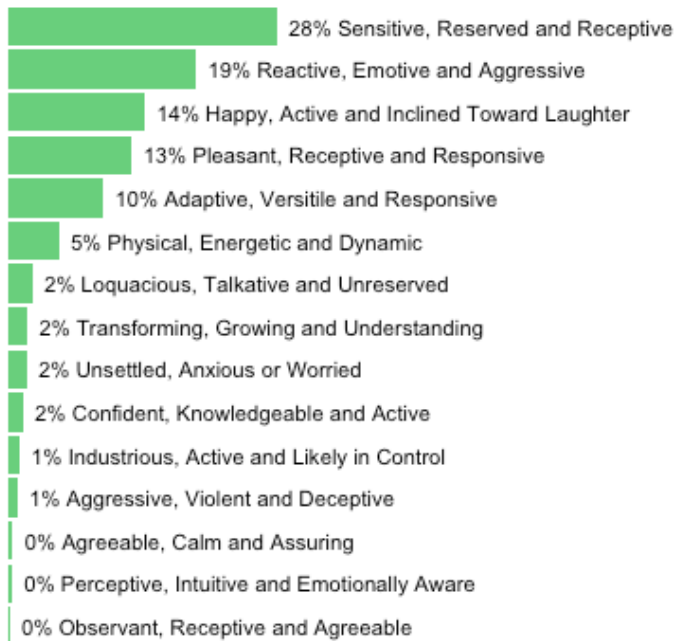
Since publishing *The Bestseller Code*, we have continued to research character, and now show your character's agency within the plot and their temperaments. Authors are well-advised to create some contrast in temperaments in order to develop a gripping story. Breakdown of character personality shows authors where they might find their characters lacking, or what their strengths are. We show them so an author can consider whether or not his or her intentions toward their protagonists has been realized to the greatest potential.

A good tactic is to look at the personality graphs below alongside the topic graphs we have just discussed. Can you develop areas of a key character with some further description, or perhaps dialogue, which centers around key theme? Can you position those themes in the places along your plot line that our graphs have shown to be a bit too steep or a bit too flat? These are the sorts of questions to ask so that the information from all the graphs can come together for you to help you edit your manuscript.

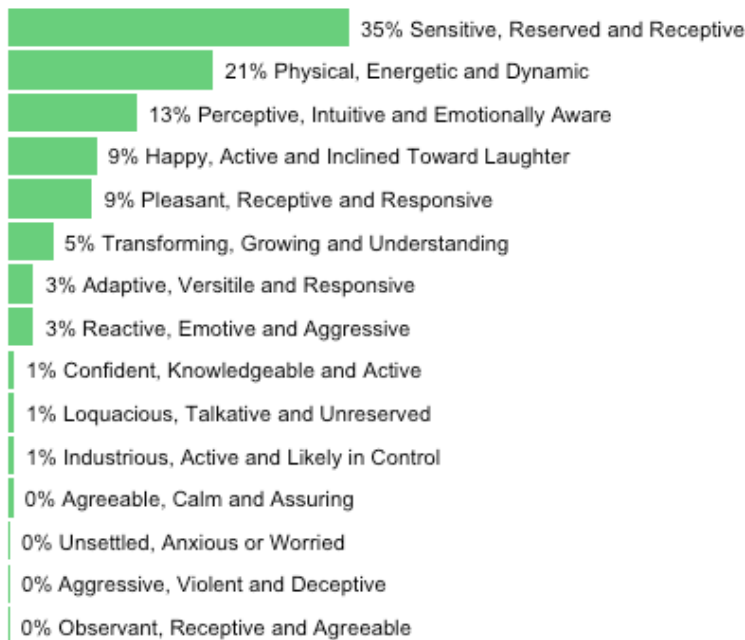
The next few sections report data on the most frequently *named* characters found in *A Clockwork Heart*. In addition to the named character personalities shown below, we examine the pronouns that are used both inside and outside of dialog in order to assess first person narrative agency. You should be aware that occasionally the same named character will appear twice in the graphs that follow. This can happen when a character has a nickname, for example "Matt" instead of "Matthew," but it can also occur when the character is referred to by a title, or by first name, last name, or first and last names.

