HEART FIRE

and

STEAMPUNK:
IMAGINED HISTORIES AND TECHNOLOGIES
OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

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Abstract

Heart Fire

The novel Heart Fire addresses steampunk’s darker side from the perspective of rebellious commoners battling a demon-haunted scientist and deadly automatons.

In the city of Forsham, all people are born with magic of varying degrees. The upper classes have been bred to have potentially destructive heart-magic, while the lower classes are supposedly left with weak and manageable skin-magic. Disaster strikes when factory owner, Sir Mathias Grindle – a mage without power – consorts with demons and attempts to elevate his position by eliminating all heart-magic.

Ju Weatherton is a commoner with too much magic who vows to overthrow the mages who suppress her. She joins forces with an outcast shapeshifter and a misfit dandy when another shapeshifter turned to stone in a human woman’s womb tricks her into facing Sir Mathias’s demons. Meanwhile Sir Mathias’s soul-stealing automatons terrorize Forsham’s skies, tearing out people’s heart-magic to transplant it into machines to provide them with perpetual motion.

The novel explores class oppression, Otherness, the use and misuse of technology in a pseudo-Victorian otherworld alongside the themes of friendship, trust, love, loss, grief and betrayal.

Steampunk: Imagined Histories and Technologies of Science and Fantasy

With reference to James P. Blaylock’s Homunculus, China Miéville’s Perdido Street Station and Ekaterina Sedia’s The Alchemy of Stone, this exegesis explores the writing of Heart Fire as a steampunk text from the perspective of a writer in the genre of fantasy. It argues that steampunk is not limited to texts representing steam-driven machinery, but also includes fantastical texts that rely on pseudo-Victorianism often set in imaginary worlds characterized by anachronism, pseudoscience, technofantasy, magic, hybridity and imagined events inspired by science fictional history as well as real history.
Declaration

The thesis has been substantially completed during the course of enrolment in this degree at UWA and has not previously been accepted for a degree at this or another institution.
Acknowledgements

For my mother, an East End Londoner taken out of school at fourteen to work in factories until World War II took her to the Land Army and different battles.

#

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Gaslights cast faltering shadows over the receiving room, where extraction chairs stood in twenty rows, ten abreast, high-backed, bare-wooded and splintery. Electrodes twitched at the ends of blood-red wires dangling from their armrests. Pausing at chair number one-seven-two, Ju Weatherton contemplated its hideous construction. The thing looked like an automaton crouched and ready to chew everyone up.

“Is it worth it for a handful of copper?” she asked herself.

“Go on sit in it,” the attendant growled, prodding the small of Ju’s back. Ju tucked a strand of hair beneath her cap. A handful of copper this week would be two next. Then it would no longer matter that Papa couldn’t find work or that Grindle had threatened to dock her pay. She could join the Designers Guild and not have to dirty her hands with oil and grease ever again.

The attendant prodded her again. “If you’ve changed your mind, the door’s over there.”

Startled, Ju swivelled to face him.

He was little more than a lad, shifty-eyed with uncombed hair and tobacco stained fingers. “If the pay isn’t to your liking, you could always take it up with the Sirs over there.” He gave a cynical laugh and pointed with his chin to the front of the receiving room where two mages in suits and top hats sat in bored repose, their hands no doubt charged with enough heart-magic to knock a room full of workers senseless.

Grudgingly, Ju lowered herself into the chair. She took off her boots, socks and cap, rolled up her coat sleeves and leggings; then leaned into the chair’s warped back. A previous occupant had carved the words “Fate Damns” into one of the armrests. Ju would liked to have added something equally blasphemous such as “Fate Exploits” or “Fate is a Tool of Oppression”, but the attendant would not leave her alone, so she stared ahead as he wound the electrodes twice around her wrists and ankles.
“You don’t think I enjoy doing this, eh?” he asked. “If I had magic enough to sell like you do, believe me I’d be the first to submit.” When Ju glared at him, he added, “I don’t plan on starving any time soon.”

As much as she didn’t like it, Ju knew he was right.

“A bony one, aren’t you?” he observed, adjusting the support straps at her forehead. He patted her knee and winked. “Quicker than lacing a corset, eh? But not quite so titillating.”

Ju rolled her eyes to the ceiling where festoons of cobwebs hung from crossbeams. Beside her, in chair number one-seven-three Old Rosie, the fortune-teller, pulled her shawl primly about her shoulders. “Keep your hands on the job, lackey boy, or you’ll go blind,” Rosie said.

The attendant scowled. He fastened Rosie’s electrodes with a rough snap.

Fuming, Ju glared ahead at the mages sitting up front, hating them as much as she hated the powerhouse. Their claim that too much coal smoke would poison the city may well be true; but if it was skin-magic they needed to fuel their machines, why force workers to sell it for a pittance?

All too soon a mage announced that the final chair was filled. The attendants took their places in front of their allotted rows. Old Rosie smelled of stale gin. She hummed a dirge, while a lad four rows in front whimpered. Feet shuffled. Breaths were held.

“Get it over with,” Rosie snapped. “If you take all day, I’ll be wetting me knickers.”

Nervous laughter rippled through the room. Ju’s electrodes grew cold. Her fingers tingled as her skin-magic made icy trails along her arms and legs. People sighed, falling into swoons as the electrodes pulled on their skin-magic, drawing it through their veins, sucking it out, feeding it into the factory above.

Although the electrodes made her feel weak, Ju easily kept hold of her senses. Praying that the mages would not notice, she closed her eyes and braced herself. The pull of the electrodes grew insistent. Her stomach lurched as her deeper and stronger heart-magic shifted towards them.

Flinching, Ju focused on reeling her heart-magic in. She forced herself to imagine what would happen if she let it spark – of how it might cause a fire. Then the mages would recognize her for what she was, and they’d drag her away burned and blistered like they’d dragged away Katy Boffin last year when the powerhouses had
first opened.

“It’s not my fault,” Katy had cried, arms and legs flailing. “I was born with
it.”

But the mages didn’t care. Heart-magic was their privilege alone. For their
own peace of mind, they aimed to keep it that way.

Gradually, Ju’s heart-magic contracted to a dull knot in her chest. Sweat
broke out beneath the straps at her forehead. She consoled herself with the prospect
of only three more weeks to go. Three more extractions and then she’d have enough
coppers for a shilling and a shilling would…

Her wrists grew icier. The ceiling rattled. In the factory above, machines
rumbled to life as the skin-magic of two hundred workers flowed into them.

The hours blurred into each other. Old Rosie groaned. There came the sound
of water trickling, and the stench of freshly voided pee. Ju wanted to soothe Rosie
and remind her it would soon be over, but she could not afford the risk. She kept her
eyes closed, her mouth slack and let a wisp of drool run down her chin in case the
attendant was looking.

Ju longed to stretch her muscles, wriggle her toes, flex her fingers – anything
to ease the cramp spreading up her backbone. For the twentieth time, she cursed the
chairs’ inventors for not thinking to pad them or mould them into a comfortable
shape. No doubt they’d planned it this way, which was why resisters like her were
eventually discovered. Not because their heart-magic betrayed them, but because
their chairs were so damnably hard.

At last, the electrodes grew warm again, signalling that the shift had ended. Ju
waited unmoving until she heard the coughing and shuffling of the others around her
waking up. The thought of the attendant pawing her again made her skin crawl, so
she wriggled out of the electrodes and untied her head straps herself.

“Don’t you be breaking them, Missy,” he said from three chairs away. “Or the
mages will be billing you for a new set.”

Ju bit back a curt reply. She expected Old Rosie to admonish him with yet
another lewd insult; but the woman sat stiffly, her face pinched and grey in the head
straps, her eyes blank.

For several choked breaths Ju tried to convince herself that Old Rosie was
merely taking her time waking up – that the puddle beneath her chair meant she’d
started the morning with too much gin. But when Ju looked again, she could no
longer fool herself. Old Rosie was dead. Her electrodes had taken too much magic.

“You killed her,” Ju spat at the attendant. “You should have seen she was
getting over-drained, but you didn’t care.”

He kept his back turned and continued to unfasten the electrodes from a man
in a swoon three chairs down. “Watch your tongue, Missy.”

“Hush!” a woman said. She slipped her hand in Ju’s. “There’s nothing we can
do. Get your boots on, before the mages hear you.”

The woman looked pale from her prolonged swoon. Ju realized with a start
that it was Amelia Birch, the baker’s wife. The poor thing looked so sickly that Ju
had not recognized her.

“We can’t just leave her,” Ju said. “If Mama were here, she’d…” Her voice
trailed away.

Mama would have hurried Ju out as fast as the crowd would allow.

Amelia proffered Ju’s socks and boots. “You can’t be risking yourself over
someone already lost.”

The strained patience in Amelia’s voice made Ju feel like a child. Sniffing,
she put on her socks and boots. Her legs shook as she made her way to the end of the
row. She wanted to sit down, but not in any chair this room could offer. Her head
throbbed, partly from losing her skin-magic, and partly from the effort of keeping her
heart-magic hidden. She wanted to sleep and cry and curse all at once. She wanted to
grab hold of the attendant’s weedy shoulders and shake him until her fingers sparked.

Amelia took her hand. “Don’t make them punish you. It’s not what your
mother would have wanted.”

Ju glanced over at the mages. Their faces looked as bored and complacent as
ever. Something inside her snapped. “They killed her! Just like they killed Mama,
they killed her!” Anger sent heart-magic tingling at her fingertips. Afraid that Amelia
would feel it, or that the mages would see, Ju clenched her fists, forced it down.

“Hush.” Amelia put her arm around Ju’s waist and steered her into the lines of
workers shuffling to the exit.

#

Head pounding, Ju focussed on dodging potholes and wheel ruts, following
the road as quickly as her shaking legs would allow. Workers in overalls, drab
shapeless shifts, leggings and coarse overcoats jostled either side of her. The ground
shook with the clunk of conveyor belts snaking out from windows six storeys above
where ragged men on narrow ledges lugged out boxes of machine parts. On the road beneath, teams of human-shaped automatons stood as tall as lampposts, unloading the boxes from the conveyors and stacking them into steam lorries. Smoke hissed and plumed from their neck vents, staining the mist dark.

Amelia snorted out a harsh laugh. “Every fog has a sooty lining. Old Rosie must have known she’d go today. That’s why she gave cheek to the attendant. She’s been wanting to for months.”

Ju huddled into her coat. She could not bring herself to talk, knowing that if she tried, she’d babble about how tempted she was to join the Groundists. So what if their agents were under persecution? She’d beg them to teach her how to use her heart-magic to help them. She’d turn it against the mages until every last powerhouse fell and their factories fell with them…

Her neck pricked. Bolstered by the idea of rebellion, she nevertheless forced herself to remain silent. If she spoke up now, Amelia would tell her husband, and her husband would tell his friends, and before Ju knew it the mages would be dragging her away to suck out her heart-magic day in and day out like they’d sucked out Katy’s. There’d be no escape and no means to stand up for herself. Ever.

Amelia rattled out a cough and spat onto the road as a gentleman in white breeches and swallowtail jacket veered past her.

“Control yourself, woman,” he said, testily. He lit up his fingers with skin-magic, sending out ribbons of yellow light onto the path in front of him.

Ju poked her thumb rudely at his retreating back. “Smells like a powerhouse owner. I’d like to see how long he’d last in electrodes.”

Amelia snickered and fell silent. Ju thought about old Rosie strapped dead in her chair, her eyes blank and soulless. Her throat ached at the thought that Mama must have looked the same.

“How often have you been submitting?” Amelia asked.

“Weekly.” Ju drew her coat tighter, despite knowing it would take more than a layer of felt to warm her.

“And you’re still tinkering at Grindle’s?”

Ju sighed. “Only in the repair shop. If my heart wasn’t set on designing, I’d have given up months ago.”

“Grindle lets you submit?”

“He wants it. He’s docked our pay to force us. Rumour has it he owns some
of the powerhouses.”
   Amelia hawked and spat.

   Ju’s thoughts strayed back to old Rosie, but she saw her mother’s face instead.
Swallowing against rage, she asked, “What about you? How often do you submit?”
   “Monthly. It’s all I can take.” Amelia coughed. “I wish I could do more. The
pay’s a boon, but it barely lasts a week, what with the rent and little ones to feed.
Then it takes me a fortnight to get over it. As for making finger-light, I’ve not had
strength enough for months.”
   “And your husband? Does he submit?”
   “Can’t. Not enough magic to outshine a taper.”
   “I’m sorry.”
   “It’s not your fault, pet. Fate works in mysterious ways. She made you strong
for a reason. Best not to waste it in a powerhouse.”

   Ju lifted her chin. “I won’t.”
   “Your mother’d be proud,” Amelia said, wistfully. “You’re just like her. But
you know, if she were still here, she’d want you to leave the city, like your sisters did.
Have you heard from them? Do they write?”

   Ju clenched her fists, afraid anger would make them spark. If she were really
like her mother and sisters, she would not have been cursed with heart-magic. It
would not be tingling at her fingertips, like it did now — like it always did when her
skin-magic was low.
   “They write sometimes,” she said at last. “When they have time between
caring for their babies and working and submitting to powerhouses.”
   Amelia clicked her tongue. “It’s no different in Portsville then? There’s no
escape.”
   “There’s not.”

   A night bird shrieked above, irate in the black slash of night between
buildings. The air sizzled with the thrum of foundries from upriver. Cooking smells
swirled in the thickening mist, heavy with coal-smoke from the tenements and
factories not yet fuelled by the powerhouses.

   Ju watched the workers straggling home ahead of her, their bodies ingrained
with oil, their skin-magic drained, shoulders stooped, fingers unlit. Soon real work
would be scarce for even them. Then there’d be nothing but the powerhouses until
everyone ended up drained like Rosie.
The idea of joining the Groundists seemed impossible already. A dream.

“Damn the mages,” Ju spat. “Damn their greed and may their heart-magic be the death of them.”

The streets at Tendrill’s Edge were half-lit, half-ruined and stagnant; but they were far enough from the powerhouses and the churn of the factories for Ju to at least call them home. It barely mattered that their open sewers overflowed, or that fog wreathed the street lamps, casting oily shadows onto the rutted dirt below. The tenements that lined the pavements, as tall as warehouses, were the only homes she had known.

At the lime-washed door to the bakery, Amelia gave Ju a long, motherly hug. “You take care now.”

Ju managed a brief smile. “Not much else I can do till my skin-magic replenishes.”

She looked across the road to her tenement window on the second floor, hoping and praying that Papa would be home. But the window was unlit; and the hearth, no doubt, would be cold.

He’d set out that morning looking for work, despite knowing there would be little chance of finding it. But without a job, what else could a man do, except look forward to the powerhouse and the wasted days in a tavern afterwards?

She started across the road, disappointment flaring into anger. At her tenement block, she lumbered up the dark, musty stairwell, tripped and stubbed her toe. She tried to conjure finger-light, but her skin-magic was still too weak. Then her heart-magic shifted, threatening to take its place. She clenched her fists, reeled it in.

“Who needs light, anyway?” she muttered. “Who needs a fire? Who needs food? And if anyone needs a drunken sot for a Papa, it’s certainly not me!”

At the top of the stairs, she heard the squeak of a boot and froze.

“You should’na be prattling in the gloom like that.” The voice was male and sure of itself, filled with the clipped tones of a foreigner.

Ju exhaled with relief. It was her friend, Forley Letonder. She squinted into the darkness and could barely make out his tall, lean silhouette waiting by her door. “If I were a thief,” he added. “You’d be knocked flat by now.”

“You shouldn’t be lurking without a light,” she said.

“You should’na be either.”
Bristling, Ju unlocked the door, her retort a tight lump in her throat. She took off her cap, hung it on the nail by the closet. She knew she must look a fright – hair falling out from the morning’s neat bun, eyes dark-ringed and dull, boots grimy from the walk past the factories. But she didn’t care and was too tired and too cold to take off her overcoat.

Forley lit up his fingers with skin-magic. Pale yellow light haloed about him, accentuating his keen forehead and sharp nose. He tossed his ropey, black hair. Its trinkets jingled.

Shivering, Ju found a candle, lit it with a flint. She checked Papa’s room to see if he’d taken himself to bed; then clicked her tongue when she saw he hadn’t.

Fingers dimming, Forley said, “The powerhouse will kill you.”

“It’ll kill us all.”

“Only because you let it.”

Ju slipped off her boots and looked around. The kitchen alcove with its beaten metal tub, open shelves and wood table was as clean as she’d left it that morning. The kettle was untouched and Mama’s hand-woven rug by the hearth was unsoiled with coal dust. Papa, she supposed, must have gone straight out after getting up.

She saw Forley watching her, his brown eyes as hard as carapaces.

She was in no mood to argue, so she turned her back and fixed the hearth. If she were alone, she would have used heart-magic to light the flame; but it was second nature to never let anyone see it – not even a friend like Forley – so she used a match.

“If it was just myself to think about,” she said. “I’d leave this minute.”

“You’re a grown woman. He should let you go.”

“Where?”

Forley held her gaze, his face unreadable. “I know not how you sleep so long, so helpless in the powerhouse.” He spoke awkwardly and Ju realized that his lapse into the pattern of his native tongue meant he was unsure about what to say next.

“Every time I believe I can be strong like you,” he said. “Every time I change my mind.”

If only you knew I didn’t sleep, she wanted to tell him. Instead, she went back to fixing the fire.

“I cannot stay,” he continued. “Grindle’s docked my pay yet again. I refuse to
submit to the powerhouse to make up for it. I’ve purchased a cabin on a freighter.
Taking me home.”

Ju prodded the fire. “So soon? Does Grindle know?”

“Grindle can rot soulless for all I care.”

“It’s all right for you. You’re not the one to face his rage when he learns the repair shop’s short of a tinkerer. I’ll be doing double time till he finds a new one. There’ll be none as good as you.”

Forley’s lean face grew harsh. “I’ll miss you too.”

Ju stormed to her bed in the corner and flopped onto the covers. She rubbed her temples, trying to curb the burgeoning ache behind them. “I’m drained. I can’t think.”

Forley reached beneath his waistcoat and brought out a package wrapped in tissue paper. He unwrapped it to reveal the dragonfly automaton Ju had constructed weeks before. He wound it up and nestled it in his palm. Its wings fluttered, whirred.

“I want you to keep it.”

“I made it for you,” Ju said petulantly.

Forley’s eyes brightened. “I checked the pneumatics. Your work is made of genius. The wings – their design is perfect. Construct its body from something lighter and stronger, and it’ll fly. You’ll earn yourself a fortune.”

“You mean Grindle will earn a fortune. This is not Cornica.”

Forley’s brown eyes searched hers. “There’ll be room for you on the freighter if you want.”

“I can’t afford the fare…”

The implications of what Forley had offered, sank in. She didn’t know what to say.

“I’ll lend it to you.” He lowered the dragonfly onto the table. “Make these in Cornica and you’ll be rich enough to buy a freighter for yourself.”

“How will I pass the sentries? They’ll take one look at my work card and arrest me for trying to leave.”

“We’ll bypass them.” Forley pulled two small booklets from his jacket pocket. “If all else fails, I have these – false permissions – complete with a mage’s stamp.” He paused, grinned. “Well, close enough to a mage’s stamp.”

“I can’t.” Ju shifted her gaze to Papa’s empty bedroom. In a small voice, she added, “It’s not…it would not be right.”
Forley looked insulted. “Ju, I promise I’ll not let anything happen to you. I have money enough for us both. We’ll travel in a perfect, decent manner.”

Ju’s cheeks stung. When she’d first entered the workshop at nearly sixteen, Forley had already come of age. She’d looked up to him as if he were a brother. He’d treated her accordingly. But now, four years later, their age gap no longer mattered. She enjoyed matching his cynical wit and had often caught herself wondering how it would be if their friendship should turn into something more.

“Forley, I trust you,” she said curtly. “I can’t leave Papa without so much as preparing him first.” She closed her eyes, rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m afraid I’ve sprung this onto you too quickly. I was willing to wait; but now I cannot.”

Ju was about to ask “why” when a clatter of footsteps rose up from the stairwell.

“Ju?” Papa called out, his words slurring. “Ju, are you home? I’ve lost me key. Ju?”

Ju sat up, swung her legs over the bed. Sweet Fate, don’t let him be too plastered, she prayed.

Before Ju could drag herself to her feet, Forley was at the door, letting Papa in. Papa gripped the wall, swayed. Ju groaned inwardly at the reek of gin and the sight of his food-stained shirtfront.

With Forley’s help, she dragged Papa to his bed. “You should go,” Ju said to Forley as Papa slumped onto the mattress. “He’ll be terribly hurt if he knew you saw him.”

“I do not think anything could hurt him right now,” Forley said.

Ju sniffed. “Try not to miss your freighter.”

When Forley frowned, she couldn’t tell if she’d upset him or if he was thinking of something equally cutting to say back to her. But Forley was always quick with his answers, so she let him be and hurried downstairs to draw water from the boiler.

But the gas flame was out and the water cold.

She hit the tap hard with the palm of her hand. “Damn.”

Forley approached from behind, his leather boots squeaking. Thinking he meant to say goodbye, Ju struggled to keep her voice steady. “I hope Cornica treats you well.”
Forley surprised her and confused her by putting his arm about her shoulders. He drew her close.

