

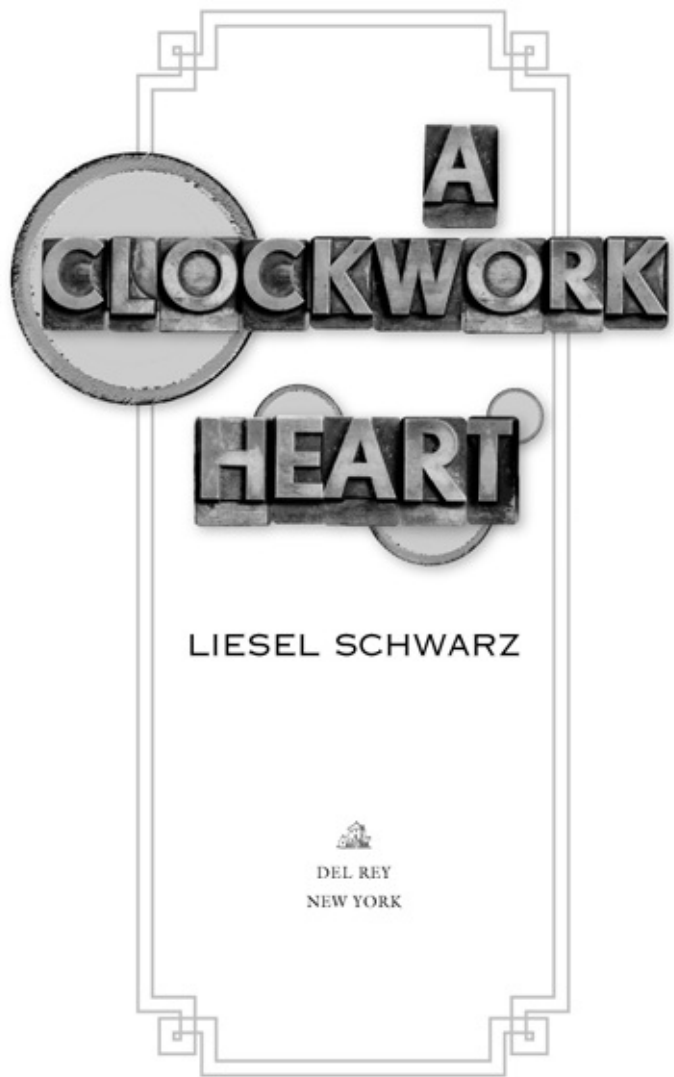


LIESEL
SCHWARZ

AUTHOR OF
A CONSPIRACY OF ALCHEMISTS

A CLOCKWORK HEART

BOOK TWO IN
THE CHRONICLES OF LIGHT AND SHADOW



LIESEL SCHWARZ


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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. It has crumbled to dust and res in the ruins of Constantinople. And a bargain has been struck. Those of the Council who would harm the girl have agreed to let her be for now.

But these are all matters that some say do not fall to the attentions of La Fée Verte. For the universe is vast and I am small. For what can one do but have regard for that tiny part of which concerns one?

I have gained my freedom, but I sometimes find myself missing Paris and the absinth green dreams I used to weave in return for 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 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 gray 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 do. For such is the nature of the two realms that make up this world: as happiness and contentment grows 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 very afraid.

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

Better to let her enjoy her newfound happiness a little longer. She will need thoughts of this happiness to sustain her. Because when the darkness comes, it will take everything.

CHAPTER 1

AMSTERDAM, 5 FEBRUARY 1904

The *Water Lily* creaked happily as she surged against the headwinds that heralded landfall. As she prepared for landing, Elle eased the airship to a lower altitude.

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 proper freight consignment. Strictly aboveboard and legitimate.

Elle smiled with pride. Her very own charter flight 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 from 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 that made up the nebula she came to know as the voice of the Oracle, was a bit of the mother she never knew. 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. “Truth be told, 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 go, 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 pressure release valves opened and released some engine pressure.