Our algorithms try to resolve these name ambiguities, but depending on how your novel is written, they can be difficult to resolve. If you have a character that appears in two graphs, you'll need to consider both as a composite picture of your character's personality. If a character is missing from the graphs below, it's likely that that character was not named often enough to allow us to detect a strong personality.

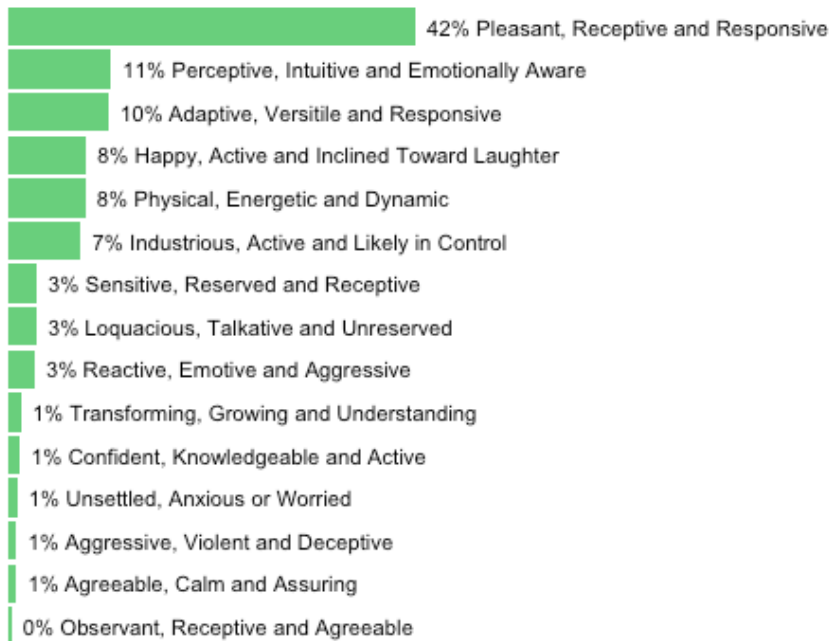
## CLOTHILDE



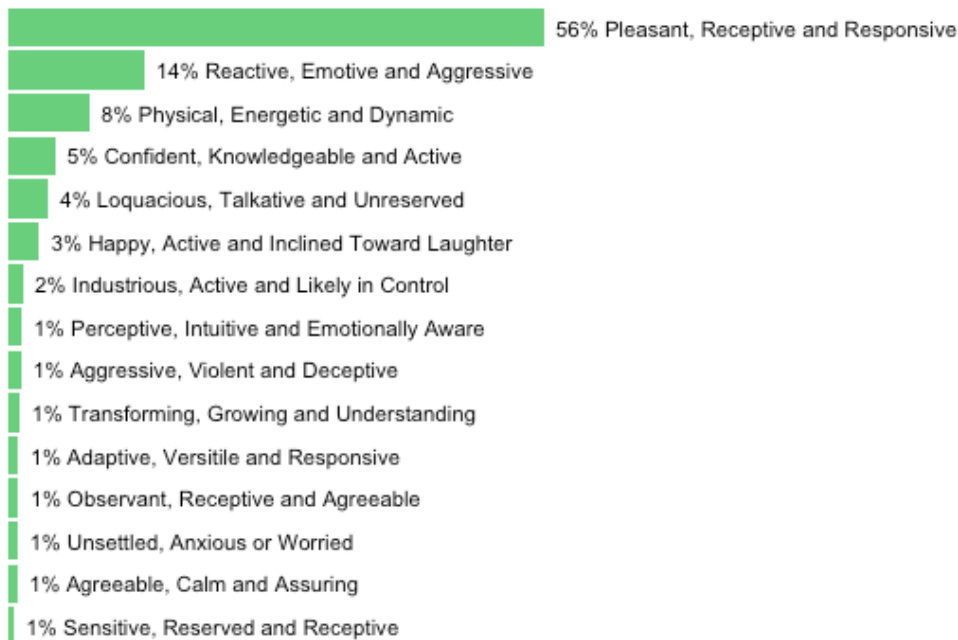
## ELLE



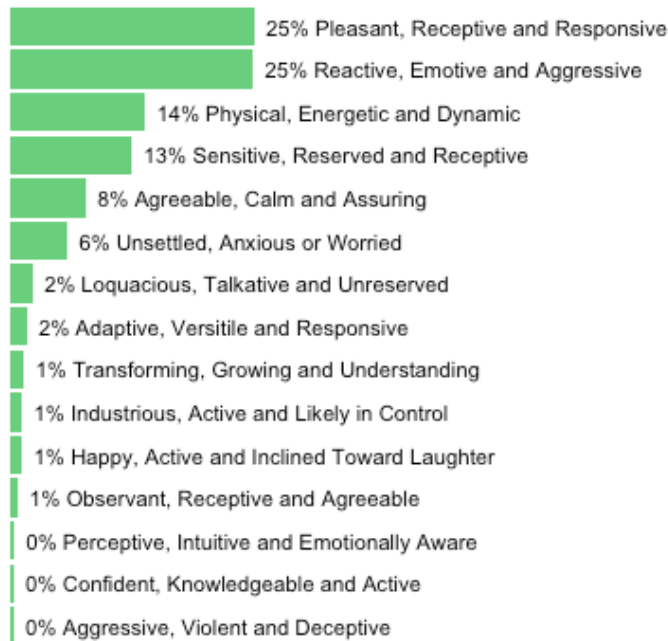
## EMILIAN



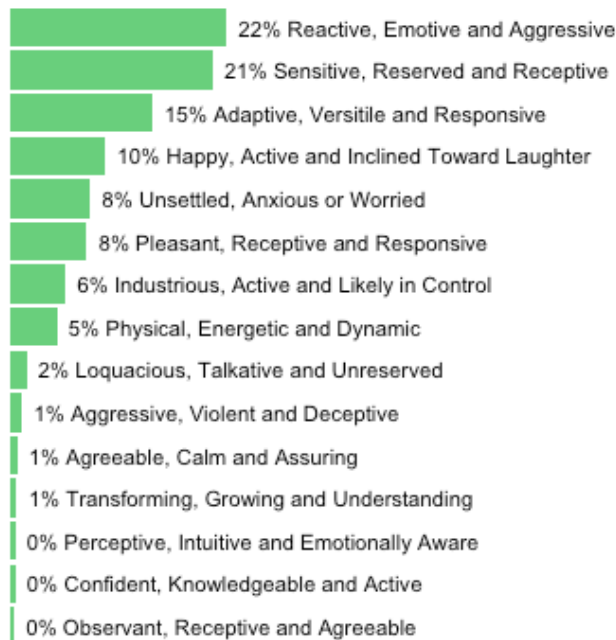
## JACK



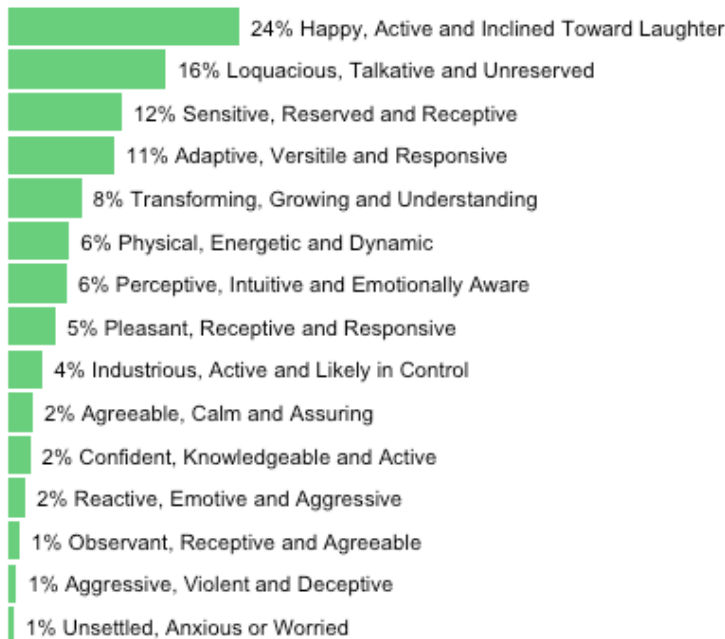
## LOISA



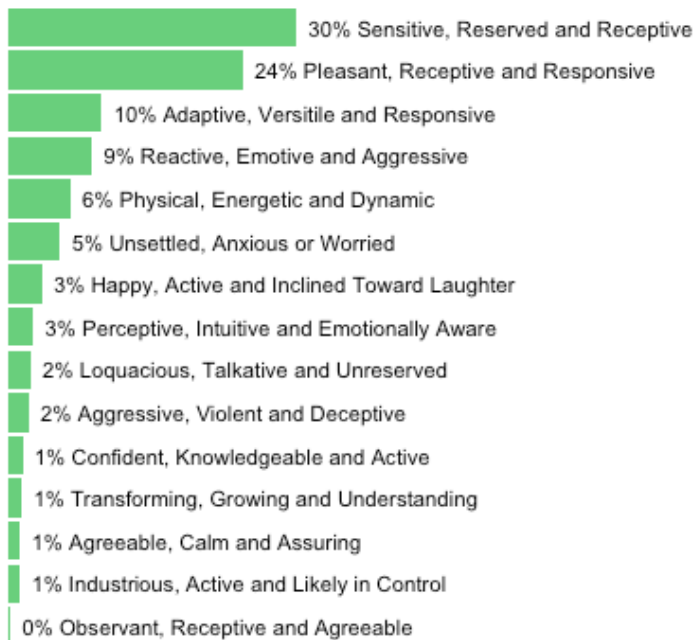
## MARSH



## MRS HINGES



## PATRICE



## 4. Character Agency

Readers and editors prefer characters who can drive a plot, appeal to our hearts and minds, and can make something happen within their genre scenario. The word for this is “agency,” and we read it for your major characters based on their actions. We measure actions and agency through careful analysis of verb use. Our data shows that characters associated with strong decisive verbs—such as “want,” “need,” and “feel”—have a mission in their world that will create a plot line of learning and growth for them. Weaker characters are more passive, more likely to respond rather than initiate. The strongest characters in fiction appeal to the emotions, the mind and spirit of readers.