Grateful for his warmth against her extraction-chilled skin, she leaned into him.

“Ju,” he said. “I want you to understand why I cannot stay.”

The bucket was almost full. Forley let go of her shoulders and turned off the boiler tap. He plunged his hand into the water.

At once, the water fizzled, steamed. The bucket handle grew warm. Forley withdrew his hand.

Ju looked at him, agape. “Fates alive, you have heart-magic?” She lurched the bucket away from him, tipped its contents onto the floor, then looked on in horror at the rising steam. “You could have just told me. If someone comes in and sees what you’ve done…”

Forley shrugged. He laid his fingers on her arm and sent her a surge of skin-magic, well-wishing her so deeply that her bones tingled. “Get some more water and see to your da. Then we can talk.”

#

Ju took off Papa’s soiled shirt and sponged him down as best as decency would allow. She helped him into a nightshirt and stood back. She wanted to shout at him for being stupid and selfish; but at the same time, her heart clenched at seeing him sickly. His portly face seemed more sallow and more fragile than ever.

She took his hand and tried to well-wish him; but her skin-magic was still too weak. Steeling herself, she turned away.

“Ju, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” He paused. “I went out to get work. But the line-up was fifty men long. I knew you were at the powerhouse, so I tried there too. But they turned me away. They said my skin-magic was too weak. They didn’t want me wasting a chair.”

She turned in time to see him struggle to sit up; then fall back again, exhausted. “There’s no future for us,” he said. “None at all. Without me to tie you down, you’ll be free to leave, find somewhere better.”

“You don’t have to destroy yourself for me to do that,” Ju said tartly.

He winced. “Promise me you’ll go anyway.”

“I’ll promise you nothing. I’ll go when I’m good and ready.”

He gave a twitch of a smile. “He’s here, isn’t he? Your friend. Forley.”
Ju nodded.

“What keeps you from him? He’s a good man. There’s not many left.”

Ju sniffed. “In three weeks, I’ll have money enough to join the guild.”

Papa shook his head. “Ju, Ju, Ju. We both know the guild can’t save you. It’s a dream.”

Ju waited for him to say more. Instead he reached for her. “Just for a moment,” he said.

Hesitantly she curled her fingers around his, knowing what he was about to do. “You don’t have to,” she said.

But he did anyway, sending her a weak surge of well-wishing. “If I could, I’d give you everything,” he said.


Papa smiled wanly. “You’re a strong girl. Don’t let the likes of me keep you here.”

The emptiness in his eyes suddenly reminded her of how Mama had looked the day before she’d died. But when she tried to picture Mama’s face, she saw Rosie’s as well, the two women’s features blurring into one, drained and soulless.

She started for the door. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

She found Forley brewing a pot of tea – the legal way – using a kettle on the fire. He poured a cup for Ju and offered her a corn cake he must have purchased from Amelia’s bakery on the way in. They ate side by side in the two sagging armchairs by the hearth, but Forley seemed lost for words.

“It wasn’t always like this for him,” Ju said.

Forley huffed. “He’s not the only man without a job.”

“No he’s not,” Ju admitted tartly. “He’s not the only one to lose his wife in a powerhouse, either. But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

Forley stared into the fire through narrowed eyelids. “Ju, I cannot stay. My heart-magic is weak. Nowhere near strong enough to shield itself in an extraction chair. I refuse to allow Grindle to force me into one. I fear he’ll make it compulsory.”

He checked his pocket watch, stood up and buttoned his jacket. “The freighter leaves at sunrise. The next one is three months away.” He took out a handful of shillings from his pocket. “I do not suppose you would accept a loan? In case you changed your mind?”

Touched, Ju shook her head. The throbbing at her temples spread out in a
painful band across her forehead.

“Damn your prattling workers’ pride,” Forley said. “It’ll be the death of you.” He mended the fire and sat down again.

Ju stared into the gathering flames. A log shifted, startling her. “You’re the first worker I’ve met with heart-magic since they took Katy Boffin. I feared I was the only one left; but of course, those who have it keep it hidden. So how could I ever know?”

If Forley was surprised at her confession, he did not show it. He kept his gaze on the fire. Then he looked up, his eyes hard. “Come with me now.”

“I can’t. Not like that. Besides, heart-magic will be restricted to mages wherever I go. If I accompanied you to Cornica, would anyone teach a worker like me how to wield it?”

Forley shook his head. “If you keep your magic to yourself, you won’t be punished. You won’t end your life feeding mages from an extraction chair.”

“At least here, I have Groundists. They can teach me. Even if it means I must fight the mages, the choice will be mine.”

“Groundists,” Forley repeated bitterly. “Don’t you think I’ve already looked into that? They’re weak. It’s only a matter of time before they’re beaten. Besides, in Cornica there are no powerhouses.”

“How do you know Cornican mages aren’t building them as we speak? How can you bear being helpless? Our heart-magic’s a gift. No one has the right to stop us from using it. And no one has the right to force us to sell our skin-magic either.”

Forley shook his head. “Ju, I’m a designer – an artist – not a fighter.” His eyes looked empty, defeated. Sighing, he stood up, leaned over her and brushed his lips against her forehead. “Don’t let the powerhouse kill you first.”

Surprised, afraid and saddened all at once, Ju put her finger to where he’d kissed her, as if in doing so, at least part of him would stay. If she begged him to wait a few days more, she felt certain he would. But the next freighter was three months away. If anything happened to him between now and then, it would be her fault.

Abruptly, he made for the door, picking up her key on the way out. She could not believe he was really going. Even after she heard the door open and close, the turning of the lock from the other side, and the scrape of the key over the floorboards as he slid it beneath the door back to her. It wasn’t until she heard his footsteps clattering down the stairs, that she realized she should have kissed him back.
“Forley!” she called out. “Take care.”
But there was no reply, except for the crackle of the fire and the hoarse rattle of Papa snoring in the bedroom behind her.

Chapter 2

The Fear whispered, piercing the shifter’s consciousness like a thorn.

Ruksinubus. Ruksin. Ruk...

There was no escaping it. Even when the shifter stirred from its decades-long slumber. Even when it fled deeper into the winding tunnels beneath the city. Still, the Fear whispered, babbling of magic – too much magic – and of humans, mages, demons and machines.

The whisper became a cry, a howl, a scream filled with the foreboding of a world turned insane. Afraid for its own sanity, the shifter fled through the tunnels into bedrock, reaching its tendrils into ever-widening circles, seeking out other shifters.

Their minds did not seek back. Only the Fear, growing louder.

Ruksinubus. Ruksin. Ruk...

Human words! Their sound felt familiar, yet they did not fit well in the shifter’s age-old memory.

Ruksinubus. Ruksin...

Finally, the shifter understood. *Ruk!* It was the name a man had given it centuries before, when shifters and men were not yet enemies. But the whisperer’s voice was a child’s voice. So how did it know?

*Help...*

“How large Forsham had grown. How alien its clangour of machines. How dreadful its reek of smoke and rot and oil and the oppressive taint of humanity.

Shuddering, contracting into a mist-like, ball-like wisp of shadow, Ruk fled to the sanctuary of sky to look down on rooftops spreading out from the river, a patchwork of iron and slate cowering beneath layers of soot.
The Fear howled like a demon, like a wound unhealing.
To shut it out, Ruk needed a body; and needed it soon.

Night fell. Rain drizzled. Ruk floated high above roads, between buildings, between houses, hovels and taverns, watching and listening while humans talked, argued, ate, drank, rutted and slept.

The Fear howled.

Ruk fled to the solitude of a wooded park, where the grind of machinery was muted, and the Fear less urgent, less compelling. The sharp scent of conifers reminded Ruk of how the land used to look before humans arrived and imprisoned it in a city. Surrounded by silence, the Fear quietened, lulled by the memory, grateful for the solitude.

A groan rose up from a thicket. The Fear urged Ruk to turn away. Too late, Ruk saw a woman in rags dying alone in a pool of blood. Tasting her memories, he found them sweet.

*She’s powerless*, the Fear howled. *Leave her, leave her...* 

The howling became a screech, forcing Ruk to wait at a distance while the woman’s memories dissipated, faded, vanished.

Later, by the dank steps of a tavern, Ruk found a man with a battered face lying beneath an unlit street lamp. His dying memories pulsed with the corrupt learnings of a mage.

*Leave him*, the Fear urged. *Go to the wharves. To the end and the beginning.*

Filled with a sudden and inexplicable dread, Ruk followed the Fear’s directions to the river where dredges churned, boats rumbled and engines hammered like buckshot. At the wharves, a shout rose up, harsh and authoritative.

“You! Foreigner! Freeze!”

Ruk followed the voices to see sentries running and a glint of steel as a knife slashed a bloody trail along a young man’s throat. Head thrust backwards, blood streaming, the man sank to his knees.

The sentries kneeled, faces complacent, bodies held proud in their uniforms of red. The killer wiped his knife on the fallen man’s breeches. “You shouldn’t have left your freighter,” he said. “Now even a mage can’t help you.”

Silver coins, pulled from a waistcoat. A pewter watch, torn from its chain.
The sentries muttered; and fled.

Ruk clutched the dying man’s memories, tasting them, ready to reject them should the Fear demand it. But the Fear remained poised hovering at the edge of Ruk’s consciousness, urging him to stay.

The man stirred, drew in a gurgling, bloodied breath, breathed out again, stilled.

*Take him*, the Fear demanded. *Now.*

Free at last, Ruk captured the memories and drank them. At once, his misty outlines contracted, solidified into bones, muscles, sinews, skin, imprinting on the dying man’s shape, absorbing everything he had seen or felt or known. The oppressive dark of the city receded until it seemed that Ruk peered out from two black holes in the bony recesses of a cave. His unclothed skin stung with the bite of winter. The clunk and clang of machinery still pummelled from a distance, but soon it grew fainter and easier to ignore.

A creature of flesh now, he did not ache with the city’s wrongness. He could no longer hear the Fear whispering.

Grateful, Ruk drew away from the shell of the dead man, seeing it for what it was: a husk, a face that now mirrored his own. Ruk’s newly-formed heart beat with the understanding that the sentries were murderers, scum. He wanted to pursue them, hear them scream, tear them apart.

He clenched his fists, drew in long, deep breaths, telling himself that corruption bred only corruption. His rage diminished. His heart slowed. The dead man’s final memories washed through him.

He closed his eyes and saw a freighter…

...the deck, rocking softly in the wake of a passing dredge. His lips aching from the memory of a kiss. Her face...

...grey-eyed, blonde hair tied up, tamed, yet spilling free in wisps of curls about her forehead and cheeks. He wants to reach out and trace the broad sweep of her forehead, the high curve of her cheek, her defiant, yet delicate chin. He knows she will not cry. He has never seen her shed tears and wonders if she knows how, wishes that she will, wants to hold her and convince her to accompany him.

She stands tall, looking at once fragile and strong. He knows her mind is set. He turns away and thinks only of her as he closes the door and faces the dark all the way to the wharves, where he stands and watches...
...his hands gripping the iron railing above the gunwales. No matter how many steps he takes, he knows he will always – always – be wanting to step back.

Ruk opened his eyes, knowing what would come next, not wanting to relive it; but the memory would not leave...

...he lowers the gang plank. His skin-magic casts ribbons of light into the wharves. He runs, takes care to avoid the checkpoints; but the sentries find him anyway. They laugh at his false papers, telling him he should not have returned, taunting him, challenging him to escape.

...he draws on heart-magic, but it’s too weak, too clumsy, too late.

...he expects the knife even before he sees it. He lashes out, knowing that the gloved hand will find its mark regardless. He flinches the instant before the blade pierces his skin.

“No one will miss him,” a sentry mutters, pocketing the papers. “According to our records, he’s no longer here.”

...he falls, heart-magic sparking at his fingers. His final thought:

Ju...

Trembling, Ruk silenced himself mid-scream. The peaking of grief was a terrible thing, a madness without end, a life without sleep, without meaning. Gritting his teeth, he sifted deeper into the man’s — Forley’s — memories, dredging up every emotion he had felt for anyone or any thing. One by one he buried them where their intensity would not torment him.

He undressed Forley’s remains as respectfully as the moment would allow. He shrugged on his clothes, grateful for the cover of darkness where his bloodied front would not be noticed. With the stealth and urgency of a wolf removing evidence of its kill, Ruk dragged the body to the edge of the wharf and tipped it into the river. He watched it float and reluctantly sink.

He stared at the water, his mind clear — clearer than it had been for years, decades, centuries. The Fear whispered, but softly now and content, like a baby sleeping, like a leaf poised to unfurl.

Turning from the wharves, head bowed, hands balled in his pockets, Ruk tried not to think about Ju.
Chapter 3

If the resonance of Papa’s snoring were a reliable enough gauge, he would not be stirring until midday at least. Ju took his hand and sent him as much well-wishing as her depleted skin-magic would allow. The smell of gin still hung about him, but she kissed his forehead anyway, cheered by the knowledge that if he’d lost his key as claimed, he’d not go to the tavern if he couldn’t lock up on his way out.

Tonight, after she’d collected her weekly wage from Grindle, she’d tell Papa she’d be seeking employment elsewhere, that her future in designing was as good as dead or as useful as a week in a powerhouse. But before that, she’d buy his favourite dinner of sausages and onions. Her stomach growled at the thought, but there was no time for breakfast so she laced up her black, calf-length boots and promised to buy herself something to eat on the way to work.

On the bustling road outside, pre-dawn air cut through her coat and leggings, chilly with the threat of winter. As she made her way past the ramshackle tenements, the horrors of the previous day seemed a lifetime away. Not that she’d forget them. Old Rosie would no longer be sitting on the costermonger’s steps, reading palms. Papa would not find work. And Mama would never sit by the hearth again, mending shirts.

Her eyes prickled. It would not do arriving at work crying. Forley would growl at her—

Forley...

Even he was lost to her now.

She imagined he’d be safe on his freighter, setting out on his five-week voyage to Cornica. How preposterous that he’d asked her to accompany him, but that was just his generosity talking. Now he was gone. If he had any sense in that Cornican brain of his, he’d not be back.

#

Ju picked up her pace, cross at herself for running late just as the clock on Blackwater Bridge struck six. At the factories, where grimy, brick buildings crowded the roads like looming giants, a sudden ruckus broke out ahead. The air smelled of smoke and burning rubber. There was no time to take the long way around so Ju
pressed forward into the gathering crowd.

As far as she could tell, a loading automaton had stepped out onto the road without looking. It now stood paralysed, a ten-foot parody of a drunkard. A gilded steam-carriage lay on its side at the automaton’s feet, engines groaning, iron wheels spinning, roof funnels spewing black, oily smoke. Beside it, a mage drew himself shakily to his feet, his dandyish coat torn and bloodied. His fingers glowed red and bristling with heart-magic.

The babbling crowd pushed forward, carrying Ju with it. Above, workers on the sixth-storey ledges called out insults. A factory boss leaned out from a window, waved his arms and shouted, “You think because you’re a mage, you can do what you want with us?”

The crowd froze. Ju tried to back away, but the press of bodies pushed her forward.

“It’s not the machine’s fault,” the boss added. The cut of his suit marked him as wealthy; but his manner was as common as any worker’s. “Your carriage was running too fast. You’re damn lucky you didn’t hit a tram.”

The mage drew himself up to his full height, and winced. Ju wondered why he hadn’t used his heart-magic to heal himself. Then the crowd shifted a little, giving her a better view of the carriage.

Sprawled beside it, was a young woman, her face striped with blood, her eyes open and staring. Heart-magic glowed in a reddish halo about her. Not the woman’s, but the mage’s. Clearly he’d tried to save her, but her injuries had been too severe.

Ju could not tear her gaze away from the dead woman’s eyes. She doubted they’d ever seen the inside of a powerhouse, yet the opaque horror in them was the same horror that Ju had seen in Old Rosie’s. She looked away.

At that moment, she caught a glimpse of a young Cornican standing to the side of the mage. If she hadn’t known better she would have thought it was Forley, but when she looked back, he had already turned around to move away. His black, ropey hair was not threaded with trinkets.

Not Forley, then, but—

Ju glimpsed him again through the press of workers. His coat had the same faded shoulders as the one that Forley had worn the night before. “Forley,” she shouted, but her voice was drowned out when the mage called up to the boss at the window above – something about preparing himself to be punished.
The boss pulled back inside and slammed the window closed.

“Demons’ balls to you,” the mage shouted in a most undignified manner. He lifted his hand.

Heart-magic flashed from his fingers. A whirling ball sped upwards, hit the window and exploded, sending a torrent of bricks and ledge-workers plummeting. The crowd surged in frantic retreat.

Ju’s hands tingled hotly as fear surged through her. The shrieking crowd pummelled her as she struggled to keep her balance. A flaming conveyor belt whipped through the air above her head. In her panic to dodge it, her hands sparked. Two hefty labourers either side of her glared and pulled away, giving her space enough to zigzag ahead towards the wider and less congested Hammering Way.

She reached the corner, her breath rasping in her throat. The tips of her fingers burned and glowed red with heart-magic. She tried to conjure skin-magic to cool them but her reserves were still too depleted from yesterday’s extraction. “Damn,” she muttered, thrusting her fists into her coat pockets.

The crowd began to disperse. It was foolish to think that no one had noticed her heart-magic, so she fled through the jumble of market stalls. At Smotter Alley, she caught her breath beneath a portico at the rear access to an apothecary shop.

She glanced about for a way out. Her hands were growing hotter by the moment – hotter than they had last year when Papa had told her that Mama had died. Back then, he’d doused her in water, telling her that if she wasn’t careful, she’d burn herself up.

Water! Yes, that was what she needed. She cast her gaze down the alley, praying for a trough or tap, then cursed herself for not remaining by the market stall where she could have plunged her hands in a costermonger’s bucket. But what could she have done then? Apologised for cooking his fish? Paid the hoards of onlookers to not report her? But her pockets were empty and the streets, no doubt, were full of mages seeking revenge over the carriage accident.

She closed her eyes, clenched her fists and concentrated on reeling her magic in.

It was useless. Her hands grew hotter. Her heart-magic swelled and spread along her arms. She opened her eyes to see it haloing in a red glow from her wrists to shoulders. She pulled her hands out of her pockets and held them up, hoping stupidly that the air would cool them, knowing that it would not.
The glow began to pulse to the frantic rhythm of her heartbeat. Certain that even water would not save her now, she stepped out from the portico in search of it anyway.

The footfall behind her was light. Before she could react, a hand grabbed her, wrenching her backwards. Her scream was cut short by another hand clamping over her mouth. She tried to bite it, but it evaded her teeth with uncanny accuracy. Her fingers sparked. Pain shot down her arms.

She kicked out only to be rewarded by a lean body ramming into her back, pushing her forward and pinning her against the wall.

“Ju, keep still,” he hissed. “No time for pleasantries unless you want us both to fry.” The voice was familiar, but she could not place it.

He loosened his grip on her mouth. Ju twisted to the side and sank her teeth into his palm.

“Don’t,” he growled. “I’m trying to help.”

You’ve got a strange way of showing it, she wanted to say. Then it occurred to her, that he’d called her Ju. Stranger still, her hands were no longer burning. She let her jaw go slack, waited.

“That’s better,” he said.

His body felt like a slab of ice pressing against her back. A deep peacefulness worked its way through her. Her thudding heart slowed. “What are you doing?” she blurted.

“Shush! Not now.”

She shivered as coldness enveloped her. Heart-magic flooded out of her, making burning trails through her bones, growing impossibly cold as it reached her skin. Oddly, she knew he was stealing it, but no longer feared him. When he loosened his grip, she moved her head a little and saw that her arms were no longer glowing.

“You had no idea how to stop it from burning you up, did you?” he asked.

She tried to wriggle out of his grip. He tightened himself about her, but not as roughly as the first time. “How could I? No skin-magic.”

He snorted derisively. “As if that would have helped.”

“Who are you?”

“A friend. Though I suppose you wouldn’t think so if I showed myself.”

His voice had the same timbre as Forley’s, but did not carry his clipped Cornican accent. He smelled of stale blood, wood smoke and a body in dire need of a
wash.
Not at all like Forley.
“Tell me who you are and let me decide,” she said.
She felt a soft weight press against her scalp and realized he was resting his chin on the top of her head.
“You’ve got more heart-magic than even I can deal with,” he said. “You really should learn how to use it.”
“Is that an offer to teach me?”
Silence.
She added, “Are you a Groundist?”
“Of course not,” he sneered. “What would they know?”
His body began to grow warm again. The flow of magic through her bones eased, but her skin remained chilled. It disturbed her that his closeness comforted her.
The idea of him leaving seemed even less appealing. She closed her eyes, remembering how it felt when Forley had stood with her in the boiler room with his arm about her shoulders.
“Don’t go near the powerhouse tomorrow,” the stranger snapped. “Go to Grindle’s if you must, but take the long way home. I don’t want to see you hurt.”
Ju opened her eyes. “What do you mean?”
He let go of her and lurched away. She swung around in time to see him fleeing through the alley, his ropey black hair spilling about his shoulders.
“Stop,” she called out, starting after him.
He rounded the corner onto Hammering way, clearly meaning to hide in the crowd. She followed, but he was too quick. Soon she lost sight of him. “Damn,” she spat. She slumped against a wall, folded her arms about her waist and shivered.
Had he attacked her? Or saved her, as he’d claimed? Ahead of her, street traffic and the clangour of machinery suddenly made her feel vulnerable again.
She contemplated huddling into a corner until dark, but she was already late for work. The thought that her supervisor, Cornby, would inform Grindle, giving him an excuse to dock her pay even more than he already had, kept her moving. Besides, this morning she had set out to tinker, so tinker she would. Drawing her coat around her, she started out, bewildered by the sheer number of people on the streets. No more than usual, but she imagined they could turn wild again at any moment.
For a long while she struggled to remember which road she should be taking.
She squinted at street signs and stumbled when her attention faltered. She stopped at a food stall and stood near its braziers, hugging herself.