Elle opened the hatch and let the ladder rope drop to the ground. With practiced ease, she climbed down and stepped onto 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 a touch heavy and rounded on the 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 honor 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 that 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 this 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.

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 did, Elle found herself missing his massive moustache. She had been told afterward 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 amphitheater when the vortex their leader, Sir Eustace Abercrombie, had created collapsed, bringing a large 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 awful memory. Patrice had simply 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 absolute 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, by working as a double agent. 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.

But this was the beginning of a new era and she wouldn't allow dark thoughts to take over. “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 steaming mingled with the odor of tired bodies hit her right in the nostrils 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 gray paint flaked from the walls, in the way that utilitarian buildings seemed to do, but this did not seem to bother anyone.

She walked up to the canteen counter and ordered a coffee. It came in a tin mug and had a faint blue-gray 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 overeager Labrador.

“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 practiced maneuver 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 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 your manky old 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 awful quickly," he said with a 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 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 fancied 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 to you 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 overelaborate 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.

Sandy was the word that first came to mind when her gaze slid to 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 as they rested 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 realized that she had been staring. "Why, thank you," she said sweetly. She set her coffee mug down on the table and 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 the room while the gray 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, her fingers went to the place between the buttons of her shirt to the slight hilt of the stiletto she carried inside the laces of her corset.

“I’ve been known to play the odd hand,” she said.

She lowered her hand unobtrusively, feeling silly at her sudden reaction.

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 and picked up the cards as the remainder of the crew took the hint and went off on their own business.

“Captain?” Elle looked at Ducky.

He laughed. “Dashwood. Logan Dashwood. He pilots our crew. I am first officer on the *Phoenix*,” Ducky explained.

“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.

There was something odd about this man, but she could not say what. “Well, Captain Dashwood, let’s play,” she said, dismissing the thought.

She picked up her cup and took a sip of the lukewarm liquid. It tasted tinny and so foolish that she could not help making a face.

“That coffee looks like it could strip-clean the tanks of a spark engine,” Ducky said.

“You are not wrong.” Elle put the mug to the side. The wedding band she wore on her left hand 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 is still very shiny. 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 be so prickly.”

She could tell that he was laughing at her, but she was no stranger to the reaction. She had spent years fighting the perception that she was some spoiled rich girl who took to flying because she was bored.

“So, Ducky, how was Japan? You must tell me all about it.” She turned to her friend, ignoring Captain Dashwood entirely.

Ducky’s eyes lit up. “Japan is like nothing you have ever experienced. Had to get out of there in a hurry, though. All the signs are that there is serious trouble brewing out there.”

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

“I found myself without a commission. That was until I heard that the good captain over here was in need of a first officer, on account of a slight problem with crew ...”

Ducky broke off what he was saying, for Dashwood gave him a very stern look.

“And so Mr. Richardson found himself stationed on the *Phoenix*. And a finer first officer or captain could hope for,” Dashwood finished Ducky’s sentence for him.

Ducky swallowed and picked up the deck of cards. 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 Barone 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 learned 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 his hand, the amulet strummed with an energy that could not be ignored.

So the good 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 not? You seem to be on a winning streak, Captain.”

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 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 bet her matchsticks to the growing pile in the center 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, facedown. “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 each other 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 center of the table.

“Hmm, a woman with gumption. I am impressed. But let’s see what you are made of. I’ll raise you,” he said as he pushed all of his matchsticks into the center of the table. Then he looked up and gave her a sly smile.

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

“Very well, Captain.” She put all her matchsticks onto the pile. “What else have you got?”

Dashwood scratched his chin and a look of uncertainty flashed across his face. “What do 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 wage. Perhaps you could even ask your husband to buy it back for you later," Dashwood said.

Elle kept her features neutral, but she was sorely tempted to put him in his place. The arrogance of the man was absolutely incredible. And to think, he had been cheating all this time without anyone knowing.