The verbs associated with characters give us a sense of their relationship to action. The table below shows your most active characters and the verbs they perform in *A Clockwork Heart*. You might want to notice if their verbs show growth (e.g. verbs such as understood, realized, rethought). You should think about whether the verbs are primarily emotional (loved, hated), mental (thought, considered), verbal (said, sighed), or physical (ran, walked)? Do they represent the character you want to create? (NOTE: Our ability to accurately detect verbs depends a bit on the complexity of your prose. Occasionally you may see words here that are not verbs because the word might be both a noun and a verb in different contexts. “Horses” might be “she horses around a lot,” or “there were horses in the field.”)

CHARACTER	VERBS
Clothilde	said = 29, laughed = 7, felt = 4, gave = 4, smiled = 4, gasped = 3, looked = 3, rose = 3, stood = 3, stopped = 3, closed = 2, sank = 2, thought = 2, turned = 2, was = 2, watched = 2
Elle	said = 190, felt = 50, looked = 21, took = 19, was = 17, sat = 15, turned = 15, asked = 13, closed = 12, pulled = 11, stood = 11, held = 10, realised = 10, sighed = 10, stared = 10, whispered = 10
Emilian	bowed = 3, is = 3, nodded = 3, said = 3, know = 2, laughed = 2, put = 2, waiting = 2, 's = 1, answer = 1, are = 1, being = 1, blurted = 1, flashed = 1, given = 1, goes = 1, grinned = 1, gripped = 1, handed = 1, held = 1, helped = 1, hesitated = 1, hung = 1, knocked = 1, leaned = 1, looked = 1, met = 1, placed = 1, pointed = 1, pulled = 1, rose = 1, shook = 1, shrugged = 1, snorted = 1, stepped = 1
Jack	said = 10, looked = 5, shrugged = 3, was = 3, gave = 2, lifted = 2, nodded = 2, being = 1, chuckled = 1, go = 1, grinned = 1, had = 1, held = 1, hobbled = 1, leaned = 1, mumbled = 1, muttered = 1, narrowed = 1, scratched = 1, sent = 1, shook = 1, smile = 1, smiled = 1, stared = 1, stepped = 1, stood = 1, stopped = 1, thank = 1, tutted = 1, want = 1, warned = 1
Loisa	said = 46, was = 12, gave = 8, looked = 8, shrugged = 8, whispered = 5, hissed = 3, leaped = 3, lifted = 3, murmured = 3, sat = 3, shook = 3, smiled = 3, be = 2, choked = 2, exclaimed = 2, grabbed = 2, groaned = 2, is = 2, laughed = 2, leaned = 2, mumbled = 2, mused = 2, muttered = 2, nodded = 2, patted = 2, pressed = 2, pursed = 2, put = 2, replied = 2, rolled = 2, shouted = 2, started =