“You all right?” the vendor asked, squinting at her through scratched half-moon glasses. “You look like you’ve been chewed up and spat out.”

Ju mumbled a faint, “yes.”

Smiling, the vendor handed her a cup of sweet, warm tea, which she sipped gratefully while it thawed her from the inside out.

Sweet Fates alive. At this rate, Cornby would be spending her pay already.

#

Somehow, despite the aches and bruises she barely remembered getting, Ju arrived at Grindle’s three hours late. When she entered Repair Shop 18, its bare concrete walls and low gas-lit ceiling seemed like a blessing. Never had the sight of its cluttered workbenches made her feel so welcome before. Strangely, her fellow-tinkerers, barely looked up from their work.

Except for Supervisor Cornby.

Ju took her place at her bench. Cornby made his way over to her, face taut with unveiled shock, making her think that maybe just this once he would not bother to report her. Surely he could see from the singe marks on her coat and the scratches on her face that she’d been caught up near Hammering Way.

He took her work card, but refused to sign it. “The accident, I believe, happened at six thirty-four,” he announced. “You should have been well past it by then, which means you were late to begin with.” He tapped the card with a severely manicured nail. “Does your shift not start at six-thirty sharp?”

Cornby’s jowls hung as limp and pasty as cured cod. It would have been wiser for Ju to have not answered, but her skin magic was still achingly depleted. What remained of her heart-magic niggled.

“I couldn’t help it, sir. Yesterday, I submitted to a powerhouse. It wore me out.”

If Cornby was as loyal to Grindle as he made out to be, he should have been pleased to hear this, but he wasn’t. He gestured about the workroom with a flourish. “Do your colleagues not visit the powerhouse as well? Do you see them signing in late?”

“They didn’t see Old Rosie die from being over drained.”

The other workers gasped. Cornby pressed his lips into a miserly line. “Your
complaint is noted and will be taken into consideration when I make up your pay. He pocketed her work card. “I suggest you do not waste your time arguing.”

He left, slamming the door behind him. The others looked up from their benches, at once curious and dismayed. Bertie brought Ju a cup of water. Annie helped her out of her coat.

“Did you see Forley at all?” Libby asked. “He should be here. Bitter Fate, I hope he’s not one of those who got crushed by the ledges when they fell.”

Ju thought back, picturing it, remembering the crowd pushing her and the stranger pinning her to the wall.

Had the ledges really fallen? And the workers who fell with them…

She shuddered. There must have been twenty at least. “I saw a Cornican in the crowd. But it wasn’t Forley.” She certainly couldn’t mention that Forley was now on his way to Cornica. She wouldn’t put it past Grindle to send out sentries in an airship to drag Forley back.

Libby put her arm about Ju’s shoulders. “Let’s pray he’s only taken the day off. You should have done the same.”

Ju looked about the room, at the concerned faces staring back at her through the piles of clockwork trinkets waiting to be attended to. It all seemed so distant and alien. Ju wondered what in the four Fates’ names she was doing here, anyway. “I can’t afford to be docked,” she said without conviction. “Besides, working is better than lying around watching it happen all over again in my head.”

Libby patted her hand and sent her a weak, but thoughtful surge of well-wishing. “Of course, you’re right. When Cornby’s not watching, I’ll see if I can give you a hand with what he’s put out for you.”

Ju looked over at her bench; and groaned. Its surface was covered with an assortment of clockwork shelf-ornaments – far too many for any one tinkerer to repair in a single day – and each one meaningless.

Steeling herself, she took her place at her stool and sorted the ornaments into piles, realizing that her work at Grindle’s had been just as meaningless all along. She supposed she’d endured it all by telling herself she’d been tinkering for Forley; when in fact it was for Cornby and Grindle. What was the point of that? Cornby was an obnoxious, self-serving slug. Grindle was a mage. If he knew she had heart-magic he’d strap her to a chair and suck it out without so much as a thank you.

“You ’aven’t got your suitor to look after you now,” sneered the broom lad.
His long, freckled face leered at her as he swept up fallen washers and screws from beneath her bench. “I’m s’posing you thought your good luck till now was your own doing.”

“Mr Letonder is not my suitor.” Ju lifted her chin. She picked up a life-sized imitation of an exotic bird and unscrewed the metal plate beneath its wings. Its feathers were real and brightly coloured – much too precious for anything as wasteful as a toy. When the lad continued to stare at her, she added, “Mr Letonder is a good man. He respects his inferiors and superiors alike; but only if they deserve it.”

“La dee dah dee dah,” the lad taunted. “Not all of us can earn a supervisor’s admiration with a pretty face and a teasing hat.” He pushed his broom towards Libby’s bench, his hips wiggling.

Ignoring him, Ju peered into the automaton’s crude inner workings. They were caked with a mixture of cheap oil and dust that looked suspiciously like dandruff. She poked at it gently with a brush. “Pathetic,” she sneered.

“Are you talking about the bird or the broom lad?” Libby asked.

“Both,” Ju muttered without looking up. She forced her mind to go blank, keeping her hands steady. Consoling herself with aligning cogs, she brushed dirt from wheels and ratchets, oiled wing joints, knee joints and tightened up pulleys. Soon, the soft clink and whirr of its clockwork began to calm her. Time slowed. Only her work mattered.

The strident squawk of the lunch siren made Ju jump. Cornby ordered her to keep working. To ease the gathering ache behind her eyes, she glanced up at Forley’s empty workbench, touching the place on her forehead where he’d kissed her. All the heart-magic in the world wouldn’t bring him back now. Nor would it get her a passage to Cornica.

When at last the others returned from lunch, the siren bleeped again, signalling the beginning of Sir Mathias Grindle’s daily inspection. Like all factory owners, he kept an eye on everything from the grandest assembly lines to the lowliest repair shop. Usually, he gave Repair Shop 18 little more than a surly glance, preferring to spend his time with the automaton manufacturers.

When Cornby ushered him through the door, Ju feared she’d not escape lightly.

She froze, her screwdriver embedded in the gaping belly of a clockwork rooster. The workshop buzzed with the clink of repairs being carried out with strained
efficiency. On the surface, all tinkerers seemed intent on their jobs; but Ju knew their ears would be listening for Grindle’s legendary grunts and sniffs which, depending on his mood, could herald either criticism or approval. The tinkerers would also be keeping their eyes averted, afraid to stare at Grindle’s two prosthetic arms, in case their faces betrayed revulsion at the click of its titanium fingers or the skeletal supports along his forearms.

Ju kept her gaze fixed on the rooster’s insides, carefully twisting the screwdriver so as not to damage the weakened clockwork. She could see Grindle through the corner of her eye, ambling from bench to bench, the cogs and gears in his arms whirring as he inspected a clockwork bird here and a prancing pony there. She would have liked nothing more than to have allowed herself to thumb her nose at him and tell him exactly what she thought. But she needed three more weeks pay, so she concentrated on the job at hand.

Then, as if to add insult to the injury, Arvin, Grindle’s over-polished and over-dressed son entered the workshop and took his place at Grindle’s side. As usual, Arvin’s face remained a picture of bored obligation, while his fingers repeatedly pushed at gold-rimmed glasses, adjusting them with nervous precision. A lock of brown hair curled errantly over his forehead.

Sweet, damn fate, Ju prayed silently. Please don’t let him speak to me today.

The memory of the evening when Arvin Grindle tried to dally with her on her way home from the factory was usually enough to send her heart-magic bubbling with indignation. But this time – thanks to the stranger from the alley – it barely reacted, feeling like little more than an annoying itch.

“Miss Weatherton,” the older Grindle said, his words precise and haughty. “I’ve been informed that your work ethic is not up to standard.”

Startled, Ju dropped the screwdriver. “I’m sorry, sir.” She looked up.

He proffered her work card. Ju stared at the miniature brass rivets in his hand’s gleaming surface. She did not know if she was supposed to take the card from him or wait to hear what he had to say.

“Sorry?” Grindle asked incredulously. “The girl cannot look me in the eye, and she says sorry?” He flicked the card onto her bench. The exposed balls and sockets of his wrist joints shimmered in gaslight. Ju shifted her gaze along the length of his shirtsleeve to the place it was rumoured that his arm’s casing melded with the flesh at the shoulder. She wondered if his skin would be puckering beneath pins. Or
maybe the attachment would be flawless like a perfectly welded seam.

“Sir, you’re frightening her,” Arvin murmured.

Grindle rounded on him and held up his other hand. Although it was modelled on the same design as the one that had held the card, its surface was dull and pitted, manufactured from brass. “Be quiet,” Grindle hissed. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

Arvin’s face tensed. He lowered his gaze.

Although Ju knew that Arvin was more than capable of looking after himself, she wondered if he was as downtrodden by Grindle as a common worker. It was absurd that she should feel sorry for him, but at that moment, she could not help it.

Grindle turned back to Ju. “Until you can prove that you’re capable of the required amount of enthusiasm, you are hereby demoted to the position of cleaner. Report to the broom lad for instructions.”

Ju’s draw dropped. “But yesterday, I submitted to the powerhouse. I couldn’t—”

“Of course, you couldn’t,” Grindle interrupted. “I will adjust your pay accordingly.”

Arvin Grindle pushed at his glasses and winced. Sir Mathias cast his gaze around the workshop. “Who, by the way, is the head cleaner in this section?”

“I am, sir.” The same lad who had teased Ju earlier stepped forward, his long face beaming.

Grindle inclined his head graciously. “I trust you will instil into Miss Weatherton the work ethic that your eagerness implies.”

Ju clenched her fists beneath her workbench, but was only half relieved when they did not spark. She waited, unmoving, until the two Grindles and Cornby tired of discussing her shortcomings and departed.

The room bristled with silence. The broom lad leaned his broom against Ju’s workbench and grinned. “Sir Mathias says you’re working for me now.”

“Leave her alone,” Libby warned.

“But Sir Mathias ordered her to—”

Ju nudged the broom with her foot. Its handle fell across the broom lad’s feet. Satisfied, she directed her attention back into the belly of the clockwork rooster. She twisted the screwdriver harder than she needed to. “Grindle did not say that I wasn’t to finish my day’s quota first.”
The broom lad snorted derisively. “I’ll report you for this.”

“You do,” Bertie said, holding up a pair of heavy-duty pliers. “And you’ll find yourself missing a few teeth.”

The lad shot Ju a look of pure spite. He retrieved the broom and left without a word.

“You shouldn’t have threatened him,” Libby said to Bertie. “You’ve only made it worse.”

Ju lowered her screwdriver to the bench. She cast her gaze about the workshop, at the faces who were as dear to her as family: Libby from Lower Slik who’d never looked down on her for living in the slum at Tendrill’s Edge. Bertie from the market tenements, and Loftus, Annie, Lily, Joey, Chas, Queenie, Beryl, Eddie and Ron.

They did not need to speak to her. She did not need to speak to them. The mute concern on their faces told her exactly what she already knew. Tears and pleas would not help anyone.

Sighing, she massaged her temples as if by doing so everything that had happened in the past two days could be erased. She looked over to Forley’s empty stool, wishing that it wasn’t too late to follow him. Lifting her chin, she drew herself to her feet, and gathered her coat.

“Grindle will have to find a new cleaner,” she said firmly. “I’m taking myself home, and I’m not coming back.

Chapter 4

Ruk leaned back in the tub and let the scented water soak into him. Although he’d used coins lifted from a drunken powerhouse attendant to get himself into here, in all fairness, he supposed he should really be thanking Forley’s innate liking for cleanliness. Granted, it was an unnecessary pleasure in the scheme of things, but it never ceased to surprise him how effectively soap and steam could bolster the constitution. Besides, a little self-indulgence never hurt anyone.

He closed his eyes, grateful that the Fear no longer tormented him. He wondered why it had forced him to take so much of Ju’s magic from her. At the same time, he wasn’t about to ask, in case he woke it or startled it and it assailed him again.
with its shrieking, howling terror.

Reluctantly, he climbed out of the tub and padded over the wet, stone floor to the change room. The steamy air teemed with male voices; merchants, bosses and wealthy foreigners preening themselves in various states of undress. Towelling himself down, he wrinkled his nose at Forley’s blood-stained clothes still bundled up in a corner where he’d left them. The excuse that he’d been caught up in the accident near Hammering way was not one that would serve him for much longer. Besides, the constant reminder of the nature of Forley’s death was not particularly comforting.

He cast his gaze about the room and saw promising replacements lying unattended in a pile on the floor nearby.

“Damn slovenly lot,” he said irritably for the benefit of onlookers. “What makes them think they can throw a man’s clothes around like that?” Assuming an eccentric air borrowed from a human memory of decades before, he proceeded to sort through the pile, folding each garment neatly onto a bench, sorting them out as if he knew which piece belonged to whom.

The singlet and plain white shirt looked unremarkable enough so he put those on first. He followed up with standard grey breeches, a waistcoat, black high-collared overcoat and a pair of fur-lined boots. Reassuring himself that the owners of the garments were wealthy enough to not miss them, he made for the door and slipped away, keeping to the backstreets more out of habit than necessity.

His gut gurgled with hunger. The single coin in his stolen coat pocket would buy him a pot of tea, and little else. That was the problem with being embodied. Flesh needed food. Food needed money. He’d neither the time nor the inclination to work for it.

For a while, he wandered aimlessly, sifting through Forley’s memories, unwilling to resort to Gamblers’ Row. When his stomach gurgled with all the emptiness of a man starved, he picked up his pace and followed what Forley knew to be the shortest route.

Disapproval followed him with every step. “Gambling is for the desperate,” Ruk imagined Forley saying.

“But hunger is a desperation of sorts,” he muttered back.

“A day’s work is a better gamble.”

“Not for a shifter in the guise of a mage.”

“But you’re no mage.”
Ruk curled his lip. “And Forley’s no shifter...”

So it went on, all the way to the gambling district until at last he rounded the corner to find brightly lit street lamps where decades before, finger-light would have sufficed.

It surprised him also how little the gaudy facades of gambling dens had changed. Unsettled by Forley’s aversion to the place, he took a seat at an outdoor teashop and purchased a pot of tea and a packet of cigars. Forley hadn’t been a smoker, so Ruk’s first puffs had him coughing and spluttering. Even so, the action of its chemicals in his bloodstream made Forley’s emotions retreat enough for his thoughts to sharpen. When at last he was able to inhale deeply and appreciatively, he watched the comings and goings of the patrons from the gambling den opposite.

Getting in looked easy enough. The sentry at the door was at least seven and a half feet tall and seemed to be there for appearances only. No patron was turned away and none were challenged. It occurred to Ruk that the sentry was rooted to the ground, as if his boots had grown from the cobbles. He sifted through Forley’s memories for an explanation, but found none, apart from the disconcerting suspicion that the sentry was a clockwork automaton that did little more than nod its head or mumble a terse greeting.

Curling his lip at the futility of it, Ruk finished his cigar and ground the butt into the cobbles. He approached the den, ready to explain to the sentry that he was new to the district and had yet to procure a work card; but the sentry merely looked him up and down, stiff-faced and silent, its gears whirring. Steam plumed thinly from a small vent in the back of its neck. It opened the door and gestured for Ruk to proceed.

Tentatively, Ruk stepped inside.

Light exploded in a chaos of blue, red, green and gold. Laughter and voices rose and fell in dissonant unison amid squealing violins, trilling flutes and twanging harps. Ruk cast his gaze to the floor, trying not to focus on all of it at once.

As his senses adapted, he laughed a deep, appreciative rumble.

Unlike their facades, the interiors of gambling dens had come of age since he’d last visited them. He supposed their owners had finally worked out that dim, smoky hovels were not the ideal means to attract customers.

“How does it compare to Cornican establishments?” a woman asked. She threaded her silk-sheaved arm around his. “Is this your first time?”
Her head was barely level with his armpit, her perfume a heady mixture of jasmine and rose. The pout on her exquisitely painted lips suggested she’d been sent to distract him; but there was little chance of that. He preferred his women tall, like Ju—

He swallowed. No, no, no, no, no. It was Forley who preferred Ju. He – Ruk – could not afford to prefer anyone.

The woman’s grey, kohl-rimmed eyes looked him up and down. She smiled as if she liked what she saw, then squeezed her fingers about his arm, sending him a brief surge of well-wishing. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said, lifting her face as close to his ear as her lack of height would allow. “William told me to show you around. He said you’d be interested in seeing the poker automatons first. Come see.” She tugged him forward.

“William?” Ruk asked; then instantly regretted it.

She regarded him again, her eyes narrowing. “Oh. Forgive me. I’ve mistaken you for someone else.” She pulled away.

“No, wait.” Ruk sent her a surge of well-wishing, enough to show his aptitude for influencing the fall of the dice, but not quite enough to compromise her sense of decorum.

Her eyes widened. “Oh.” She fanned her throat with her free hand. “Oh, I say. Your magic is—” She looked around as if to ensure she was not being overheard.

“Tell me, has it been long since you last visited a powerhouse?”

Ruk stooped, putting his mouth close to her ear. “It’s been very, very long.”

“Well, if you intend to play here, you’ll need an escort.” She paused, pursed her lips as if weighing up her options. “You know, I could tell William a little white lie. I could say it was I who invited you in.”

“You could?”

“Yes. Fifty-fifty. Use that unextracted magic of yours to the fullest, and I’ll not tell anyone how you got here.”

“How I got here?”

“Uninvited, I believe.”

“Oh.”

She regarded him. Her dark eyebrows made an interesting contrast to her stylish auburn hair. Up close, he could see that the contours of her face were at once lovely and stubborn. Her eyes, although pale, suggested a presence of mind that
would not be easily fooled. He threw her what he hoped to be Forley Letonder’s most charming grin; and then cut straight to the quick. “Fifty-fifty is about as fair as it gets.”

“Very fair,” she agreed, tightening her arm about his. “Come, do let me show you around.”

From a distance, the games in progress looked alien and incomprehensible. But when Ruk managed to get close enough for a clearer view, he realized they were nothing more than elaborate adaptations of what he already knew. The roulette wheels were larger and more polished but it didn’t take too much scrutiny to see that their spins were easily adjustable, even without the use of skin-magic.

The woman took his hand and guided him past the baccarat, craps and blackjack tables. “Do not concern yourself with these,” she said. “The people who play them are drained of magic, so the stakes are low.”

Ahead of them, a vast saloon jutted out from the rear wall like the prow of a mahogany galleon. “Come,” she said. “Let us relax first.”

Without being asked, the waiter handed her and Ruk each a well-filled glass of Cornican brandy. Ruk downed most of his in a single gulp. He’d not tasted the stuff before, but according to Forley’s memories it was good. Attempting politeness, he said, “I’m afraid I’ve been terribly rude for not introducing myself.”

The woman put her finger to his lips. “I think it’s best we dispense with that ritual. Safer for us both, do you not think?”

He grinned. “A most satisfactory arrangement. You may call me Ruk.”

She frowned. “Ruk? That’s not a Cornican name, is it? If it’s games we must play, I suppose you could call me Blysse.”

“It suits you.”

She looked sad. “Not really. It’s a nickname I once had. Few people know it.”

Ruk felt a sudden and disturbing surge of regret, as if the fault were his. But Forley’s emotions would not help him now, so he buried them before they distracted him.

“Come,” Blysse said, brightly. “Let us play the poker automatons. They’re William’s little obsession. The stakes are higher because they’re impossible to cheat.”

She pulled him towards her and whispered close to his ear, “William owns this establishment, you see.” She pressed a silver coin into his palm. “Your first game is on the house.”
She led him beyond the saloon to an adjoining room where the coloured gaslights and music were no less distracting. She gestured to the two-player poker tables crammed together in rows from wall to wall. A dealer headed each table with a single player sitting opposite. Ruk regarded them curiously. Last time he’d played poker, the tables accommodated six. It occurred to him, that although each dealer was dressed differently, their faces were identical.

His jaw dropped. They were not men. They were in fact, replicas. “Life-sized automatons that do not belch smoke and steam?” he asked. “How?”

Blyssé laughed prettily. “Look at their chairs. They’re solid to the floor because they hide the pipes that are connected to their underground furnaces and machines. Their smoke is vented through a chimney outside. What you see here, are merely their clockwork thought directors.”

“Automatons that play poker!” The idea was impressive. If machines were not so repugnant, he may well have wanted to tinker with one to see how it worked. But that was just Forley’s sentiments and it was best not to encourage them.