"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."

"Perhaps, you celebrate a mite too 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, I would recommend that you check whether your opponents have special abilities before you start cheating at cards." She waved her hand over the table. "See?" she said.

Even in the harsh spark lights of the canteen, Elle's arm cast no shadow on the table. It was one of the many peculiarities that being the Oracle brought, for she was the one who walked between the two worlds.

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," she said sweetly.

Ducky gawked 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 minor 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 has rented 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. "A wager is a wager, Captain. I'

sorry.”

Dashwood said nothing, he just stared ahead of him as Ducky followed Elle downstairs.

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

“Is she now?” Mr. De Beer said in surprise.

“Yes 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, madam. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“We had a bet and I won. Fair and square. Now the ship is mine and I make no apology for it.”

Mr. De Beer shook his head in dismay. “Very well, then. I will arrange it. 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. We don’t want any trouble, now do we?”

“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 2

INGOLDSTADT

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 light 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. And she was one of them.

In anticipation of the icy rain that would soon fall, she tightened her cloak around her shoulders, making sure that the hood covered her extraordinary hair. As white as sea-bleached bone, it reached down to her knees. Her skin was pale and fine; her features perfectly molded as if from the finest porcelain. Her lips were bloodless and sculpted, the face of a marble statue.

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 color except for her eyes, which were a startling shade of sea green.

She was one of the last of her kind: *La Dame Blanche*—a lady in white.

The promised rain started sifting down, pinpricks of sleet, soaking everything before freezing to 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, because here, high above this city of learning and enlightenment, were all the Shadow elements she needed in one place.

She closed her eyes and reached out to 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 anyone who had the skill to tap into it. How stupid these humans were. Thinking that a few puny rules enforced by *Warlocks* could stop someone like her.

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. It was certainly unusual for a Shadow creature to touch the void from the Light side. Unusual and highly illegal. The penalty for being caught was instant death. Or so they said. But Clothilde had lived for a very long time and she cared little for the rules imposed on her by men.

She braced herself for the next step. It was a big risk to take, reaching into the divide like this—back to front—but she was hungry and the need for nourishment was strong, so it was a risk she was willing to take. She took solace from the fact that no one was watching. No one would know.

Carefully, she reached in between the folds of space and time. It opened up before her—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, before the magic slipped through the fissure she had created. The sensation was like biting into a ripe, exotic fruit—lush and exquisite. Clothilde could not help uttering a low moan as she felt herself fill with power.

No man could ever match the sensuousness that tapping into the void could evoke. She was young, measured against those of her kind, but she had spent more than one human lifetime searching for a man who was strong enough to withstand her voracious appetites, but they all shriveled up and died, crumbling to dust between her fingers. Such fragile creatures, such a pity.

Sated, she stood and straightened her cloak. A gentle psychic tug caught her attention and she stared in the direction of the university. The pull she felt was the desire of men. She could feel herself 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 wrapped her fist in her cloak to lift the knocker, flinching at the sting of the metal through the fabric.

A young man opened the door for her. He was impeccably dressed in a fine suit, his hair still damp from when he had combed it this morning. The only sign that indicated his association here was the discreet little silver medallion he wore pinned to the lapel of his jacket. His eyes lit up with lust as he took in the full impact of her presence, but she stopped his thoughts before they could go too far. He would be such easy quarry, but this was no time for seduction.

The young doorman frowned with a disappointment he did not fully comprehend before his sense of duty took over. “This way, 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 clear that this was a place few visited.

The metal doorframes briefly crackled with a glimmer of blue electricity 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, while understandable, were most annoying.

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 at the back of his head by a black satin ribbon. Apart from their hair and a few bald patches, the masks completely obscured all recognizable features of the attendees.

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.