2, took = 2, turned = 2

Marsh said = 19, was = 10, grunted = 6, been = 4, frowned = 3, ran = 3, stumbled = 3, turned = 3, asked = 2, chest = 2, felt = 2, groaned = 2, had = 2, heart = 2, is = 2, pressed = 2, pulled = 2, walked = 2, wore = 2

Mrs Hinges said = 4, 's = 3, put = 3, 'm = 2, are = 2, Hinges = 2, is = 2, room = 2, 're = 1, been = 1, bid = 1, called = 1, came = 1, chatted = 1, closed = 1, coat = 1, did = 1, exclaimed = 1, feed = 1, felt = 1, followed = 1, found = 1, game = 1, going = 1, has = 1, hugged = 1, know = 1, laid = 1, let = 1, look = 1, looked = 1, made = 1, make = 1, patted = 1, pushed = 1

Patrice said = 18, felt = 6, sat = 4, started = 4, turned = 4, shook = 3, was = 3, been = 2, floated = 2, let = 2, looked = 2, smiled = 2, stared = 2, answer = 1, asked = 1, bellowed = 1, betrayed = 1, chuckled = 1, face = 1, fought = 1, frowned = 1, froze = 1, gasped = 1, gave = 1, inclined = 1, kept = 1, mused = 1, nodded = 1, ran = 1, rose = 1, rubbed = 1, settled = 1, shouted = 1, stood = 1, struck = 1

## Character Gender

Our model infers information about your characters' genders by looking up their names in a database compiled by the U.S. Social Security Administration. This analysis provides us with information about the gender balance in your book. Unisex names are those that can be either male or female, such as Jordan, Kelly, and Quinn. Uncertain names are those that are made up or very uncommon, such as Quebert, Oxton, and Zelda. The data below will help you think about the gender balance in your novel. There is no right or wrong here, and there is no evidence that more of one character gender and less of another leads to a successful book. Instead, consider this just one more piece of information about your book. If you are marketing your novel to one particular gender demographic, this data can help you think about the impression your story will have. The information about unisex and uncertain names can help you assess the level of gender ambiguity in your text. Some readers may struggle to imagine your characters absent clear gender markers.

### *A Clockwork Heart*

GENDER	PROPORTION
FEMALE	23.7%
MALE	36.0%
UNISEX or UNCERTAIN	40.3%

### For comparison, *The Da Vinci Code*

GENDER	PROPORTION
FEMALE	28.4%
MALE	46.8%
UNISEX or UNCERTAIN	24.8%

### For comparison, *Fifty Shades of Grey*

GENDER	PROPORTION
FEMALE	47.6%
MALE	32.0%
UNISEX or UNCERTAIN	20.4%

## 5. Style

We measure several hundred elements that are important to bestselling style. These include everything from the frequency of function words to sentence length and adjective to noun ratios. Style is of course about narration, description, frequency of dialogue, sentence length, complexity of prose, voice, tone and much more. We go granular with style analysis because the secret sauce of style is hidden in the fingerprints. Style analysis has revealed that J. K. Rowling was Robert Galbraith. Even though she had tried to write as a man different from herself, the fine details of style in her new books under the pen name and Harry Potter meant that the algorithm could detect the same author present.