Blyssé giggled. “They do not play real poker. They merely shuffle the cards and deal five. The player casts a wager for each hand and if he’s lucky enough to receive four of kind, a full house or a flush, he wins a tidy sum. The outcome is totally random, but the odds are against him, of course.”

“Of course,” Ruk said.

“Would you like to try?”

Ruk shrugged. “How do I use magic to influence the fall?”

Blyssé gave an amused trill. “That is their point. You cannot. William invented the machines to attract customers whose magic is weakened by the powerhouses.” She looked at him, her brow furrowing. “When did you say you last visited a gambling den?”

“I didn’t say.” To change the subject, he sent her a deep surge of well-wishing, enough to show her that his magic was not to be trifled with.

“Well, my word.” Blyssé fanned herself with both hands. “We really are wasting our time with poker.” She sent him a weak surge back. “Perhaps we should go straight to the ward-dice.”

“Perhaps we should.”

She led him to a set of narrow stairs, where a human sentry dipped his gold-studded helmet respectfully before barring their way. “You may enter when the
match-in-progress is completed,” he said.

“I assume you’re familiar with ward-dice,” Blysse whispered to Ruk.

“An old hand,” he assured her.

A waiter brought two more shots of brandy. Ruk and Blysse sipped them in what passed for amicable silence.

“How are you always this morose before a match?” Blysse asked.

Morose? Since meeting her, he had not considered himself as being anything less than polite. Reserved perhaps, or as Forley would often say, “disinclined to prattle.” But morose? He refused to let the insult sting. “It’s an old trick to keep the mind clear before playing,” he said.

“She looked at him, but he couldn’t tell if the pinkness about her throat was a blush or a reflection from the coloured lights above her. She gave a haughty sniff and threaded her arm through his. “Let’s not keep them waiting, shall we?”

The room at the bottom of the stairs was dimly lit like gambling dens were meant to be. As Blysse ushered Ruk inside, the door closed behind them, blocking out the infernal racket of the music and lights. Ruk followed Blysse over plush carpet to a rectangular ward-dice table where four players sat opposite a woman with night-black hair and cupid-bow lips painted to match the burgundy lace of her gown. Ruk’s uneasy gaze traced her low-cut bodice to the curves of her perfect, corsetless form. She looked up at his approach, her green eyes dry and sparkling.

Ruk’s stomach turned at the realization she was yet another automaton attached to a solid chair through which pipes and pulleys connected her to machinery somewhere beneath the floor. “What use is an automaton to ward-dice players?” he whispered close to Blysse’s ear.

“This one is William’s true fantasy,” she whispered derisively. “Don’t let it distract you. Your strength will still give you an edge.”

She took Ruk’s hand, and pulled him forward. “William!” she said brightly. “I have an old friend who wishes to show off his skill. May we join you?”

“She quietly asked.”

“Of course,” the eldest of the men answered. He rubbed his steely beard, his eyes curious, no doubt sizing Ruk up.
Ruk took the silver coin that Blysse had given him earlier. He threw it onto the table. A young dandyish man shot Ruk a surly glance and contemplated it. “I’m out of funds anyway,” he said, giving up his seat. “Be my guest.”

“Are you sure, Horace?” Blysse asked prettily. “I’d hate to cheat you out of a windfall.”

Horace frowned. “I doubt you could cheat me out of anything, my dear, so do not concern yourself over my lack of spirit. The hour is late. I must be going.”

Ruk watched Horace leave. As he settled himself into the man’s chair, his head felt light from the brandy, but at least Forley’s aversion to gambling no longer bothered him. In fact, for the first time since turning human, he felt more like his true self, enjoying the prospect of a challenge.

The remaining three men matched Ruk’s coin with one of their own. “You know the rules then, I presume?” William asked.

“I’ve not played an automaton before.”


“I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple. The automaton’s thought directors have been tuned with utmost precision.” He gestured to it. “My dear, please demonstrate.”

The automaton blinked smoothly, reached into a decanter filled to the brim with ward-dice. It pulled out two, juggled them in its hands and announced, “Four.” Its voice was high and scratchy like an over-tightened violin string. With a sweep of its hand, it rolled the dice along the length of the felt-topped table. They halted an inch short of its edge: a double two.

“Four,” the automaton announced.

“Impressive,” Ruk conceded with growing unease.

“Do you think you have what it takes to thwart it?” William asked.

It was Blysse’s money at stake, so there was no need to think before saying, “Yes, I do.”

William gave a flicker of a smile. “Let the match begin.”

The automaton blinked, chose two new dice and cradled them in its creaseless palms. “Nine,” it said. It proffered them to Ruk.

Ruk took them, struggling to conceal his distaste at the lifeless feel of the automaton’s rubbery skin. He closed his hand about the dice, enveloping them in
skin-magic. Ribbons of yellow light arced from his fingertips, haloing his hand. He
divined at once that the dice were carved from ox bone, filled with quicksilver, and
the numbers painted on their six faces perfectly balanced. He focussed his skin-magic
into the dice and imagined them falling. “Three,” he judged confidently. He passed
them to William.

Ruk watched the other men closely as, one by one, they held the dice and
judged them. From the intricacies of their skin light, he could see that their magic was
as undepleted as his. He presumed that these men had no need of the powerhouses,
and wondered if it would be prudent to enquire as to how.

“Eight,” William said.

“Twelve,” said the man opposite.

“Ten,” announced the last.
The automaton retrieved the dice. “Shoot.”
The four men raised their hands.
The dice rolled.

The instant they hit the table, Ruk caught hold of them with skin magic,
urging one die to favour the six and one to favour the three. He could feel the other
men’s magic, a substantial tug from three different directions as each fought to
manipulate the dice to their own wishes. By the time he succeeded in upsetting their
balance, the game was over: A six and a two.

“Eight,” said the automaton.

William gave a complacent smile. He claimed the four silver coins at the
table’s centre.

Ruk turned to Blysse. She was standing behind him with her eyebrows raised.
He shrugged as if to explain that it would not be wise for a newcomer to win the first
game and was momentarily startled by the tinkle of silver coins being thrown into the
table’s centre behind him. Gently, he pulled Blysse to his level and put his mouth
close to her ear, “I’m afraid you’ve discovered my desperate circumstances,” he
whispered. “My pockets are empty and the banks are closed.”

She smiled, pulled a new coin out from her bodice and tossed it onto the table.
Her gaze skewered him.

This time he knew exactly what was needed to win. Even before the dice were
chosen. Even before it was his turn to weigh them and announce his preference.
When they rolled, he threw out his skin-magic and wove disruptive circles around the
magic of the other three, pushing their halos aside so that his influence alone
determined the outcome. When the dice halted, the four silver coins were his.

The remainder of the match became a tug of wills as the others manipulated
their skin-magic to compensate. Ruk allowed each of them to win with acceptable
regularity, while at the same time ensuring his pile of silver grew.

“We must talk sometime,” William said evenly. “I’ve not seen you in this
district before, yet you play like a master.”

“I’ve been abroad,” Ruk said. “I thought I’d try out my talents before I stoop
to the powerhouse.”

Seemingly appeased by this explanation, William played on, but betting with
smaller coins, throwing Blysse boorish glances whenever he lost.

At the final roll, William said, “Who’s up for all in?”

Undeterred, Ruk grinned. He’d gambled against William’s type before. Their
strengths were often their weakness. If cunning did not beat them, patience would.

The other two men shook their heads.

“You’re free to go,” William told them with a benevolent nod.

Clearly relieved, they stood and departed.

William tipped his entire winnings onto the table’s centre. “So, let us divine
as to which skills are most conducive to a positive result. Abstinence from the
powerhouse? Or experience and skill?”

Ruk tipped his winnings on top of William’s.

“Before we start,” William said smoothly. “I’d like to raise the stakes a little.”
He took two gold coins from his money pouch. “If you allow the automaton to
change its tactics, I’ll add these to my wager. Because I’ve sprung this on you
without warning, you need not do the same.”

Blysse caught her breath behind him. Ruk knew that William would be using
this to his own advantage, but gold coins did not usually fall into one’s lap so easily.
Besides, if he lost, there would always be another den and even another Blysse to
borrow money from.

“What exactly does this change in tactics involve?” he asked.

“The automaton will use ward-dice that have been loaded with a magnetic
field. It will make them harder for us to manipulate. However, before we start, I must
add that I’m a fair man. I will instruct you how to adapt to it.”

Ruk inclined his head.
“Do not try to manipulate my magic. Manipulate the magnetic field instead,” William instructed.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”


“It’s true,” she said. “But I am told the technique requires a good deal of practice.”

Ruk discerned from the low tone of her voice that she wanted him to take their winnings while he still could. Although Forley’s sensibilities shrieked at him to do just that, the challenge of playing a loaded ward-dice was not easily passed up.

“Can you give a demonstration first?” he asked.

William pursed his lips. “You drive a hard bargain, but I sense you’re up to it. Very well. But you must commit to the game first.”

Ruk could not resist. “I commit.”

“Six,” the automaton said blandly. “Shoot.” It lifted its hand. The dice rolled.

At once, Ruk felt the magnetic field resonating inside them. As he tried to manipulate it, his magic fell away like water sliding over oil. His skin crawled.

The dice halted.

“Double three. Six,” the automaton said. It snapped them up, cupping them in its rubbery hands, shielding them from Ruk’s magic.

“Fascinating, do you not think?” William asked.

Ruk kept his voice steady. “Unnatural.”

“Mechanical,” Blysse corrected him.

William’s jaw tightened. He shot Blysse a stern glance. “Shall we begin then?” he asked.

Ruk nodded.

The automaton handed him the dice, the same ones it had used in the demonstration. He tried to discern their loads, but the magnetic fields blocked him. It felt like trying to punch holes through leather using an awl made from flesh.

“Twelve,” he guessed, handing the dice to William.

William took his time judging them, turning them around and around in his fingers. His skin-magic seemed sharper and more angular than it had previously. For an instant Ruk thought he could see his way in, but then William let out a satisfied chuckle and the opening closed over.

“Two,” William said. He handed the dice back to the automaton, his eyes
gleaming in gaslight.

The men raised their hands.

“Shoot.”

The dice rolled.

This time, Ruk kept his magic closely aligned with William’s. But the surfaces of the dice remained as smooth and impenetrable as they had the first time. Ruk could feel William’s magic rolling with them, tightening like a steel coil, nudging Ruk’s aside. The taste of defeat rose like gall in the back of his throat.

Mechanical, Blysse had said. What did it mean?

Then he saw it. A tiny cog, shimmering like the scales of a trout darting beneath the surface of the magnetic field. He timed his magic with the cog’s turning. At once, its field opened out to him in all its harrowing entirety: cogs and wheels, turning and turning like clockwork. He threw his skin magic into it, hooking it, speeding it up, nudging it away from the automaton’s double-one, past William’s double-three, and on to a double-four.

William must have felt his influence, because his coil tightened in response. Ruk’s magic lost its grip. He took hold of it, hurled it forward, but the dice sped ahead, beholden to William.

The two dice halted at the table’s edge. Ruk’s magic caught up to it. The moment it touched William’s, Ruk made it coil about it. The two forces joined, became one.

The die’s faces remained blank, their numbers obscured by the wheels of skin-magic churning above them.

“The dice have fallen,” the automaton announced.

Ruk met William’s gaze.

William’s magic obscured Ruk’s. Ruk’s obscured William’s.

“Do you wish to give up?” William asked. “Do so now and I’ll allow you to return for new match tomorrow.”

Ruk shook his head, unsure if he was winning or losing, but too caught up in the challenge to care. He grinned. “How can you be sure you’ve beaten me? Give up first, and I promise I’ll not return to beat you again.”

“Oh for Fate’s sake,” Blysse said curtly. “You can stay like that all night, but it won’t change the outcome now.”

William gave a barely perceptible nod. He lowered his hand.
Ruk lowered his.
Their skin magic swirled, faded, revealing first a six, and then another.
“Twelve,” Ruk breathed.
Blysse hooted. William stared at the dice, his eyes narrow. The automaton blinked, its emerald eyes dimming.
William stood. “Beginner’s luck or an old hand?”
“Neither,” Ruk said, shrugging.
William broke out into forced laughter. “Well played. I presume you’ll be returning for a rematch?”
“Maybe,” Ruk said, not at all intending to. The effects of the brandy were beginning to wear off. The idea of challenge no longer seemed appealing.
Blysse handed him a felt pouch. He gathered up his winnings and secured them.
“Can I take one?” Ruk asked, pointing to the dice. Their magnetic field still irked him, but he’d never felt anything like it before. He guessed there’d be value in studying them.
William’s face was as impassive as all the other gamblers Ruk had beaten over the years. Without looking away, William snapped up the dice and returned them to the automaton. “Only if you buy it.” He gestured to Ruk’s winnings. “And that, my friend, would barely make the down payment.”

Blysse took Ruk to the Chop and Steak House across the road, where they divided his winnings evenly before celebrating their good fortune over a meal of steak and kidney pie, fine ale and gold-label cigars. When he’d eaten his fill, he leaned against the back of a wooden bench in a low ceilinged lounge, inhaling smoke from an ill-ventilated hearth. The chatter of gamblers did little to settle him, and neither did the clockwork automaton playing an accurate yet strident rendition of an old love song on a flute permanently attached to its chin. At least his money pouch sat comfortably inside his coat – enough to provide meals to last him a month of Sundays, and maybe a bath or two in between. Now all he need do was rid himself of Blysse who insisted on prattling about spending her share on clothes and a floor rug for an apartment she rented in Upper Park.
She held his gaze, lips parted slightly. “Would you like to see it?”
He shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s been a long day. I regret I must retire.”
She pouted, her grey eyes narrowing beneath her fringe of auburn curls.

“Well,” she said brightly. “If your circumstances should ever leave you with your pockets empty and the banks closed, please do not hesitate to call in.” She held out her closed fist. “Here, take this.”

She handed him a ward-die.

Its magnetic field brushed his skin. He looked at her incredulously, not knowing what make of her generosity.

“You earned it,” she said.

Pocketing the die, he nodded an amused acknowledgement and considered taking up her offer of accompanying her back to her apartment. He had to admit she was pretty. If he let down his guard, he imagined their time together would be a pleasant complement to his hour in the bathhouse.

At once Forley’s sensibilities niggled at him, reprimanding him for taking advantage of her. He wanted to ignore them, but the Fear whispered for him not to, urging him to leave. Cursing inwardly, he lit up another cigar, hoping it would clear his mind of both of them. When it didn’t, he paid for their meals and left.

A breeze had picked up and the fog was late settling. Ruk made his way out of Gambler’s Row and caught a glimpse of familiar stars above the rooftops looming either side of him. Their poignant light reminded him that the city was but a small part of the world. No matter how widely or how thickly its canopy spread, he could always escape it.

He assumed it was too late to find a respectable inn to retire to, so he started out towards Forley’s old daytime haunt on Highknoll Lookout near Upper Slik. Here, he could catch an hour or two of sleep in a park shelter before morning. He neared the turnout to an unlit street and breathed easier than he had all night. The road was pleasingly deserted. He did not need to worry about how to behave.

He had barely walked two blocks when he was startled by a footfall on the gravelled road behind him. He swung around, glimpsed a flash of steel, lurched away, but not quick enough.

The agony of a blade sank into his back. There was no time to draw on heart-magic to stop it. No time to remember that he was not human.

Not again, he thought stupidly, falling to his knees. The knife pierced him again, this time from the front. For a long, searing moment he felt the muscles of his heart pumping against it. A wash of blood pooled around him. He looked up and saw
a face – a man’s face.

It was the dandy – the man who had given up his place at the ward-dice match.

“Horace! You said you wouldn’t kill him,” a woman shrieked from behind.

Blysse. Ruk felt not so much shocked at the realization as incensed.

Blysse knelt at Ruk’s side. It occurred to him that she’d probably planned it like this all along – that she and Horace had been working together, leading Ruk to this exact moment. He could not bear to look at her, so he pushed her away. He took hold of the knife in both hands, wrenched it free and winced as it scraped his ribs on the way out.

Horace gaped at him, uncomprehending.

Seeing the chance, Ruk lunged.

He caught Horace exactly where he’d intended, at the base of his heart. As he twisted the knife upward he did not feel any sense of victory or accomplishment. Instead he was suddenly overwhelmed with an acute sense of disgust and wished he’d simply walked away and left both Horace and Blysse to grovel.

But of course, they were Forley’s instincts, he realized. He wasn’t sure if he should embrace them for the way they reined in his anger, or push them down and let his predatory skills protect him instead.

Blysse shrieked and shimmied backwards.

Gasp sparkling, Ruk sat back on his haunches and ran his hands along the dark stains soaking his shirt and breeches. He stared at the blood pooling at his knees, counting second after agonized second until it began to evaporate into mist. Then crying out, he pulled the mist inwards, healing himself until all signs of his injuries had vanished, except for the holes in his stolen shirt and coat.

“What are you?” Blysse demanded.

Rage swept through him. She’d spoken to him as if he were a thing. Did she think her betrayal was justified?

She made as if to run.

He lunged, took hold of her arm and jerked her around to face him. He ignored her pathetic little scream and slammed her onto the ground, pinning her there with the length of his body.

If he were a wolf, he would have torn out her throat there and then.

“I trusted you,” he growled. “And your friend’s knife has ruined my clothes.”
She lay unmoving beneath him. He feared he had killed her, but then she struggled weakly and he realized she was only winded. He supposed she couldn’t breathe, so he shifted some of his weight onto his elbows keeping them either side of her chest to remind her there would be no escape.

She whimpered, opened her eyes. “Horace promised. He… he promised he wouldn’t kill you.”

Ruk shuddered, afraid he would lose sight of both himself and Forley. He focussed instead on locating her money pouch and found it in the silken space between her corset and bodice. “You owe me,” he said, easing it out with his fingers. It was not as heavy as it had been when he’d first given it to her.

She trembled beneath him, deep wracking spasms. “What are you?” she stammered.

“I’m not a thing,” he hissed. Her skin smelled like terror. He wanted to kill her and let her go free all at once. He wished he’d not embodied himself in anything so contradictory as a human. He wished he could return to the centuries past when he could live in his preferred shape as a hawk or wolf, free from the curse of mortality.

“Betray me again,” he breathed. “And I’ll seek you out. Next time I’ll not be so lenient.”

He let her go and drew himself to his feet. His heart still ached from where the knife had pierced it. Rage sizzled at the edge of his consciousness, threatening to explode again at any moment. He dared not let it out. He shifted his attention to Blysse cowering on the ground in front of him and supposed that she was too afraid to realize she was free to go.

“You’re not much of an adversary after all,” he said. “Like the rest of your kind, you can’t see past your own greed.”

He still wanted to hurt her; and feared that at any instant he would. He let out a low growl, drew on a good measure of Ju’s heart-magic, and turned it onto Horace instead. The body flared into a ball of white flame, then flickered and extinguished. The ground smoked with a skeletal imprint of pale, grey ash. Only half-satisfied, Ruk reached into Blysse’s money pouch. He took out a silver coin and threw it onto her bodice.

“A token,” he said. “I want you to remember that when a shifter refuses to die, he also refuses to forget.”

Blysse did not look up at him or even acknowledge that she’d heard. Turning
away, he pocketed the pouch and then fled into the shadows, unable to trust emotion, forcing himself to draw on Forley’s less volatile instincts instead.

He reached the river and cowered beneath the low rumble of what looked to be an airborne whale. He tried to make sense of its passing shadow, frantically sifting through Forley’s memories for an explanation.

An airship, he realized. A thing made of wood and steel. A thing fired with coal, yet its gasbags were filled with hydrogen. One stray spark and it would explode, flames engulfing it and everything beneath.

He turned away, neck prickling. The arrogance of humans didn’t bear thinking about. He contemplated returning to Forsham’s catacombs, but then like a nightmare returned, the Fear began to whisper again. Words swarmed through Ruk’s head, riling him, like the buzzing of wasps.

*I want them stopped, stopped, stopped…*

Chapter 5

Papa lowered himself into the sagging armchair by the hearth. He stretched out his legs and plonked his feet on top of the sawn-off tea chest he used as a footstool. Beneath his thin, steely hair, his face looked less plump but not quite so sallow. His eyes seemed just that little bit livelier – almost his old self again – but Ju knew as soon as he felt well enough, he’d be out to visit the tavern. One drink would become two and two would become three and the cycle would repeat.

She would not face it again. Deep down, he was still as good a man as always; but since Mama’s death, caring for him had done little to encourage him to care for himself.

She knelt at his side and sent him a surge of well-wishing. Her skin-magic was still weak, but the feeble surge he sent back to her was enough for her to know that he felt it. “Look what I made,” she said handing him her clockwork dragonfly. She pointed out the delicate brass key beneath its thorax.

Papa’s smile was as broad as cats’ whiskers. “It’s a beautiful thing,” he said, winding the key. “Mr Letonder really thinks that with the right materials it could fly?”

“He does at that.”
The dragonfly’s wings fluttered, whirring softly. Shards of coloured light sparkled about the room. “Beautiful,” Papa repeated. “I can’t possibly allow you to sell it to the likes of a mage. He’ll make a fortune out of it and you’ll be left sweeping up sawdust from his factory.”