“Miss de Blanc. We are pleased that you answered our invitation. Apologies for meeting so early, but our members are all busy men and we thought it would be more discreet if we assembled out of sight.” She was not sure which one of the men had spoken.

“Thank you for inviting me. It is an honor to be in such auspicious company.” She made a slow, careful curtsey.

“We have been watching 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.”

“I thank you, sir,” she said. A shiver of arousal passed through the room as the men reacted to her low voice, but Clothilde felt nothing but contempt for them.

The chairman cleared his throat. “As mentioned in our invitation, 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 masked members moved. It was most disconcerting.

“It is correct that you are familiar with spark monasteries?”

“Yes, I briefly lived in one as a foundling many years ago.” Clothilde kept her face impassive. She was far older than any of the men she faced. Older even than the grandfathers, for she had lived with the electromancers in the days before the men of the Realm of Light had found ways to use the spark they made to power their machines. It was a fact she would keep to herself for no man wants to be reminded of the fact that women age. Instead, she smiled sweetly. “The electromancers found me and I stayed with them until they sent me to the convent. I think they always sensed that my talents lay in the workings of the human body, so they sent me to the sisters at a convent that specializes in the healing arts when I was old enough. I worked as a healer in the hospice until the world had changed enough for me to enroll here at the university to study.”

“Splendid.”

“I live to serve,” Clothilde murmured the mantra of the electromancers and inclined her head. “But tell me, what would you have me do?”

“Well, we are most interested in the experiments you have been conducting in the field of galvanism. Most scientists had dismissed the theories long before, but you have persevered.”

“I am not most scientists,” she said with a little smile. “I have always been most interested in the application of spark electricity to flesh and the reanimation it brings.”

“Well, yes, and we understand that your findings have been most extraordinary.” One of the masked men motioned to a leather attaché case that lay on the table before them. “Your instructions are contained therein. You are to burn the papers once you have read and memorized them.”

“I understand,” she said.

“Inside you will find a folder with the necessary letters of introduction. You are to show these to the abbots on the list who are designated to assist you. And most important, you will

contact us with news, by means of the method described in the instructions once each stage of the process is completed.”

“I understand,” she said again.

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

“Clear, sir.”

“And Miss de Blanc, we are well aware of your ... weaknesses. If the electromancers do anything noteworthy in this regard, it would be that they taught you temperance and control. We do expect that you exercise this at all times. The weather, well, there is not much one can do about that, but we absolutely forbid the seduction of any men for the duration of the contract. Have we made ourselves clear?”

“Yes. No sorcery apart from that needed to complete the task.”

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. There was no point, for there would be no negotiation with the Consortium and besides, she would be long gone before any of them would ever be able to do anything. But if it made them happy, then she would oblige.

She inclined her head in a gesture of subservience when she put the pen down, but inside she felt her emotions roil at their arrogance. In answer, the windows lit up with a flash of lightning and outside thunder rolled as rain lashed against the roof.

“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 tonight. We are to ensure that the factory is installed and ready to start up.”

The young man stepped forward and handed her a wallet that was thick with bills.

“You should find enough in there to cover all expenses,” the member of the Consortium said.

“Thank you,” Clothilde said.

“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 said.

Someone laughed. “Yes, we expect war to be declared at any moment. And we look forward to it with great anticipation. The dawning of a new era.”

“I am honored by the faith you have placed in me,” she said.

“It has nothing to do with faith, Miss de Blanc. We will be watching your every move. There is no room for error. Do you understand?”

“Yes, perfectly,” she said sweetly.

One of the masked men leaned over and whispered something. The one he had spoken to inclined his head.

“Furthermore, we have an additional task for you.”

The man who had whispered nodded and stood up from the table. He walked up

Clothilde and presented her with a wooden case. As she took it from him, she thought she could hear a faint ticking from within.

“We want you to find suitable candidates for these. They need to be strong, as we will be testing this new invention for future use. One of our members known only as the Clockmaker will send you all the additional equipment you will require for this experiment. It must be conducted with the utmost secrecy.”