This granular analysis of words, punctuation, and parts of speech is important because every writer has a unique style and also because bestselling books tend to have many stylistic features in common. Some might even go so far as to say that bestsellers have a style all their own. Many of these stylistic “habits” are difficult to discuss because they are “microscopic,” which is to say they are things that we are not likely to notice as we read. Things like how often an author uses the word “the” for example. But these features of style are incredibly important to the overall experience of reading a book, and winning writers seem to know instinctively just how often to use the word “very” or “really.”

Writers we have worked with have told us that objective data on what feels natural to them is helpful in making their writing choices more conscious. In the tables that follow, we offer you just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding your own linguistic habits of style. All of this style data is ultimately used to compare your novel to bestsellers of the last thirty years and then assign your manuscript a score (star rating) based on how closely the style matches the style of the bestseller market.

The key below will help you understand the data tables that follow. Pay particular attention to features that get assigned a “-” (minus sign). A minus sign indicates that your use of the feature deviates considerably from the range of values found in bestsellers. If a given feature gets “flagged” with a “-” (minus sign), that is a signal to you that your use of that feature is outside of the norm for what we expect to see in a bestseller. Keep in mind that the means (Bestseller mean and Industry mean) are aggregate statistics showing the central tendency. There can be a good deal of deviation around those means, but if a feature in your book deviates too far from the mean, we flag it for you.

### KEY

INDICATOR	DEFINITION
+	In the bestseller sweet spot

- Close to the bestseller sweet spot
- Outside the bestseller sweet spot

## Your style versus the market

We start with sentence length since length indicates density. Paragraph-long sentences obviously indicate a very different book from the one written in short, punchy sentences with fewer clauses, no adverbs, and so on. The bestseller list has its sweet spot in sentence style, and we will show you where your book fits compared to that target.

Here is a table showing some information about sentence lengths and their level of syntactical complexity in *A Clockwork Heart* compared to the market. Syntactical complexity is one measure, among many, of the novel's "readability" and level of grammatical difficulty.

FEATURE	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
High Range Length	15.00	16.74	16.90	-
Low Range Length	6.00	5.29	5.55	+
Maximum Sentence Length	53.00	111.27	107.97	•
Mean Length	11.23	12.23	12.48	+
Median Length	10.00	9.75	10.05	+
Syntactical Complexity	1.24	1.28	1.27	•

## High Frequency Word Data

A writer's distinct linguistic style is found in the way the writer uses common function words. It turns out the market favors writers who use function words in certain ways. Your manuscript contained roughly (because it depends on how exactly you count) 96767 words. Here are some of your most frequently occurring words compared to their average use in the market.

WORD	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
the	6.03%	5.08%	5.21%	-
and	2.50%	2.73%	2.58%	-
to	2.50%	2.51%	2.53%	+
of	2.27%	1.85%	1.98%	•
a	2.01%	2.22%	2.20%	-
she	1.87%	1.18%	1.04%	-
her	1.85%	0.99%	0.97%	-
i	1.57%	2.16%	2.04%	-

you	1.44%	1.20%	1.24%	●
in	1.39%	1.40%	1.37%	+

## Adjective Data

Though a bit less important than function words, the adjectives a writer uses can have a big impact on success in the market. Here are the most common adjectives found in *A Clockwork Heart* compared to their appearance in the market.

WORD	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
little	0.170%	0.096%	0.094%	-
few	0.092%	0.054%	0.051%	-
more	0.088%	0.138%	0.140%	-
other	0.078%	0.096%	0.100%	●
good	0.074%	0.097%	0.091%	-
sure	0.065%	0.058%	0.053%	+
own	0.053%	0.053%	0.061%	+
small	0.050%	0.041%	0.041%	+
fine	0.049%	0.020%	0.018%	-
cold	0.049%	0.020%	0.021%	+

## Adverb Data

In the *Elements of Style*, Strunk and White warn writers about the danger of “leech” adverbs that suck the life from verbs. Our research for *The Bestseller Code* confirmed that adverbs must be used judiciously. Here are the most common adverbs in *A Clockwork Heart* compared to the market.