“What would you have me do instead?” Ju asked.

He thought; then shook his head, perplexed. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Sorry for what? For standing by us all those years when you could have run away? Are you sorry for having a daughter who loves you?”

He ran his hand gently over her hair and signed. “I’m sorry for being what I am.”

Ju pulled away and took herself to the chair beside him. “You’re my Papa,” she said indignantly. “I love you.”

He stared into the fire, contemplating the flames. “I’m sorry that I’ve not earned your love.” He took a long, ragged breath. “I should be the one protecting you. Yet here you are protecting me.”

The dragonfly stillled. Papa squinted at it, turning it over in his hand. He ran his finger over the multi-faceted eyes, the copper-wire legs, the filigree veins in the wings.

“Papa,” Ju said softly, “Yesterday I made up my mind. I’m not going back to Grindle’s. I’ll not be submitting to a powerhouse again, either.”

Papa’s eyes turned wary. “Then what do you have left?”

“For the likes of me, it’s inevitable, isn’t it? It’s either prison or the Groundists.”

Papa frowned. “The newspapers say the Groundists are all but finished. They cannot save you.”

“I know that.”

Papa took another shaky breath and frowned.

“All right, she said. “If you must know.” She paused and steeled herself. “It’s I who intends to save the Groundists.”

Papa’s face fell. “Ju…” He rubbed his stubbled chin. “Ju, if anyone else had told me such a thing, I would have thought them barmier than a leaky automaton. Maybe, if I were you, I’d be doing exactly the same. But Ju—”

“My mind’s made up.”

“But—”
“I won’t desert you,” Ju promised.

Papa’s face turned paler than it had when he’d rolled home drunk. “It’s not that. It’s…” He fixed his gaze on the dragonfly and lowered it onto his lap. “It’s not what you’re meant for.”

“In this city I’m meant for one thing,” she said curtly. “The powerhouse.”

“But your magic…it’s special. The Groundists will ruin it.”

“Yesterday,” Ju said softly. “My magic nearly burned me up.”

Papa inhaled sharply. “In the powerhouse? It showed itself there?”

“No, it showed itself outside yesterday. If I’d not-” She couldn’t bring herself to speak of the stranger. Admittedly the man had saved her life, yet at the same time his help had felt like an attack. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up at the memory of how he’d pushed her against the wall. Yet he still made her think of Forley. She’d not wanted him to leave. Why had he sneered at her for not being able to control her magic? When she’d mentioned the Groundists, he’d sneered at them too.

“I can’t control my magic on my own,” she said at last. “I need training. If the Groundists can’t teach me, who can?”

“I do not know where your magic came from. I truly don’t. If I’ve let you down by teaching you to suppress it instead of using it, I’m sorry. But for the likes of us…” He wiped his forehead and sighed. “I failed you, didn’t I? I tried to make you like me, but you’re too strong for that.”

Ju dared not well-wish him again because she needed to let her own magic build up. She wanted to hug him and tell him that she did not see him as a failure – that he was her papa and she would always love him no matter what. But Papa would not want that. He would turn away from her, and apologise again and again, thinking that her reaction proved that she thought him weak. She swallowed. “I have a plan. A good one.”

Papa met her gaze, his eyes wet. “I suppose I should have expected nothing less.”

She nodded towards the dragonfly. “I do believe that my design is as valuable as Mr Letonder claims. Even though mages are doing their best to stamp out the Groundists, there are others who want the Groundists to continue.”

“Yes, of course, there are. But that does not make the Groundists safe.”

“For me, nowhere is safe.”
Papa winced. “You think Groundists will be able to sell your design for you?”

“No, better than that. I will sell it to them. They can then either sell it to the highest bidder or use it for whatever they want. I’ll give the money to you. I want you to set yourself on your feet again.”

“While you fight,” he said flatly.

She nodded.

“You do not need to waste your beautiful dragonfly on an old sot like me.”

Ju sighed. “If this is the only design I can come up with, then what sort of a designer am I? Besides, the money will only be wasted if that’s how you choose to use it?”

Papa opened his mouth and closed it again. “Why not take some time to think about it. Stick out three more weeks at Grindle’s, as you said you would last week.”

She shook her head. She wanted to tell him about Forley returning to Cornica, but knew that the moment she mentioned his empty workbench she’d give in to tears. Instead, she told him about the incident on Hammering Way and how Grindle had treated her so badly afterward. “I refuse to set foot in his workshop again ever. He disgusts me. He has the money and means to fashion proper arms from himself, yet the ugly pieces of junk he chooses to wear are barbaric.”

Papa smiled wryly at that. “You know, back when he first made his fortune, rumours abounded as to why a mage would resort to mechanical arms in the first place. Some said it was because he was born with an arm so twisted and useless even heart-magic couldn’t heal it.”

“That’s no excuse for him to treat his workers like animals,” Ju retorted.

“Bitterness flaws even the best of men.”


“You’ve got to give him this much. He’s done well for himself, using his genius to make a fortune out of tinkering.”

“Not just genius,” Ju amended. “Perfectionism. He demands it of himself and despises anyone who can’t live up to his standards.” She paused to leave it at that, then remembered something that Forley had told her a few months before. “His son, Arvin, would sometimes share a drink with Forley at the tavern. He told Forley that after Grindle got his first mechanical arm, he couldn’t bear to look at himself in the mirror any more because his remaining flesh arm made him look unbalanced, imperfect. So, at the age of thirty, he had his flesh arm cut off. Now both arms are
mechanical – merely so they’d match.”

Papa whistled through his teeth. “That would have been nearly twenty years ago. The papers blamed it on a machine accident. But no one saw it happen.”

“I don’t believe any of it,” Ju said. “When he threw my work card at me yesterday, I saw his arms still do not match. They’re crafted to the same design, but the titanium one is flawless and polished, and the brass one is dull and worn. You’d think if he were truly a perfectionist, he’d replace the old one, wouldn’t you?”

Papa shrugged. “That’s insanity for you. Not content to confine itself to the mind, it spreads like a plague to the body and then to everyone and everything within reach.”

“Now you know why I cannot work for him anymore.”

Papa sighed.

Ju yawned. “I need sleep. My skin-magic is still low.” She took herself to her bed by the wall, tugged off her slippers and slipped under the covers.

“You know,” Papa muttered from his chair. “Grindle used his genius to save himself. Why can’t we?”

“Grindle’s a mage,” Ju said, cynically. “His birthright saved him. Genius served only to make it easier.”

“Now you’re taking your genius to the Groundists,” Papa ventured.

Ju nodded, saying nothing, considering the subject closed.

After a long silence, Papa added, “I do not believe—” He rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hand. “Ah Ju.” He shook his head slowly. “Always the dreamer, eh?”

Ju resisted the urge to scoff. “Unfortunately, this is not a dream.”

Papa picked up the dragonfly from his lap. Hands shaking, he turned the key. Its wings fluttered and whirred as specks of coloured light flickered over his face. “It’s truly a beautiful thing,” he said. “But your plan terrifies me.”

Ju lifted her chin and brushed strands of stray hair from her eyes. “It terrifies me too. But what else is there?”

#

Ju woke with a start. Afternoon light angled in through the window, not so much warming her face as reminding her that the day had not yet ended. But something else had woken her. The sound had been so abrupt, she had already forgotten what it was.
She sat up and looked around. Papa had taken himself to bed. She could hear the muted rhythm of snoring from his bedroom.

Three sharp knocks on the front door.

Ju slid out of bed and padded barefooted across the room, wondering if perhaps someone from the workshop had taken it upon themselves to ask her to come back. She opened the door.

Her heart skipped a wary somersault as she looked up into the face of a dandyish mage. Fate of Fates, it was Arvin Grindle.

“Oh!” She took a step backwards and almost closed the door again.

“Miss Weatherton,” Arvin said awkwardly. “I’m here to apologise for my father’s odious behaviour yesterday. I’m also concerned about Mr Letonder. He has not attended the workshop for three days. I’m awfully worried about him.” He pushed his glasses up along the bridge of his nose. “I was hoping you would know whether he was safe or not.”

Ju looked at him, agape. As always, he was dressed in a suit of the finest wool, his shirt whiter than the twice-bleached sheets that flapped over the rooftop of Martha’s Laundry. His hair looked both darkly rebellious and stylish all at once.

“How did you find me?” she stammered.

“I’m sorry if my actions seem somewhat prying,” he said. “But I considered the situation serious enough to look up your address in Cornby’s records.”

Ju supposed that Arvin’s blue gaze looked remorseful enough, but at the same time she noted an uncustomary eagerness. She remembered his father accusing him of making a fool of himself when he’d tried to speak up for her. It would be too unkind to dismiss him without at least allowing him his say.

Gathering her wits, she mimicked his pompous word play, adjusting her voice to match his educated accent. “If you are concerned that Mr Letonder was caught up in yesterday’s carriage accident, then rest assured he’s safe. I caught a glimpse of him after the attack, but he appeared to be in a hurry. Seeing as I was already late for work, I did not engage in unnecessary chatter. Therefore, as to where he proceeded afterwards, I cannot say.”

She imagined that would appease him. A part truth was better than no truth at all.

Arvin relaxed visibly. “Ah, that is good to hear. Thank you. You have relieved me of a great deal of worry.”
Ju waited for him to take his leave. When he didn’t, she said, “I’m sorry, Mr Grindle, but I have been out of sorts today. I was resting when your knock disturbed me.”

This time Arvin’s face appeared mortified as well as remorseful. “Please, forgive me. That was not my intention.” He pushed at his glasses again. “Miss Weatherton, I must say that my father’s animosity towards you yesterday was by no means personal. He has high standards, you see—”

“Are you suggesting that my standards do not meet them?” Ju interrupted testily.

Again, he looked mortified. “No, of course not. What I meant was, his standards are above and beyond what any human being could hope to attain. I doubt that even he, himself, could fulfil them.”

Ju was tempted to mention that she understood what he was talking about – that Forley had already told her how Grindle had ordered the amputation of his own arm. Instead she said, “Your apologies are accepted. Although, I must point out it was not you who abused me.”

“Even so,” Arvin pursued. “The guilt lies with a member of my family.”

He did not look like he was intending to leave and Ju had already told him she was unwell. She did not know how to press the issue without appearing curmudgeonly. “I’ll not be returning to the workshop,” she said. “I’ll be seeking employment elsewhere.”

“Yes, your friend Miss Talbot has already informed me. Under the circumstances, I do not blame you. However, it would be a tragedy to see you left destitute. I’ve had a word to Mr Cornby and have ordered him to not only ensure that you are treated kindly by the cleaning staff while you are working under their instruction, but also to release you back to the workshop with a glowing recommendation before the week’s end.”

Ju cringed inwardly at the thought of that. Afraid to meet his gaze in case she blushed, she focussed on his distinctively curved eyebrows. “I’m indeed grateful. But I fear it’s too late. I’ve made up my mind.”

Arvin frowned. “I feared that would be the case. I have a new proposition for you.”

Ju could only gape. A proposition from a mage was not something that anyone with her lack of status would seriously consider.
“My mother,” he began. “She requires special care. She lives with me; but I do not like leaving her by herself with only the maids to converse with. I need someone to look after her while I’m working. She would benefit from your company. Mr Letonder once confided that, despite your circumstances, you were literate and sensible.”

Ju bristled. “What exactly did Mr Letonder tell you of my circumstances?”

Arvin put his hands in his pockets. He looked uncomfortable, took them out again. “Oh…no…I’m sorry… He didn’t say anything particular at all. He has never offered anything but praise. Fate help anyone who insults you. For a woman without the privilege of wealth, I sense that your qualities are exceptional and would be wasted on sweeping floors.”

She forced herself to not overly react to this. Feigning pride, she said, “My father taught me to read. Despite our circumstances we make the effort to expose ourselves to as many books as we can borrow. I would also like to point out that as poor workers, we are not alone in this, therefore I do not consider myself exceptional.”

“Yes, of course. I apologise. I didn’t mean to offend you.” He paused, fiddled with his glasses yet again. “Miss Weatherton, please. My offer is meant as genuine praise, not as flattery or as a means to exploit you. If you accept, I will pay you well. Meals included. Lodgings too if you wish.” He hesitated, averted his gaze, then looked back again. “You have a way with people.”

Arvin seemed honest enough, but if she joined the Groundists, she would not have time to babysit her own parent let alone Arvin Grindle’s. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Gently, she said, “Mr Grindle, I am touched by your offer, but I must point out that I cannot consider the prospect of living or working under the same roof as your father. Not only am I literate, but I’m also sensible enough to know that I cannot live up to his standards.”

Arvin smiled. His face seemed honest and blithe. Ju almost blushed at the sheer unexpectedness of it. “What would you say if I told you that Sir Mathias is not my real father?”

“I would then ask how could you possibly bear his presence.” Ju bit her lip. She hadn’t meant to be brazen.

Arvin laughed.

Ju squirmed inwardly as the blush she’d been trying to suppress burned across
her cheeks with mutinous glory.

“A valid point,” Arvin said, “which, if you are interested, I shall attempt to address for you.”

Still smarting from the blush, Ju could only nod.

“My real father was once a dear friend of Sir Mathias’s. When he died in unknown circumstances, Sir Mathias adopted me because my father had decreed it in his will. I was only four years of age at the time, but nevertheless I remember my mother could not tolerate the sight of him. So, to avoid insult, he purchased a separate house for her, and continues to support her to this day. He has never asked for anything in return, except that I honour him as any true son would. To be honest, I do not share his philosophies. If it was not for my mother I would have walked away years ago.”

Ju had not expected such a candid explanation. She felt rude for forcing him to pour out his heart on the steps to her tenement. But the idea of asking a mage inside to experience her “circumstances” first hand seemed equally preposterous.

Arvin must have taken her silence for indecision. He reached beneath his waistcoat and pulled out an embossed white card. Handing it to her, he said, “I expect you will need a few days to think things through. If you would like to meet my mother first, do call in. I will tell the servants to expect you.”

Dumbstruck, Ju did not know if she should berate him for his presumptuousness or thank him for thinking of her.

He made as if to adjust his glasses, but stopped and put his hands in his coat pockets. “Well, I must not outstay my welcome.”

“No, you must not.” Ju flinched, not having meant to be rude, but the words had slipped out of their own accord.

Arvin nodded, his face unreadable. “Good afternoon, then.”

Ju’s cheeks grew hot again. “Good afternoon.”

She watched him take the stairs two at a time, his back straight and his hair unrulier than she had ever seen it at Grindle’s. When he was gone, she turned around and saw Papa standing in the doorway to his room.

“That was Arvin Grindle?” he asked incredulously.

“That was.”

“He’s not like his father.”

“He’s still a mage,” Ju reminded him.
“Yes, that he is.” Papa rubbed his chin. “What do you make of his offer?”

Ju shrugged. “Nothing that I wish to take up. Imagine my hands sparking in front of his mother. Imagine it!”

Chapter 6

With the workers gone, it felt strangely peaceful in the powerhouse. Wishing that he, too, could leave, Ruk wrinkled his nose at the reek of dust and machine oil. He could still the hear the chatter of the attendants locking up, so he kept himself hidden, crouched in the darkness between a brick wall and a stack of coffins.

It had been a long day, and a harrowing one after sifting through Forley’s memories to learn that the coffins were reserved for workers who were over-drained during extraction. It was enough to make him proud of what he was about to do.

Now, the Fear urged. Now, now, now…

Did the Fear think he enjoyed waiting here? Did it think he could simply walk out and…

A cockroach scuttled down Ruk’s arm, its brittle legs skimming across the back of his hand. He dared not move. Not yet. Not until he was sure the attendants had taken their leave, and the powerhouse and its factory above was unmanned.

Now, the Fear whispered. Now, now, now...

Ruk shook his head. If he tried hard enough, he could block the Fear out; but the prospect of what it offered thrilled him. From Forley’s point of view, the repercussions were damnably satisfying. “A noble undertaking,” he imagined Forley saying. Even Ju would want it…

“But why do you want it?” Ruk asked the Fear.

To stop him… the Fear began. But then its words became muddled, a meaningless medley of emotion that threatened to escalate into panic. An image formed in Ruk’s mind: a face. A mage’s face, set and determined. Then a hand lifting to rub a stubbled chin. A brass hand, pitted and dull.

The Fear howled.

“As soon as it’s safe, I’ll do it,” Ruk muttered irritably.

Gradually the Fear grew calm, became silent. Distancing himself from it, Ruk lowered himself onto his rump, stretched out his legs and mused at how easy it had
been to sneak in here.

That morning, when the workers were filing in, the attendant had shouted at a woman for hesitating. Ruk had slipped past unnoticed and made himself scarce. The workers either side of him might have seen, but no one would willingly aid an attendant, so he had gotten away with it, spending the remainder of the day hidden, listening to the breathing of workers strapped upright in chairs, paralysed in swoons as their skin-magic was torn out of them.

He shuddered. So much for the compassion of humans. If Horace and Blysse were anything to go by, the species was doomed.

At last he heard the main door thump shut, the clink of keys turning in their locks. Now, the Fear whispered. Now, now, now…

Steeling himself, Ruk lit up his fingers with skin-magic. He stood, wound his way between the rows of chairs and seated himself in a chair at the room’s centre. The main power cable that fed skin-magic up to the factory hung from floor to ceiling in front of him. Determined to get it over with, he bent forward and attached the electrodes to his ankles, sat up again and wound the others about his wrists.

He squirmed against the chair’s hard, splintery back. Clenching his teeth, he let Ju’s heart-magic flow.

The electrodes sparked, burned, grew red hot, yellow hot, and finally white. He shuddered as magic seared through his bones and erupted from his fingers. He yowled as the electrodes melted, shrank and burned about his wrists and ankles. The Fear danced at the edge of his consciousness. Its whispering turned to laughter, its laughter to tears, and its tears to utter, boundless joy.

Through the corner of his eye, Ruk could see the cable leading to the factory, haloed in heart-magic. Beyond the ceiling, he could hear machines rattle, clunk, whirl, churn and rumble, picking up speed.

The powerhouse shook. Its foundations creaked. Heart-magic tore through him.

Fates Alive, he could not help but give in to Forley’s emotions. He could not understand how Ju could have remained so long untrained and not have burned herself up already. How was it that not one of her kind had used magic to destroy a powerhouse as he was doing now?

Then it occurred to him with sudden, horrifying clarity. What if she was the only one with the power to do it? Or if no one had the means to teach her? No wonder
mages worked so hard to limit heart-magic to themselves. If someone like Ju opposed them, their control would crumble.

Above him, the ceiling bent and shrivelled, opening up like melting wax as flames licked through it.

Enough, Ruk decided. He wriggled his wrists and ankles. The glowing remnants of electrodes fell away from him, disintegrating into ash. Flinching at the realization that the skin beneath them was blistered and weeping, he healed it in a heartbeat. Conjuring light at his fingers, he headed for the door.

Plumes of smoke poured down from above. Ruk’s lungs heaved. He put his hands to the door and jolted its locks with a surge of heart-magic; but the flow was feeble, and the locks held. He realized with dismay that he must have used up most of Ju’s magic in the chair. For a few panicked moments he gave in to human emotion and feared he’d be trapped.

Above him, the ceiling cracked, buckled. He slammed his shoulder against the door and kept slamming until the locks snapped open.

Just then, the powerhouse ceiling crumbled. Bricks and mortar slid down in a roaring avalanche, ramming him to the floor, burying him. He let out an agonized groan, sharply aware of every shattered bone, every inch of crushed flesh, every drop of blood spilling out from him.

In a terrifying rush of agony, he counted the seconds until his injuries turned to mist. Groaning, he drew the mist in, forcing himself to heal.

Whole again but still aching, he clawed his way out from beneath the rubble, brick by brick, stone by smoking stone. He caught his breath and crouched on a kerbside out of reach of falling debris. A crowd gathered about him, gaping at the sight of both a powerhouse and factory crumbling in flames.

Ruk dusted himself down, checked his pockets and located his winnings still safe in their pouch where he’d left them. He noted with regret the tattered ruin of his coat and breeches. Behind him, he heard the frantic hooting of approaching steam lorries, no doubt bringing water to put out the blaze.

Too late for that, he thought triumphantly. One powerhouse down. Eleven to go. In the back of his mind, the Fear whispered, content, approving.

“Damn you,” Ruk spat. At that moment, he did not need approval of any kind. He needed only to be alone.

Carefully, he stood, slipped into the shadows and ducked into an alley.
He supposed he should have found shelter at Highknoll, waiting until tomorrow to buy a new set of clothes. But the night was cold, and Forley’s instincts urged him to find something more comforting. He thought about going to an inn and paying a tidy sum for someone to look after him. A bath and a meal would surely provide time enough to think things through, but yesterday’s dealings with Blysse reminded him that all the gold in the world could not buy loyalty.

He clenched his fists, bitterly aware that his heart magic was all but spent.

The Fear shrieked, terrified. *Go to her. Now, now, now...”*

Cringing against the mouldy alley wall, Ruk held his head in his hands, fighting to block the shrieking out. But the more he fought it, the deeper it twisted inside him, gnawing at his consciousness like a piece of himself turned insane, forcing him to listen.