“I will do my best,” said Clothilde.

The men at the table grew silent. “We do not want your best, Miss de Blanc. We demand your complete and utter compliance with our every request. Any questions?”

“No. I understand completely,” she said. Outside more lightning flashed, filling the room with white light, 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. “Take care of it.”

As she touched the key to put it round her neck, she felt a tremor of thaumaturgy pass through her. And the strangeness of it made her shiver.

“Very well then, you may go,” one of the men said.

Clothilde gathered up the satchel and case, carefully tucking the wallet inside the folds of her robes.

She gave the Consortium another low curtsy, pausing for an alluring moment before rising and leaving. But as she turned to leave she kept her face turned to the floor in order to hide the slow smile that spread across her face.

These men had no idea who they were dealing with. And enlightening them was going to be such fun.

CHAPTER 3

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 façade. 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 the summer when they bloomed. This was where she lived.

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 his shoulder as she went into the house.

Elle flung herself into the leather Chesterfield in the library with a sigh. “Oh, it’s nice to be home. 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.

The fire had burned 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 favorite rooms in the house, mainly because it was so utterly dominated by 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. “Shadow magic,” he said. “What if you had been discovered?”

“Oh, don’t be such a worry ninny. I was very careful and the captain of the ship didn’t guess who—or should I say what?—I am. Besides, I bumped into Ducky in Amsterdam and after I won the ship, I hired him to pilot her home. He’s busy berthing the *Iron Phoenix* at 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, if you have to be completely precise. But 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 sweetly.

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 pacing up and down all day worrying and waiting for you to come home safely.”

“Oh,” said Elle. “But we saw no pirates.”

“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 ever utterly ridiculous,” Elle said.

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

“But 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. “And how do you suppose I do that?”

Elle felt herself grow angry. She hated it when he condescended to her. She rose to her feet. “Hugh, flying and airships are my business and I was flying for years before you came along, so please stop interfering.”

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

“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 looked awfully angry the last time she had seen him. And yet, despite her rather rickety shortcomings, the *Iron Phoenix* was a beauty. She was a big freighter, nearly 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. You are only saying this because I am a woman.”

“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.

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, we have spoken about this at length. You know you can’t come with me on flights, because flying is something I must do on my own. We are both strong-willed people. And if we impose on one another, we shall end up despising each other over time. You have to leave me be on this topic.”

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

“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 favorite.

“I think I need something stronger than tea.” Marsh walked over to his liquor 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 forego 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 wicked grin. “Invitation accepted, but don’t blame me if Mrs. Hinges is annoyed because we’re late for dinner.”

CHAPTER 4

An almighty crash followed by a high-pitched scream greeted Elle as she came downstairs one morning, a week after her flight to Amsterdam. Edie, one of the maids, 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. It is the best remedy after an upset. I know this from personal experience.”

“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 terra-cotta pots had toppled over. Shards of pot and soil were spilled all over the floor. Someone had treaded mud all over the black-and-white checkered 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. Globes of the bright blue liquid had sloshed onto 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, smoldering 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 crumpled-up balls of paper interspersed with the 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 foot.

“Don’t you mind Mrs. Hinges. She will understand,” 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 the most alarming thought.

“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 the room at a speed faster than the eye could follow. Round and round the room 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 beamed at her. “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 this is fun.”

“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 you could go.” Elle closed her eyes in frustration.

“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 had no option but to say yes. Do you not think to ask me first?”

Marsh pulled the wires out of the spark tank and the sparks that were emanating from the umbrella stopped. He walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “You weren’t here to ask. 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 theater while I’m here.” He kissed the top of her head as he walked past. “Oh, what a display of supra-kinetic energy. I say, old chap, you and the little green one have been hard at work.”

“Papa ...” Elle started to say, but the professor had already pushed past her and 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

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