WORD	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
not	0.482%	0.38%	0.39%	-
so	0.257%	0.26%	0.24%	-
here	0.177%	0.12%	0.12%	-
now	0.160%	0.16%	0.16%	●
very	0.155%	0.07%	0.07%	-
just	0.141%	0.19%	0.17%	+
then	0.134%	0.22%	0.21%	+
back	0.123%	0.20%	0.20%	+
too	0.101%	0.11%	0.11%	-
even	0.091%	0.11%	0.11%	+

## Punctuation Data

Punctuation is intimately connected with style, and the bestseller market certainly has preferences when it comes to things like the exclamation point and the semi-colon. Here is how *A Clockwork Heart* compares to the market in terms of punctuation usage.

MARK	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
.	43.6%	36.0%	35.6%	-
,	22.4%	30.6%	30.0%	-
“	21.7%	22.0%	20.3%	+
'	5.1%	0.4%	0.5%	-
?	3.5%	4.0%	3.9%	+
-	1.6%	2.5%	2.5%	●
!	1.3%	0.8%	1.0%	+
–	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	-
:	0.1%	0.5%	0.4%	●
;	0.1%	0.6%	0.8%	●

## Part of Speech Usage Comparison

More subtle than punctuation and common words, the types of words a writer employs and the frequency of their use say a lot about a writer's style and the response readers will have to it. The Bestseller-ometer tracks 36 different parts of speech. Here are the top 10 from *A Clockwork Heart*.

TYPE	YOUR BOOK	BESTSELLER MEAN	INDUSTRY MEAN	STATUS
Noun singular	11.7%	11.1%	11.3%	●
Preposition or subordinating conjunction	10.3%	9.3%	9.5%	-
Determiner	8.5%	7.7%	7.8%	-
Personal pronoun	8.3%	8.5%	8.2%	-
Verb past tense	7.6%	6.9%	6.9%	-
Adverb	5.1%	5.5%	5.5%	+
Adjective	4.5%	4.5%	4.6%	+
Proper noun singular	3.9%	4.5%	4.6%	●
Verb base form	3.8%	3.6%	3.7%	+
Noun plural	2.8%	2.9%	2.9%	-

## Inappropriate Word Data

Our thematic analysis tells us when a book contains explicit sex or graphic violence. Archer Jockers also tracks a set of words that some readers might find inappropriate or editors might use as a guide for age-appropriate content. These words might help decide if a book is pitched as New Adult, Young Adult or Adult Fiction. Here are some of the most frequent found in *A Clockwork Heart*.

WORD	COUNT
balls	4
damn	3
hell	2
whore	2
bloody	1
bugger	1
butt	1
cock	1

## 6. Setting

Though our research has suggested that geographical setting is only weakly correlated with success in the market, we find it useful when it comes to acquisition meetings to identify common places that an author references. These are the most common places detected in *A Clockwork Heart*.

PLACE	COUNT
the Black Stag	7
Marsh's	5
the Realm of Light	5
the West End	5
the Shadow Realm	3

## 7. Your Star Ratings

The Bestseller-ometer assigned **A Clockwork Heart** an overall star rating of: 2 stars (★★).

Here is the breakdown of your composite score. Bestselling in a global way is all about hitting the sweet spot (5 stars) in most of these areas. However, we see good sales at three stars and above.

MODEL	STARS
Character Agency	★★

Overall Mood	★★
Plot Shape	★★★
Style	★★
Theme	★★
Topical Focus	★

## Next Steps

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to review *A Clockwork Heart*.

If you would like to learn more about your manuscript from the insight of our work, we can supplement author reports with phone calls. We have been working with the data for a lot of years, and sometimes authors and editors appreciate hearing how we can interpret the data on your novel more holistically and give you even stronger guidance. Details of how to work with us one-on-one are on our website: [www.archerjockers.com](http://www.archerjockers.com).

We wish you the best of luck with your revisions and hope for your great success in the market!

Jodie & Matt



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