“All right, I’ll do it!” he shrieked back. “Just stop, please, please stop.”

He was crying, he realized. His head literally pulsed with too many emotions, each once conflicting with the other. He fought them down, willing them silent. Gradually the Fear’s shrieking subsided and ceased.

Alone at last, Ruk sifted through Forley’s memories. He did not want to think about the streets that would lead him to Ju, but his mind’s eye would allow him only that.

#

Ju’s tenement looked exactly as Forley remembered it. Its flaking plaster and encrusted plumbing made Ruk wonder if its builders had gathered up as many slum hovels they could find, piled them up and smoothed them over with a trowel.

He recalled that there had been a way into the main building through the boiler room, where mechanics had once forced a lock and broken it. Months ago, Forley had helped Ju repair it, but the hinges were loose and could be coaxed apart by lifting the door upwards. This, Ruk achieved without so much as a twinge of heart-magic. When he was through, he leaned the door back into place, leaving it unlocked.

He crouched in darkness, taking comfort in the warmth of the boiler. Tomorrow’s powerhouse would not be as easy as the first one. Even if today’s fire were deemed to be the result of an accident, an identical fire so soon afterwards would leave the mages suspicious. He considered changing his body for a worker’s; but unless Fate led him to a dying one, he would have to kill the man first.

He shook his head. Even if the Fear demanded it, he would not do it as easily
as he’d killed Horace.

The minutes stretched out. One of the upper-storey tenants wandered in and drew a bucket of water. The sight of Ruk in the dim glow of her finger-light startled her. Then she tossed her head and said, “Ah, it’s you, Mr Letonder. Since when did you and our Miss Weatherton start trysting in the boiler room?” She gave a coarse chuckle. “Do you want me tell her you’re ready and willing?”

Ruk’s cheeks stung. He shook his head. “I’m sure she’ll be down shortly.”

When Ju still did not appear, Ruk worried that she’d been down to draw water earlier. A distant clock struck ten, then later, ten-thirty. Ruk shifted and wriggled. He wanted to sleep, but it annoyed him how easily Forley’s memories could fool him into thinking he was human. Animal memories had never been so difficult to rise above. But humans! He rued the day he’d first become one.

His eyes grew heavy. His muscles ached. Two near deaths in as many days had stretched even his shifter tolerances. Leaning against the wall, he closed his eyes and let the tinkle of the gas boiler soothe him. It would only be for a moment. He wouldn’t succumb to sleep like Forley would. He wasn’t weak like humans. He wasn’t…


Before Ruk could react, Ju knelt beside him, skin-magic streaming from her fingers, her eyes so much wider and greyer than Forley remembered them. She grinned and launched herself on top of him, wrapping her arms about his neck and pressing her cheek against his. “Forley, I thought… I thought I’d never see you again.”

Ruk reeled as much from the unexpectedness of her reaction as from the utter confusion of his own. Did this mean that Forley meant more to her than just a friend – that if he’d told her he loved her she might have changed her mind and accepted his offer?

Gently, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her close. The jasmine scent of her coat made him realize how much he missed her, how much he needed her after all that had happened. The press of her cheek against his felt sweeter than he’d dared imagine.

Her hair, golden even in finger-light, like silk, like down…

All he need do was turn his face a fraction towards her and brush his lips
against hers before—

He flinched at the realization that he’d almost lost himself to Forley.

Ju must have felt it too because she pulled away and sat back on her haunches. “Forley? What are you doing down here in the boiler room? Your hair? Where are your charms? Your clothes! They look like they’ve been burned and spat out! What happened?”

His charms? For a moment he wondered what she was talking about. But then he realized that when he’d taken Forley’s form, he’d only absorbed his memories and shape. The trinkets Forley had worn in his hair had not been part of his body. They would need to be added.

“Freighter’s rules, no trinkets,” he said quickly, keeping his accent as Cornican as Forley’s had been. His mind raced, embroidering an explanation. “In the end, I couldn’t go through with it. Two days out, an airship caught up to us and unloaded urgent freight. I bought a ticket home.” He looked down at his singed clothes and shrugged. “Boiler incident on the way. It was a rough ride. I was afraid to come up and knock in case you weren’t there. In case you’d joined the Groundists already.”

Ju hugged him again. “For a moment I feared you were the stranger.” She shivered. “Oh Forley, I…I so, so missed you.”

Her fear-edged joy shamed him. He could have taken her magic there and then, but his Forleyness wouldn’t let him and he couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t as if he’d kill her. Or even so much as hurt her. Besides, wouldn’t she benefit from the destruction of the powerhouses as much as the Fear did?

“And here’s me thinking only of myself,” Ju added, pulling away. She ran her hands down his arms. It took all of his will to not give in to the pure pleasure of her touch. “From the look of you,” she said. “Fate must have treated you much more unkindly that it did me.” She threaded her fingers around his and sent him a deep surge of well-wishing.

The pure honesty of the action stunned him. Forgetting the consequences, he sent her a surge back.

Ju gasped. She jerked away, shimmied backwards. “You’re not Forley.”

Not Forley! The old taunt riled him. It’s what they all said when they learned what he was. You’re not him. You’re not her. But couldn’t they see he was all of them?
All of them and a little bit more…

He lunged, caught hold of her wrist. “Don’t force me to be cruel to you.”

She struggled, looked as if to scream, so he silenced her with another surge of well-wishing, lacing it with a trace of the heart-magic he’d stolen from her in the alley. She stopped struggling, and stared at him, gaping, eyes wide. “Who are you?”

At least she’d said “who” and not “what”. He loosened his grip on her wrist so he wouldn’t hurt her, but not quite enough for her think he would let her go. “I’m a Groundist,” he said.

“You’re not,” she spat. “You said so yourself when you attacked me in the alley.”

“I didn’t attack you. I saved your life. You were burning up.”

“Why didn’t you let me see you? Why didn’t you tell me what you were doing? Why do you look like Forley?”

“There was no time to explain.”

Her grey gaze pierced him. He realized with a stab of regret that she was trembling.

“Is that what you’ve come for now?” she said. “To steal my magic again?”

“You’ve more than enough for your own good.”

“And so says every mage who owns a powerhouse,” she replied defiantly. He was impressed by her spirit, but didn’t have time for it. He sent her another surge of well-wishing.

“Stop doing that.” She tried to wriggle out of his grip and winced when he tightened his fingers about her wrist. Without thinking, he let her go. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“So, why are you doing this?”

He wanted her to run so he would not have to see her face when he took her magic. “I’m destroying the powerhouses. One by one until there are none left.”

“Why?”

He readied himself to pounce. “I…because I must. Because they’re his.”

“Who? What are you talking about?” She stared at him, uncomprehending. Her grey eyes wide. “Sweet, bitter Fate. You’re a shifter, aren’t you?”

Well, she was a clever one. He had to give her that much. Too clever for her own good. He wished she would hurry up and try to flee so he could get it over with. Instead she remained where she was, her fingers glowing dimly.
Her eyes looked greyer and more intense than he’d ever seen on a human being before. He realized it was because they were wet. A tear ran down the side of her cheek. She did not brush it away, but merely stared blankly as if nothing outside of her existed. Even in sadness she looked strong.

Finally, she said, “Shifters can only take the shape of the dying.” She held his gaze, bit her lip. “Which means…”

He did not want to see her pain, but Forley’s memories would not let him look away.

She raised her chin, the set of her face suddenly fearless. “Did you kill him?”
“No. I did not.”

She flinched, closed her eyes, opened them again. “How did he die?”
“Quickly.” Ruk hoped she would leave it at that.
“How?”
“A sentry’s knife. To the throat.”
“You saw it happen?” Her voice shook. “Why didn’t you stop it?”
“It was done by the time I understood what had happened.”

She wrapped her arms about herself and rocked slowly back and forth until her trembling contracted to the corners of her mouth. She took a deep shuddering breath, closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. He tore his gaze away from her and focussed instead on the worn toes of his socks.

It had been a long time since he’d last seen the anguish of loss. Of all human emotions, grief was the only one that he’d never been able to fully suppress. Its force terrified him. His only escape had been to dissolve himself into mist and embody himself with a new set of memories, allowing the grieving ones to fade to a level he could bear.

But for Ju, there would be no reprieve. She was tied to her grief as inescapably as Forley was tied to the decision that killed him. For reasons Ruk could not fully understand, he blamed himself for hurting her, as if his presence made Forley’s absence real. Wanting only to comfort her, he reached out to take her hand.

She jerked backwards. “Don’t touch me. You’re not Forley.”

She pulled herself to her feet and made for the hallway, shoulders hunched, finger-light dimming. Ruk could not bring himself to stop her like he had in the alley. He could not allow himself to pin her to the wall and take her heart-magic even though he knew there was nothing she could do to prevent it – not this time, not next
time, or the time after that. Instead, he kept his gaze on her feet, noting that her socks looked much too thin for a night as cold as this.

Grief was a terrible thing. Best left alone. Best not meddled with.

At the back of his mind, the Fear cringed, silent.

#

Ruk did not intend to secure the boiler room door when he left. But he did so anyway, knowing that Forley’s memories would haunt him if he didn’t. It felt good to be out in the cold again. It felt even better to be alone and running with the night air washing over his face. He took huge gasps of it, as if its chill would suppress his humanness from the inside out.

He would not risk seeing Ju again. Her grief had felt too connected to him, too sharp to control. Even the Fear seemed relieved to be free of it.

He had no idea where he should go and not an inkling of what to do next. Even if it took a day or two for Forley’s heart-magic to replenish itself, it would not be strong enough to burn down a powerhouse. He slowed to catch his breath. He needed food, rest and a safe haven in which to think things through.

In his mind’s eye, he saw a Fate church where Forley had once asked a warden about ways to control his heart-magic. At the memory, his mind leapt from one possibility to the next. Would the warden have heart magic too? Would there be others? Would their magic be as strong as Ju’s?

He pick up his pace and swerved east, heading for the church, averting his face from the factories, blocking out the malevolent stench of their machines. This time, the Fear did not shriek at him, but whimpered instead, calling as if lost.

#

The Church of Fate stood beside a deserted stretch of road between a tram shelter and a soup kitchen, partly shrouded in fog. There were no lamps, so Ruk used skin-magic to light his way along the woodblock path. He kept his footfalls light, more out of habit than necessity, preferring to keep the advantage on his own side. As he neared the main door, he heard a rustle from above and looked up to see strings of Fate flags festooning the eaves. In the dimness, they appeared to him as grey circles, but he remembered that there should be four colours for each of Fate’s aspects: gold for Sweet, blue for Bitter, green for Indifferent and red for Cruel.

“Pray for the gold,” he thought, unsure if the adage came from Forley’s memories or his own.
The door was locked. Ruk stood back and cursed. The idea that his way should be barred to a place of worship was proof that humanity’s heart was indeed a cruel one. Now he was done with running, he did not relish the prospect of spending another night in the open. For the first time in centuries, he did not want to be alone.

Cold air seeped into the tattered wool of his coat. He extinguished his finger-light and shivered. His heart-magic was too weak for him to warm himself, and already he regretted not taking Ju’s. Who was she to reject him for not being Forley? Couldn’t she see that part of the man still lived inside him? His memories, his instincts, his love...

He shook his head, remembering that her humanness would not allow her to think of him as anything more than a thing. “You’re not real,” people had told him in the past. “You’re a dead man, a pretender, a liar, a thief…”

He clenched his fists. This latest taunt had stung him the most. You’re not Forley...

An owl swooped into the thicket beyond the path. Longing for its freedom, Ruk sprinted towards it, reaching it in time to see it emerge clutching a rat. He closed his eyes as the rat’s dying memories reached him in flurry of raw emotion – simple and unmediated by anything as contradictory as human knowledge. Giving himself over to the pure simplicity of it, Ruk stumbled and fell.

For a long, grateful moment, he was too caught up in the rat’s brief existence to care about Ju or her grief. He opened himself up, accepting the animal’s memories as an opportunity to return to unknowing wildness, regardless of the form it took. He refused to think about the impossibility of what he was attempting. Instead, he lay transfixed as sounds and tastes smothered him in a palette of sensation.

His mind’s eye flashed with forests of grass, fields with grains the size of melons, hunger more intense than anything a human could feel; yet so much easier to quell.

Pain shot through him. Ruk yowled and opened his eyes. His arms were already turning rattish, his skin already obscured by a layer of fuzz. He lifted his paw to see it shrinking. He laughed, part from the pure pleasure of shedding his humanness, and part from the torment of realizing he no longer could.

Then cruelly, his perspective expanded, shattered. His human memories – too knowing and too insufferably defiant – would not fit into anything as undemanding as a rat. He let out a low, miserable groan. Slowly and reluctantly, he folded his new
memories of rathood deep into the back of his mind – alongside his other animal memories: the wolves, cats, hawks, owls, hares – transforming them into dim recollections that his human self could barely comprehend.

At once his hands and arms became Forley’s again. His ropey hair felt heavy against his back despite its lack of trinkets. Yowling, he curled himself up into a tight, quivering ball. Cold bit into his skin, sharp like the knife that had slashed Forley’s throat – like the squeeze of owl talons about his middle – and the icy grip of an electrode. For a long time, he could not move. Then at last he found the will to stand again.

Straightening his tattered shirt, he made his way purposefully back to the church.

A voice called to him through fog, taunting. “Poor, poor shifter. Are you tired of being human?” Its timbre was muted and unnatural. Ruk wondered if it had originated from the fog itself.

Ruk blinked. A man approached, his outlines indistinct. As he drew nearer, Ruk discerned that he was clothed in long, flowing robes.

A warden! At last.

“I’m newly arrived in the city,” Ruk said. “I was passing a powerhouse when it exploded.” He looked down at his singed and torn clothes. “I have nowhere to go.”

The warden’s mouth stretched into a smile. Sheathed in fog, it seemed that the rest of his face remained static. “We sensed your arrival.” It moved forward. “We thought we’d lost you. But then you tried to shift again, and we knew exactly where you were. Do you not know it’s too late for that now? Shifters can never be what they used to be? We’re ruined, ruined.”

Ruk froze. “Who are you?”

A breeze picked up, bringing with it the smell of rotting flesh. And then that smile again, like a mask stripped of emotion. “Do you not remember? Can you not see?”

Ruk shook his head, dread rising like bile in his throat. The thing that faced him was familiar yet not familiar. Whole but not whole. It reached out its hand, its fingers stretching in misty tentacles. “Join us,” it demanded. It took hold of his shoulders, its touch burning.

“Us?” Ruk reeled backwards. “Are you the Fear? Is it you who brought me here?”
He tripped on the edge of the path, teetered and fell. The thing covered him in an instant. Mist oozed across his skin, coiling like tentacles around his body, probing the holes in his shirt and coat. Ruk let out a hoarse shriek. Mist filled his mouth. The smell of rot overcame him. He gurgled and retched, writhed and struggled, but the mist clung like a thousand memories eating into him.

Then he saw what it was made of. Not an absence of emotion, but too much of it. He howled.

“Do you still not know who we are?” it asked.

“Yes, yes,” he said through chattering teeth. It was not the Fear at all. It was madness – the last remnant of his own kind – the ones who’d refused to escape in sleep – the ones who’d lost their sanity to hatred and grief and fear and rage and anguish.

“Join us. When we’re strong enough, we can stop them all,” it promised.

“Every man, woman and child, every ship, carriage, lorry, every worker, every noble, and finally, every King.”

“No!” Ruk shouted. “Blaming all humanity for our ruination is——”

“Ecstasy,” a voice crooned in his head. “Pure, pure ecstasy.”

The tentacles tightened, squeezing, paralysing, shrinking his will, making it their own.

“This is what they turned us into,” the thing said. “Join us. Punish them.”

“No!” It was not what he wanted. It would not give him peace.

Just then he felt something cold and hard being pressed into his hand. “Take this,” a woman’s voice said.

Voices shrieked in his head, an insane chorus that threatened to consume him. The tentacles tightened, pressing into the pores of his skin.

“Vermin,” the woman muttered.

Through the corner of his eye, Ruk saw her reach beneath her bodice. She pulled out a locket and held it up. The voices shrieked.

Ruk shrieked with them.

Then he felt the soft warmth of the woman’s hand closing about his. He clutched her fingers, grateful for a steady anchor in the roil of confusion. He focussed on the stability of her skin-magic. The tentacles oozed away, sliding over his skin to hover above his head.

“We know who you are now,” they whispered. “You’ll not escape us.”
Coalescing into the misty shape of a man, they rose up and receded into darkness, taking their stench of rot with them.

The woman put her hand on Ruk’s shoulder, her fingers glowing with skin-magic. Her touch felt at once gentle and strong. He reminded himself she was human – that he could not afford to trust her. He pulled away and hunched against a gatepost, eyeing her miserably.

“You’re safe now,” she said quietly. “The demon can’t bear being anywhere near Saint Theobald.”

“Demon? Is that what you think it is?” His voice came out hoarse, broken; but now would not be a good time to heal it.

She shrugged. “Some say it’s made up of shifters turned insane. Some say it’s just furious because it can no longer shift. But either way, it doesn’t matter. It’s what it is now that counts.”

“What does it want?”

“Our magic, souls, bodies. Let it in, and it’ll wield you like puppet.”

“They do that to humans as well?”

She furrowed her brow. “Who else would they do it to?”

“A shifter perhaps? A sane one?”

The woman shrugged. “I doubt there’s any left.”

“You mean they’re gone?” he asked, his voice rising. “All of them? You mean—” He paused. It wouldn’t do to tell this woman exactly who he was, so he made himself tremble. “You mean they would have used me up?” he amended.

He didn’t want to overdo the theatricals, so he folded his arms as if to calm himself. But he couldn’t stop trembling. His terror was real and taking him over.

The woman sent him a surge of well-wishing, all skin-magic and nothing else. He stopped trembling at once. Curious now, he wanted to test her, to see if she had heart-magic hidden beneath it, but the gentle furrow of her brow and the kindness in her unsuspecting eyes made him pause. He opened his fingers and looked at what she had pressed into his hand earlier. It was a locket on a chain, set with a piece of dirty, white stone. He remembered what she’d said.

“Tell me,” he demanded. “Who is Saint Theobald?”

She smiled, her cheeks dimpling. “No time for that. I’ll tell you later.”

At the back of his mind, the Fear whimpered. He wanted to ask if it if it knew about the demon, but the moment the thought formed, the Fear fell silent. Its presence
Chapter 7

“Solly Flood?” Ruk repeated from his seat by the coal stove. The sound of it rolled strangely yet pleasantly over his tongue. “Is that your real name?”

“As real as Ruk.” Solly smiled, her cheeks dimpling. A wide metal flue creaked and tinkled beside her, sending out waves of delicious warmth.

Ruk allowed her a smile in return. She’d earned it for inviting him into the soup kitchen. As he watched her measure cupfuls of oats into a cooking pot large enough to feed a congregation, he marvelled at how calm she seemed. Most humans would have fled the demon without looking back. She had merely stood her ground, calling the thing “vermin” and treating it accordingly.

“Who are you cooking for?” he asked.

“Fate wardens.” She drew water from a clumsy iron tap. She filled the pot and hefted it onto the stove.

“Ah. Is this what you do for a living?”

“This is what I do,” she said crisply. “But it’s not why I live.”

He smiled, not so much at the words, but at the way she spoke them. Her voice was the kind of voice he could listen to all day, laced with the singsong cadences of a mage, but not drawn out as if every utterance were precious. He wondered if she had once been a servant in one of the greater houses. She certainly moved briskly like one; and although her hand-woven dress was as shapeless as an overcoat, the set of her shoulders and the elegant curve of her neck suggested her true self was nothing less than intriguing.

He could not understand why she was still helping him, but was afraid to ask in case he drew attention to the fact that he did not belong here.

She opened a drawer, took out a white tablecloth and draped it over one of the four scrubbed tables at the kitchen’s centre. Here, she laid out cutlery, napkins, cups, saucers and a chipped sugar bowl. Enough for twelve.

“When they arrive,” she said, returning to the cooking pot and stirring it, “I’ll tell them I already know you. It’s best we don’t worry them into asking questions. It complicates things. Makes your retrieval harder.”
Morning light dappled the string of Fate flags hanging like so many faded circles at the kitchen’s single window. Ruk huddled into the coarse blanket Solly had draped over his shoulders earlier. He puzzled over what she meant by “retrieval”, but even Forley’s memories couldn’t help him there. He rubbed his brow as if still in shock from his altercation. “What should I tell them about myself?” he asked.

She frowned. “You say nothing about yourself. If anyone should enquire, tell them about the fire at the powerhouse.” She took the wooden spoon out from the saucepan and laid it on a plate. “Say nothing about your heart-magic or the demons, either. Do you understand? Not even if they ask. It’s best they never know.”

As she started past him, he took hold of her elbow, gently so as not to startle her. “How do you know I have heart-magic?”

She paused, frowned again. “Obvious, isn’t it? You healed your voice on the way in here. Plus a demon wouldn’t bother showing itself for anything but the best. So from the look of you now, I’m guessing it feasted on all but your last drop. If I hadn’t showed up, Fate knows what it’d be doing to you now.”

Ruk swallowed, knowing the demon would certainly have made him part of it. His Forley shape would have dissolved into mist and he’d now be as insane as the demon was.

“What were you doing before it attacked you, anyway?” Solly added.

“I…” Ruk grappled for something believable. “I must have passed out. I nearly died when the powerhouse fell. Delayed shock, I believe.”

“That would do it,” Solly said matter-of-factly. “Your defences must have been down for longer than you realized. You’d better keep that locket safe from now on. Take it off and you’ll be swooped on again, faster than you can say, the King consorts with demons.”

Ruk raised his eyebrows with mock astonishment. “Does he?”

Solly laughed. “What do you think?”

“I think that if the King had magic enough to consort with demons, he wouldn’t be buying it from workers.” Forley’s words, not his, but it felt curiously satisfying to repeat them.

“Well,” Solly said, briskly. “You are a lively one.”

Ruk could not tell if she had complimented him or mocked him. “I didn’t thank you for saving me out there,” he ventured.

“You’re welcome.” She pushed back a lock of brown hair that had fallen from
beneath her headscarf. Her eyes met his and their greenness startled him. According to Fate flags, green was meant to represent indifference, but Solly’s green was more like the green of treetops after rain, both confident and vulnerable.

She went back to stirring the porridge, wielding the spoon with quick, efficient strokes. “I’m not sure how it works in Cornica, but here Fate Wardens do not condone the powerhouses. They do not condone the use of heart-magic by workers either.” She lowered her voice. “But in cases like yours, they’re willing to turn a blind eye, so long as we remain discreet. My advice is to keep to yourself as much as you can. My shift ends at three.”

Ruk nodded and sank back into his chair. Sifting through Forley’s memories, it occurred to him that Solly might be an agent for the Groundists. If so, she’d eventually lead him to as much heart-magic as he could possibly want. The idea pleased him, but he was afraid to be cheered by it. There was always the danger that Solly could betray him like Blysse had. The thought made him sullen, so he pushed it to the back of his mind.

“Tell me about Saint Theobald,” he said. “Why haven’t I heard of him?”

“There’s not much of him left.”

Ruk raised his eyebrows, secure in the thought that such a cryptic response was not meant to be understood.

She chuckled. “Well the story goes like this: A hundred years ago, Saint Theobald followed his shifter lover into a cave in the wilderness…”

Closing his eyes, Ruk let Solly’s voice wash over him.

“The shifter buried herself to avoid demonhood,” Solly continued. “Saint Theobald was so grief stricken he buried himself too. He died beside her. Some say it was madness that drove him to it. Others say it was devotion. Eighty years later, his remains were found by miners who passed them on to Fate Wardens. We do not understand exactly why demons flee his presence, but his bones are like poison to them.”

Ruk fingered the locket where it now rested on its chain against his chest. It did not feel like anything special. He tested it with a spurt of skin-magic like he would a die in a ward match, but as far as he could tell it was nothing more than a piece of death.

“You should put it away now,” Solly said softly. “The wardens will be here soon. As soon as my shift’s done, I’ll get you sorted.”
He opened his eyes and stared at her, wondering yet again what “getting sorted” would involve.

“Don’t look so worried.” She glanced to the window with its string of faded Fate flags. “If you’re honest with us, things will work out fine.” She smiled. “If you think it’ll help, pray for the gold.”

“Pray for the gold,” he intoned, as if the Fates truly could help him.

Fate wardens, it seemed, had changed little in the eighty years since Ruk had last seen them. The men still dressed in worker’s overalls, and the women still wore hand made-dresses of the same ilk as Solly’s. They chatted in low, wary voices and ate with the prim restraint of those who had higher duties ahead them.

Ruk kept to himself by the stove. He scarféd two bowls of porridge, meditating on how hunger improved even the blandest of foods.

After that he must have dozed off, because when he opened his eyes, his neck was bent awkwardly and his chin rested on his collarbone. The wardens were gone, the dishes were washed and something fragrant and meaty simmered in the pots on the stove. Loaves of damper cooled within reach.

“I’ve never seen anyone sleep bolt upright for so long before,” Solly said, chuckling. “How are you now?”

Ruk flexed his neck, making out it was stiff. He liked having her fuss over him, so he kept up the pretence of being helpless. “As rickety as rust,” he said thickly.

She laughed, ladled out two bowls of pea and ham soup, cut two slices of damper and motioned for him to sit at the table to eat. They sat opposite each other and for a moment Ruk feared she’d insist he pray. He looked at her expectantly.

“If you’re waiting for me to say grace,” she said. “You’ll starve. Fate didn’t bring us this. I did.”

Ruk smiled. He wanted to say something to make her smile back, but even Forley’s memories couldn’t help him. Instead, he took a mouthful of soup and nodded his approval. It was as thick as porridge and according to Forley’s palate, an order of magnitude tastier.

When they were done, Solly cleared the table. “It’ll be a different team of wardens this time, so it’s the same rules as before. Keep to yourself.” She pointed to a pile of clothes on a stool by the stove. “I’ve brought you some clothes to change into.
There’s a tap outside, by the back door. You might want to clean up as well.”

Ruk took the clothes, then washed his face and hands at the outside tap. He undressed and dressed again under the cover of an alcove behind the church. The clothes were threadbare but at least they weren’t wardens’ weeds and they fitted him well. He dug into his pockets and retrieved his cigars and the die that Blysse had given him, then tucked them into his new coat along with the two money pouches he’d earned from Gamblers’ Row. The coat was long and warm. He thought about going for a walk to help clear his senses, but decided it might be useful to pay attention to the lunchtime wardens’ conversations instead.

Their chatter turned out to be as dull as a party of mages admiring their own moves on a croquet field – all talk of magic judiciously omitted.

When at last they left, Ruk was impatient to leave as well. He helped Solly clean up, taking over the scrubbing of the pots while she took the soiled tablecloth to the church laundry.

“You’ve done this before,” she said when she returned, admiring the now-gleaming enamel sink. “Are you a chef, perhaps?”

He laughed at that, wishing he could tell her that once – and only once – he’d been a servant woman. The tedium of cleaning and scrubbing was not something one easily forgot. He smiled. “I’m a tinkerer. Washing oil from cogs is no different than washing it from pots. It responds to the same amount of soap, and requires just as much scrubbing.”

Her green eyes twinkled. “Point taken. Shall we go, then?”

He didn’t ask where they were headed in case he was supposed to already know. But when she took him outside and joined the line at the tram stop, he had to force himself to not panic. Trams were bad enough from a distance; but to actually venture inside one and endure its rattle and rumble was not something he would willingly do.

Pray for the gold, he thought, lighting up a cigar. This had better be worth the effort.

The tram arrived sooner than he would have liked. Gut churning, he stood back and let the other passengers board. To distract himself, he decided he would pay for his and Solly’s fare, but he had nothing smaller than silver. The tram driver eyed him as if he were barmy.

“Best to put it away,” Solly said. She handed the driver two coppers.
Ruk looked into the tram. It felt like facing the inside of a tunnel in an earthquake. Swallowing against nausea, he swore under his breath.

“Are you ill again?” Solly asked. “You look pale all of a sudden. She tugged his arm. He had no choice but to stub out his cigar and follow her into the tram.

The seats were all taken. He was only partly relieved to be able to stand within sight of the back door. Then the engines began their hideous metallic whining. The churn of pistons and the rattle of casings made the hairs on the back of his neck writhe.

Solly took hold of his hand and drew it upwards. “Hold on—”

The tram lurched forward. Ruk barely caught the ceiling strap in time to stop himself from careening backwards. “What’s wrong?” Solly asked above the clangour.

He wasn’t about betray his shifterness by confessing his aversion to machines, so he said, “Motion sickness.”

“Oh.” Solly stared up at him, eyes troubled.

“Oh.”

Ruk tried not to let his irritation show. He closed his eyes and imagined himself in the powerhouse again. There, at least, he could have walked out whenever he chose. But here, sandwiched in a press of chattering, sweating bodies, he was hopelessly and thoroughly trapped.

Solly took hold of his free hand and sent him a surge of well-wishing. Although it felt sincere enough, it didn’t make him feel remotely better. Before she let go, he sent her a brief surge back while, at the same time, took the opportunity to test her for heart-magic.

She jerked away. Curtly, she said, “If you’d asked, I would have told you.”

It surprised him that she’d noticed what he’d done. Yet her heart-magic had felt stunted, as if someone had recently and violently drained it.

“Sorry,” he said, meeting her gaze. “I was curious.”

Frowning, she shuffled backwards, looked away.

#

Most of the passengers disembarked near the tenements bordering the markets and wharves. As soon as there was room enough, Ruk took a seat by an open window where the clangour of engines could be offset by aiming his face into the wind. Solly lowered herself stiffly onto the seat next to him, but kept to the seat’s far edge.
He couldn’t understand why she had been so sensitive about him testing her. According to Forley’s memories, it was quite acceptable to do so in Cornica and perhaps even in Forsham amongst potential Groundists. Surely Solly would know that. Perplexed, he lit up a cigar and inhaled deeply, grateful for the way the tobacco dulled his senses, allowing him to ignore the tram and focus outward to the passing street beyond.

“Won’t that make your motion sickness worse?” Solly asked.

Staring ahead, Ruk proffered the packet. “Try one. They’re very good.”

Solly looked at him dubiously and folded her arms.

They alighted at the Lower Slik terminal, where tenement blocks gave way to the quaint semi-detached houses. Iron-wheeled steam-carriages ambled along wide thoroughfares, looking ridiculously out of place alongside horse-drawn hansoms, men in bowler hats and women with their hair arranged like proud sculptures.

“We’ve got a three mile walk ahead of us,” Solly said. “Are you up to it?”

Ruk took a deep breath of cold air, his nostrils sufficiently numbed by the cigar to block out the taint of coal smoke. He relished the feel of unmoving pavement beneath his feet. “Lead the way.”

Solly kept her pace brisk and unwavering. Ruk could not tell if she was cross or merely impatient to be rid of him. He still puzzled over where she was heading and wondered how to encourage her to throw out a hint. When her stubborn silence began to nettle, he asked her to tell him about herself.

She looked surprised and thrust her hands in her coat pockets. At first Ruk thought she would ignore him, but then she said, “I grew up in a mage household. My mother was a servant. My father, I’m told, was the mage. The rest is common knowledge for cases such as mine. When my heart-magic started showing itself, I was forced to leave.”

She left it at that and he supposed he was meant to work out the rest for himself.

“What about you?” she asked.

He looked at her, not sure which of his selves he should tell her about. Her soft green eyes grew suddenly fierce and uncompromising. He realized that whatever he said now would make or break her opinion of him. Drawing on Forley’s memories, he said, “I left Cornica about eight years ago to take up tenure, posing as a designer at Grindle’s. My motives, in fact, were of a much more clandestine nature.”
He paused, acutely aware that the real Forley would not have admitted such a thing, perhaps not even to Ju. But what better way of gaining Solly’s trust than by feigning a confession of his true intentions?

“Posing?” Solly asked.

“Yes. In the past, my people never saw your country as a threat to our security. Our collective magic is of equal strength to yours. But your recent advances in machinery are quite astonishing. To avoid the possibility of invasion, we must remain on equal technological footing. Then Grindle docked my pay to force me into a powerhouse, and the prospect of completing my tenure was no longer achievable. My heart-magic – as weak as it is – would inevitably betray me. The next ship home is three months away.”

When Solly offered neither condemnation nor praise, he paused and looked around to make sure that no one was in earshot. In a low voice, he said, “I’m thinking that, until I can procure the suitable permission papers, my best bet is to lie low with the Groundists.”

Solly’s step barely faltered. Ruk wondered if she’d heard him. Or maybe she wasn’t an agent after all and she was thinking what in Fate’s name she should do with him.

At last, she said, “You must prove yourself with more than words, you realise. Prying into my heart-magic uninvited is not a good way to start.”

Chapter 8

Deep in the wealthy districts bordering Upper Slik, the slate paths widened and the tree-lined avenues grew leafier. The air smelled less of factory and more of lavender, pruned roses and indiscriminate wealth. An elephant-shaped carriage trundled along the road’s centre, its bejewelled wheels clanging over the cobbles, its roof flues venting smoke with polite control. Ruk let out a brief derisive laugh at the carriage’s occupants peeking out through a curtained window in its iron flank, their heads lolling back and forth in time with the machine’s ambling roll.

Unamused, Solly picked up her pace. At Wishton Lane, they came to a block of staid terraced houses with nasturtiums growing in pots by their doors. She paused at the fourth door from the right. “While you’re here, you’re my responsibility, so I
trust you’ll not be upsetting anyone by meddling into matters that aren’t your concern.”

Ruk managed a repentant smile. “Of course not.”

She fumbled with a key, unlocked the door. “Do not think we’re unprotected, either.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Ruk assured her, following her in.

He paused in the hallway, surprised that despite the pretence of reserve from the outside, the interior of the house reeked of excess. Its crimson velvet walls were barely visible beneath a clutter of treasures and curiosities. To the left of a spiral staircase, a half-sized harpsichord huddled between mosaic mirrors. At its side a mechanical ballerina pirouetted and spun with untiring precision.

“Why are you bringing me here if you do not trust me?” Ruk asked.

Solly furrowed her brow. Her green eyes looked wary. “I didn’t say I don’t trust you. I merely implied that I have yet to make up my mind. Believe me, if your intentions are hostile, you’ll be dealt with.”

Ruk expected her to introduce him to a superior. Instead, she led him directly to a sitting room where she gestured towards an armchair beside a blazing hearth. The room felt close and airless, but he sat nevertheless, despite wanting to return to the cold outside. Coin-sized lamps set into the cornices threw out dim strips of yellowish light, clearly intended to resemble finger-magic. Their gassy smell served only to unsettle him further.

Solly took off her coat and draped it over the back of an armchair. Her grey, hand-woven dress and leggings seemed all the more faded beside the rich red of the wallpaper.

She lowered herself into the chair beside him. “Tell me, what do you know about Groundists already.”

Staring into the fire, Ruk sifted through Forley’s memories. “I know very little, to be honest. Apart from the fact that they worship the ground magic springs from. That’s what they believe, isn’t it? That magic is a gift from the Earth. That if industrialists allow machines to dominate nature, your…our…humanity will be lost. That’s why they teach workers the art of wielding heart-magic, isn’t it? Not just to fight, but to keep them tied to the Earth.” He paused, remembering how Solly’s magic had felt on the tram, of how it had been stunted as if recently drained. He stretched his legs towards the fire. “I’ve also heard Groundists steal heart-magic for
their own use.”

Solly stiffened. “Do you know what that use is?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? To sabotage mages. Get under their skins. To push them where it hurts.”

Her eyes gleamed in hearth-light, but the soft curves of her face remained shadowed. “If it were deemed that your heart-magic was best given to someone with training enough to use it, how would you react?”

“Depends on what they wish to do with it.”

Her brow furrowed. “Learning to wield one’s magic as a weapon is a lengthy process. At first you may find yourself with a surplus of it. To prevent you from losing control, we siphon it off much like skin-magic is siphoned off in the powerhouses.”

“You mean I’ll be forced to submit to a chair?”

“Nothing so brutal as that. However, I’m guessing in three months time you’ll be leaving us and taking that freighter back to Cornica anyway.”

Ruk nodded, his Forley instincts relieved at the thought he may well do just that.

“Well, then,” Solly said briskly. “A little lost heart-magic is a small price to pay for sanctuary. The alternative, I imagine, is intolerable.”

“The alternative?”

“The powerhouse of course. Is that not why you came to me? To make a living without resorting to the powerhouse?”

“Oh, of course, yes.” He relaxed into his chair. He hadn’t realized that the answer as to why she was helping him was anything so simple. He almost laughed aloud with relief. “I thought you were about to offer some less palatable alternative.”

She surprised him with a smile, her cheeks dimpling. “We’re not as bad as all that. We really are out to help you. Though you must understand these things take time and effort on both sides.” Her face became serious. “Do you have any questions?”

“Yes,” Ruk said. “When I tested your magic on the tram—” He paused as if searching for the right word. “I apologize for that.”

Solly raised her eyebrows, waiting.

“Your magic felt damaged,” he ventured. “As if—”

“I meant questions about Groundists,” Solly said firmly. “My personal life is
not open to scrutiny.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” Ruk paused, annoyed that her reaction made him feel awkward and boyish. “It’s just that I was afraid that the siphoning of my magic would do the same to me.”

“Not if you submit willingly.”

“If I do not?”

“You have no choice. By allowing me to retrieve you, you tacitly agreed to submission. Surely you understood that already?”

“Yes, of course, I did,” Ruk blustered.

Her face softened. “Look, what happened to my magic had nothing to do with Groundists. So can we leave it at that? However, before we go any further, I need to know if you’ll submit.”

“To electrodes and chairs?”

“No,” she said impatiently. “Not chairs.”

Ruk relaxed. Humans without the strength of their technology could be easily overcome. “I agree then.”

Solly’s lips twitched into a half smile. Ruk stared into the fire, watching her through the corner of his eye. The more time he spent with her, the more he found himself drawn to her. She was unlike anyone he’d met before, but he couldn’t pinpoint as to why. He tried to think of something to say just to see her cheeks dimple. That much about her, he knew he liked. Her eyes too – the way they smiled.

His hand strayed to the die in his coat pocket. Its magnetic field seemed weaker than yesterday. He almost tossed it into the fire, thinking it would soon be useless and he wouldn’t be needing it anyway. Then he remembered Blysse and how she’d given it to him and how he’d taken her gesture as a sign that he could trust her. How wrong he’d been…

For all he knew, Solly could turn on him just as easily.

“What’s that you have?” Solly asked as he returned it to his pocket.

“A gift from an acquaintance,” he said absently. “From a gambling den.” He almost added, “before they stabbed me in the back”, but then remembered that Solly would have seen the tear marks in his coat. He didn’t doubt she’d be smart enough to take him literally. He was in no mood to explain that one.

She looked at him oddly. Then, to his relief, a maid brought a pot of tea and painted china cups.
“Who do I thank for this?” Ruk asked. “Fate wardens?”
Solly laughed. “Fate wardens are behind us. From now on it’s all Groundists.”
“I take it your candour is a sign that you trust me?” Ruk asked cheerfully.
“Nothing of the sort. You are under guard as we speak. Betray us and you’ll not live to enjoy your return to Cornica.” Her voice was soft, but the threat was clear nevertheless.

Without thinking, Ruk stiffened, despite knowing that Groundists were the least of his worries.

Solly’s brow furrowed and she looked into the fire. Regardless of his uncertainties about her, he wanted to reach out and smooth away whatever it was that worried her. Then, annoyed at the pure stupidity of the impulse, he blamed Forley’s instincts and reminded himself that if he listened to them he’d ruin his chances of using Solly as spectacularly as he’d ruined his chances of using Ju.

He stood, reached for the teapot. “How do you take your tea?” he asked, pouring it.

A little later, four men dressed as fashionable mages joined them in the dining room for dinner. At first their talk was stilted and perfunctory, seemingly for the sake of politeness. But as the maid brought in soup, a portly man by the name of Jonathon Fletcher demanded, “Why did you choose today to make contact?”

“I did not exactly choose,” Ruk said carefully. “I found Miss Flood by accident.”

“Did the demon speak to you?” It was Solly this time. Her voice was as challenging as Fletcher’s.

Ruk shrugged. “Babble. Incomprehensible.”

“Who else do you know with heart-magic?” Fletcher asked.

Ruk paused, wondering if he should tell them about Ju. But no, if he needed her again, it would be best to keep her for himself. He shook his head.

“How long does it take your magic to replenish?” Solly pursued.

“A week,” he said, drawing on Forley’s memories. “My heart-magic’s not strong.”

“How do you avoid sparking in the powerhouse?” Fletcher asked.

“I’ve never submitted.”

The questions went on and on. Ruk deflected them as best he could, couching his answers in ignorance before finally resorting to a plea of hunger.
More food was brought in. When Ruk had eaten, the others departed. Solly excused herself and left Ruk to sit by the fire alone, to mediate on the wisdom of what he’d bought in to. Then Solly returned a little later with a heavy-set gentleman with grey hair and a salt and pepper moustache. He held out his hand and introduced himself as Henry Hawsted.

Ruk shook his hand. He wondered if he should risk testing the man’s heart magic, for surely not everyone was as sensitive as Solly had been. But the thought had no sooner left his mind when Hawsted surprised him by testing Ruk first. Ruk jerked away.

Hawsted raised his eyebrows. “You felt that?”

“You caught me unexpectedly.”

Hawsted regarded him with intense interest. “Tell me, what’s drained you so suddenly and so completely. The demon outside the church? Or something much more dramatic?”

Ruk’s skin prickled, knowing at once that Hawsted suspected him of destroying the powerhouse. He was tempted to use the revelation to his own advantage, thinking that such a prodigious act of war against mages would guarantee him access to as much Groundist magic as he could want.

“Of course, you would hardly admit it to strangers,” Hawsted continued. “At this stage in our relationship, I’d expect nothing more and nothing less.” He started for the door. “In the meantime, make yourself at home. Rest easy while you have the chance.”

When the door closed behind him, Solly refused to talk any more on the subject. It took all of Ruk’s resolve to not pry further into the puzzle of what had happened to her heart-magic. He stared into the fire, not knowing how to proceed. When at last she informed him that it was time to retire, he was more than happy to oblige.

She took him upstairs to a bedroom with a single four-poster bed and a sink by the wall. There was a towel, soap, flask, cup and saucer on a bedside table.

“Breakfast is at seven. I’ll knock,” she said.

Ruk watched her go, leaving the room in darkness. He felt suddenly alone, and briefly contemplated calling her back. Then he remembered how he’d earned the die in his pocket. Besides he was too tired to be bothered with undressing or washing himself or even so much as lighting up the room with skin-magic. Grateful for what
little comfort the bed could offer, he took off his boots and slid beneath the covers.

Closing his eyes, he directed his thoughts inward. The Fear felt distant – as good as absent. He felt at peace.

And alone. Deliciously alone.

#

A hand shook his shoulder. “Wake up,” Solly whispered urgently. “We must go.”

Ruk could barely see her face through the darkness. He had been dreaming a human dream about Forley dividing his money into piles of three. A pile for Ju, a pile for her da and a pile for a sentry with a bloodied knife. All three had thanked him as his body shrank into the hunched, grey shadow of a rat. The prospect of losing his money did not nettle him any more. The Fear laughed at him, accusing him of consorting with demons.

“Hurry,” Solly hissed, shaking him again.

For a moment, Ruk could not remember where he was. He sat up, blinked and gathered his wits.

“What’s the matter?” he said thickly.

“Sentries.”

Ruk slid out of bed. “A raid?”

“Quick!” Solly handed him his boots. “The others have already gone.”

Awake now, the danger meant nothing to him. If he were caught, he’d simply melt into mist and slip away, unharmed. “I thought you said we were under guard.”

“A Warden sent word. Warned us. Too many to fight. Hawsted thinks you’re a spy. He ordered to me to go without you.”

Ruk fumbled with his boots. “Why didn’t you?”

She sniffed. “Should I have?”

He flexed his fingers and felt a brief tingle at their tips. “Not much I can do to help. My heart magic’s still too weak to fight.”

“No time for regrets.” Solly took hold of his wrist. She tugged him out of the room and down the stairs. Someone or something started banging on the front door.

Solly froze and for an instant looked shaken. Squaring her jaw, she pulled Ruk up the stairs again and dragged him back into the bedroom. “Damn. What are you like at climbing?” She went to the window and peeked through a gap in the curtains. “More sentries. Guarding the windows. We’re under siege.”
She was dressed in the same drab shift and leggings she’d worn last night, though they were crumpled as if she’d slept in them. Her headscarf was tied loosely and her long dark hair hung about her shoulders. She looked to the ceiling, “Hawsted chose this house because, apparently, no one in this whole line of terraces uses their attic. There’s a manhole somewhere. Damn. I forget where.”

Ruk shrugged. “Sorry, no point in asking me.”

She shot him a curt look and scurried out of the room, muttering, “We moved here a week ago. I can’t even say where the chamber pots are.”

He glanced up at the hallway ceiling and saw no means of escape there. Someone was still banging on the front door. Clearly Solly was cornered, but unlike him, she could not escape in a puff of mist. Her refusal to give up intrigued him, so he followed her to see what she would do next.

He checked the other rooms.

“Over here,” Solly hissed. “The bathroom. Close the door behind you, but don’t lock it.”

When Ruk caught up with her, she had already climbed onto the sink and removed the swing-down cover from the manhole. Dust peppered her headscarf. Ignoring it, she shoved her hands into the attic and pulled down a rope ladder.

From downstairs, there came the sudden crack of wood splitting – a door being forced open.

“Damn,” Solly muttered.

She made Ruk climb up first. Then she lit up her fingers and followed him, her movements quick and silent. Without pausing, she pulled up the ladder and the manhole cover. Towards the eaves, light from a street lamp shone feebly through cracks in the tiles.

Solly extinguished her finger-light, untied the ladder, rolled it up and handed it to Ruk. “We’ll need this at the other end. Oh, and look out for rats’ nests. If you step on one, try not to make a fuss about it.”

Grinning, Ruk looped the ladder over his shoulder. “Rats aren’t so bad.”

“That’s what they say about mages. But you won’t catch me shaking hands with them.” Solly paused. “Listen.” There was shouting and the sound of footsteps mounting the stairs. “Let’s hope they’re slow on the uptake. I’m not keen on meeting them here.”

“Where do you propose to go?”
“These houses are terraced. We should be able to get to the end of the block and wait for a bit. Then we’ll climb out through the roof.”

The roof was low pitched with standing room in the centre only. Ruk followed Solly as she picked her way over battens and joists, steadying herself with her hands on the overhead beams. Each house was separated by a shoulder-high brick wall, leaving room enough for a talented climber to squeeze through the gap between the top of the wall and the roof’s uppermost ridge. Over the seventh – or maybe the eighth wall – their passage was blocked by tea chests stacked neatly over floorboards.

“Hurry?” Solly hissed. “This way.” She headed for the eaves, dropped to her knees and began to crawl beneath the low roof space around the boxes.

Ruk crawled to catch up, confused that his Forley sensibilities were discomforted by the smell of rats’ nests nearby, while his own memories were cheered by them. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

Solly chuckled. “Attics, basements, sewers. Found myself in a dungeon once.”

They squeezed past the boxes, moved back to the centre of the attic and climbed the next wall.

The attic flooded with light.

“Damn, they’ve found the manhole,” Solly whispered. She ducked behind the wall. If we’re lucky, they won’t guess we had a ladder.”

Lantern light flashed through the roof space, swerving back and forth.

“Get down,” Solly hissed. She took hold of Ruk’s arm, pulled him beside her.

He noticed she was shaking and wondered if it was from fright or exertion.

Then he realized he was shaking too.

“Are you all right?” Solly whispered.

Ruk rubbed his forehead. He was sweating. “Don’t know.” He took a deep breath, let it out. A buzzing started up in his head, an unnatural, tinny sound. It was too close for the Fear, but he squeezed his eyes shut anyway, trying to block it out.

“What in Doom’s name is that?” Solly whispered.

“What?”

“That buzzing.”

“You hear it too?” Ruk opened his eyes. The buzzing grew louder, closer.

The light went out. There came the distant click of the manhole cover being closed. The buzzing drew nearer and Ruk could make out the click-click of
“This is bad,” Solly whispered. “Let’s go.”

She sprang up, made for the eaves and pushed on the roof tiles above her head, shifting them aside. Night air rushed into the attic, reeking of chimney smoke.

“Don’t just sit there. Help me,” Solly hissed. Her movements were no longer smooth and controlled. The tiles rattled as she flung them haphazardly outside, piling them up both sides of the widening hole.

Peering over the wall, Ruk squinted into the gloom towards the click-clicking that was still drawing closer. The Forley part of him screamed to flee alongside Solly, but his shifter part forced him to stop shivering and face it.

The thing approached, leaping from beam to beam. It was as large as a rat, with long, spindly legs, spring-loaded and sharply angled like a locust’s. Ruk ran his hand along the top of the wall, took hold of a brick and wrenched it free.

Suddenly, two large, yellow eyes threw out columns of bilious light, swivelling them back and forth like torch beams.

Ruk gasped. The thing that jittered towards him was not a living thing, but a creature made of metal – an automaton.

It leapt, its legs clicking.

Wielding the brick, Ruk struck it and crushed it against a roof prop. Smoke poured from its thorax in an explosion of cogs and wires. It dropped to Ruk’s feet.

“Hurry,” Solly hissed. She was outside on the roof, peering at him through the hole she’d made. “Bring the ladder.”

Ruk was tempted to leave the automaton where it was, but if Groundist agents were as savvy as they made out to be, then maybe they could guess who’d crafted the thing. Nothing in Forley’s memories resembled anything like it.

He picked up what was left of its head and pocketed it.

The attic flooded with light again as someone from the far end reopened the manhole. A new buzzing started up.

Ruk cursed, climbed out onto the roof. “Quick. There’s another one. Put the tiles back and pray it can’t eat its way out.”

Solly frantically began to fix the roof. Ruk unrolled the ladder and tied it to an exposed rafter. Ahead, fog swirled thickly about a streetlamp that lit up part of the roadside, but not much else. He unfurled the ladder and dropped it down the side of the house, well away from windows. He was about to tell Solly to leave the tiles and
climb down when she let out a sharp yowl. He turned around in time to see a second automaton erupt from the roof in a shatter tiles.

In a rasp of metal and claws, it leapt at Solly’s face.

Solly reeled backwards, lost her balance. Ruk lunged and wrenched her away from the automaton’s line of flight, pulling her against him to steady her. The automaton whizzed past Solly’s cheek, missing her by an inch. Ruk balled his fist and lashed out.

His aim was skewed. Instead of hitting the automaton head on, he clipped it with the side of his hand. The thing twisted and dug its claws into his arm. It skittered up to his shoulder, leapt and landed on his throat, making wet, sucking noises as it latched onto his skin.

His throat grew hot and cold all at once. A surge of magic from deep within his bones rushed towards it.

It was feeding on him, he realized. He should have been afraid, but instead he stood, mesmerised, as a calm warmth worked its way through him.

Solly shrieked. She grabbed the automaton with both hands and pulled on it; but the thing seemed part of him now. How easy it would be give up and escape. He could melt away and the automaton would turn its attention back to Solly. If it killed her – for certainly a human would not survive being drained of magic – he could take her memories and become her and gain an even steadier footing with the Groundists…

“Don’t give in to it,” Solly cried.

Ruk could not believe she was still trying to help him. Anyone else would have fled by now. As she grappled with the automaton, skin-magic spilled out of her, both terrified and determined. He caught a glimpse of her face. Her gaze held his. It occurred to him that the fear in her eyes was for him and not herself.

It seemed the most important thing in the world to understand why.

She lost her grip, fell backwards onto her rump and slid down towards the eaves, scrabbling for a handhold before stopping at its edge.

Ruk’s throat grew numb. The automaton stopped sucking. It pushed away from him and leapt towards Solly. He caught it mid air and hurled it to the tiles, flinching at the flash and crackle of heart-magic – his heart-magic – pouring out from its mouth as it broke apart. Cursing, he ground the thing beneath his heel, relishing the sharp crunch of its inner workings collapsing.
He nudged it with his toe, sending it tumbling over the eaves, a tangle of clockwork and wires trailing in its wake.

Solly stared after it, her mouth working soundlessly.

“Hurry,” Ruk said. He pulled her to her feet, urged her towards the ladder. She blinked, every last trace of her strength of will gone.

“Come on,” Ruk urged.

“Yes,” she said, quietly. “Yes, of course.”

Ruk scrambled down the ladder, leaping half a storey onto a concrete path. Solly jumped down beside him. He steadied her with both hands about her waist, but she landed so precisely, he doubted she needed it. She grinned up at him, her face all confidence and efficiency again, her cheeks dimpling so prettily he wanted to kiss them.

“Hurry, we’ve wasted too much time already.” She took his hand and led him away from the terraces into the safety of shadows.

They ran for several blocks and then picked up a tram that took them out of Upper Slik, through commercial precincts and past the towering factories of the workers’ districts. Only then did Solly relax, slumping into her seat.

“What were those things?” she asked in a low voice.

Ruk shook his head, tapped his pocket. “Don’t know, but I kept one as a memento.”

“Good thinking.”

“It was stealing my magic.”

Solly stared at him. “Are you all right?”

“I think…”

It occurred to Ruk that he felt less than all right. His skin felt itchy all over as if it were about to turn into mist at any moment. He felt more like a disembodied shifter and less like Forley.

“You look positively ill,” Solly said. “The automaton…it must have nearly drained you.”

“No, it’s the tram. I don’t like being shut up in machinery.” He wiped his forehead. His hand came away wet.

Solly stared at him long and hard. “It happened in the attic as well, remember? Before you were attacked. Now, you look different.”
“In what way?”
“Kind of faded...and shorter.”
“I don’t understand.” He wiped his forehead again.
“The locket,” she said absently. “It’s been almost a day since I gave it to you.”
“What?”
She met his gaze, frowning. “We should walk for a bit.” She stood up abruptly, took his hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

They alighted the tram in a shopping street that even Forley’s memories could not place. Cold daylight swirled through thinning fog. Breakfast vendors were already setting up, unloading their rickety carts, shouting, “Steam buns, fried bread, egg cakes and trotters...”

The contrasting smells of food, smoke and horse manure made Ruk gag. Solly seemed to know where she was going so he concentrated on keeping up with her, daring not to complain when she picked up her pace, dragging him behind her like a child.

Eventually, she stopped at a glass-fronted shop that displayed an impressive collection of exotic and improbable clocks. The sign above the door proclaimed it to be owned by George Clapton, Registered Horologist.

“Come on,” Solly said, pulling him inside. “George is an agent.”

Ruk’s legs felt like jelly. He collapsed into a chair and caught sight of himself in the mirrored face of a silver and crystal wall clock. It was Forley’s face all right, but there was something wrong with it. His cheeks were too pale, and his eyes had turned grey. He groaned, realizing he was no longer the Forley Letonder he was supposed to be.

He was, in fact, Forley washed out and shrunken.

“You should have told me you were a shifter when I gave you the locket,” Solly said. “Now it’s too late. Look what you’ve done to yourself.”

Just then, a ruddy-faced man with black hair and a thin moustache hurried into the shop from the back room, tying up the corded belt of a red, velvet housecoat.

“Solly! You’re supposed to be—”

“George, it’s a shifter.” Solly said.

George glared. “How do you know?”

“I found it yesterday, fighting demons. So I gave it a piece of bone. Now it’s
shrinking.”

“I’m not an it,” Ruk said. “I saved your life, remember?”

Solly looked at him, her brow creasing.

“Toss it outside,” George snapped. “Let the sentries deal with it.”

“George, he’s on our side. He needs help.”

George’s face went from red to pale and back to red. “You shouldn’t have brought it here.”

“Winston Lane was raided last night. We escaped within an inch of our lives. Fate knows where Henry is now.”

George looked even more taken aback. He locked the front door, his hands fumbling nervously. “As soon as Henry sends word, you’ll have to go.”

“Sorry,” Solly said. “There was nowhere else.”

George grunted. “At least you’re safe. We need to get the shifter out of sight.”

“I don’t understand,” Ruk muttered as George and Solly hauled him out of the chair. “It’s not my doing.”

“No,” Solly said. “I suppose it isn’t.”

Ruk’s knees folded. George and Solly wound his arms over their shoulders and dragged him behind the counter into a workroom lined with clunking, clattering clocks. They pulled him up two flights of narrow stairs, bustled him into a garret room and plonked him unceremoniously onto a bed.

Solly covered him with a blanket. Its prickly wool made him curl up and shiver.

“When I gave him the bone, I didn’t know he was a shifter,” Solly said. “I’m supposing he cooperated because he didn’t know what it would do. Either that or he prefers regression to demons.”

Regression? Ruk had no idea what that meant other than it made him feel like his bones were dissolving inside him. If the locket was causing it, he needed to get rid of it before he disappeared altogether. He tried to lift his arm, but it wouldn’t move. He groaned, looked to Solly, but she merely stood there, looking pale.

“Will he die?” she asked.

George shrugged, staring at Ruk as if contemplating a malfunctioning clock.

“As far as I know, shifters don’t die. But it’s got the locket now. And the locket is restraining its magic. Last time I saw something like this, the shifter turned into a child. It could still look after itself, but it was too weak to cause trouble.” He
frowned. “I never found out what happened to it, though. As far as I know, it’s still a child. Either that or it continued to shrink and disappeared. Or maybe it discarded the bone and a demon found it.”

“No, please, not demons,” Ruk slurred. He jerked forward, grabbed hold of Clapton’s wrist and tried his best to gauge the strength of the man’s heart-magic.

Clapton pulled away. “Not on your life, shifter. Try that again and you’ll be out the door quicker than you can shrink.”

“He can’t help it,” Solly said defensively. “I don’t think he knows any other way of saving himself.”

“Well tell him if he wants salvation, he’d better stop acting like a demon.”

Groaning, Ruk curled himself up, steeling himself against a sickening wave of dizziness. He closed his eyes, imagining he could see his bones shrinking, the muscles attached to them contracting and weakening. Crying out, he opened his eyes and even in dimness, the room seemed too bright and the world too large. He longed for the sanctuary of the catacombs and feared there would be no returning to them.

“Don’t leave me,” he said in a small voice. He felt Solly’s hand closing around his. Already her fingers seemed too large. Her hand was like his mother’s hand – Forley’s mother’s hand – and it made him want to cry like all children cried.

But he wasn’t a child. He was a shifter and like all shifters he could not risk allowing himself to give in to emotion.


“Sleep?” Ruk rasped. “Here? In this Fate-forsaken city? I’d sooner turn into a rat, crawl into a sewer and bath myself in the foul juices of humanity than sleep vulnerable in their presence.”

“As you wish.” Solly gently removed her hand from his.

Ruk did not hear her leave, but when he thought to look for her, he could not understand why she’d deserted him.

Chapter 9

Gramophones like conch shells sprouted from shop eaves in Pifferaro Square, blaring music to the winding of a key or the furtive addition of heart-magic. Beneath them, morning shoppers wove their way around artisan stalls amid laces, beads and feathers
hung and strung in a riotous clash of colour. Winding her way through the stalls, Ju searched the faces of hawkers and milliners, but none seemed familiar and she supposed there was no reason to expect otherwise.

It had been well over a year since Mama had first brought Ju here to introduce her to the plump and immaculate milliner named Gracie Bell. Ju could still picture Mama standing there, dressed in her twenty year-old coat, her boots with sawn-off heels, and her face pale with illness. Admiring Gracie’s hats, Mama had talked about how much she missed life before the powerhouses and how terrible it was to submit.

“Yes, terrible,” Gracie had agreed, adjusting her display of plumed hats. “I’ve seen people – good people who couldn’t hide their heart-magic – dragged away to prison.” She lowered her voice and leaned towards Mama. “It needs to be stopped.”

“How long do you think someone could last like that?” Mama had asked in a small voice.

Gracie pursed her lips. “You mean strapped in a prison chair? Years. Years and years and years…”

Mama’s face turned even paler at that. Ju tried to console her with bravado. “Don’t worry. I’ll stop them,” she said.

“Hold your tongue, girl,” Mama replied crossly. “Go look at the hats.”

Stung, Ju did as Mama asked, all the while watching her whispering with Gracie. Ju strained to catch their words, but was unable to hear above the babble of shoppers. On the way home, Mama said, “Gracie’s a good friend. If anything should happen to me, go to her.”

Ju had not understood what Mama had meant at the time, but over the months as Mama’s skin-magic began to weaken, Mama would hint about Gracie’s connections with Groundists. “Think of them as a last resort. You’re a tinkerer not a soldier; but if the mages leave you with no choice…”

Mama had never been able to bring herself to say the rest aloud, but Ju knew exactly what she’d been thinking.

Blinking away the memory, Ju wove through the crowds to the milliners’ stalls, but Gracie was no longer there. Beneath the awning where Ju remembered her to be, a crone with unkempt, white hair sat in an uprooted dentist’s chair smoking a briar pipe.

“You be looking for Gracie?” the crone asked. “Or you be shirking extraction?” She grinned and pointed to jagged teeth that she clearly had not found
the courage to deal with.

Ju paused. The play on the word “extraction” was not lost on her, but she refused to talk about Groundists to a stranger. She tried to think of a response that would work equally well regardless of who the woman worked for.

“Gracie promised me a hat,” she offered in her best, uneducated accent. “She didn’t say she’d be leaving.”

The woman shifted the pipe to the corner of her mouth. “None of them do.” She sucked on the pipe, eyed Ju up and down. “Bet she took your money as well, eh?”

The glint in the woman’s eyes made Ju uneasy. Ju moved on, threading her way through shoppers, pretending to be browsing the stalls. At a bowler hat stand, she noticed a hawker staring at her along the length of his fine, straight nose – the makings of a mage’s nose – but his clothes were as cheap as her own. Above her, a gramophone shell burst into strident song. She winced, deciding she needed quiet to think about what to do next.

As she turned to leave, she noticed the hawker still staring at her. The square was filling with even more shoppers, reminding her of the press of people during the accident near Hammering Way. Without planning to, she found herself heading towards the wharves; and then to the terminal where Forley’s freighter must have departed the morning before. Steeling herself, she walked out along the now-empty wharf where oily water lapped at the pylons.

She stared over the river, imagining Forley to still be out there, submerged and alone, unable to escape the cold or the gnawing of crabs. Most likely he’d still be alive if she’d agreed to accompany him to Cornica. Now he was gone. Her throat ached, but over the past two days she’d cried enough already.

Turning away, she clutched her handbag in both hands as if it were all she had left. That, the few coins inside it, and her clockwork dragonfly. “Construct its body from something lighter and stronger, and it’ll fly,” Forley had said. “You’ll earn yourself a fortune.”

“But this is not Cornica,” Ju muttered. “Fortunes are the privileges of mages, not workers.”

“Only if you let it,” Forley would have said.

“Easier said than done,” Ju thought miserably. She threaded her bag over her forearm and turned away from the wharves, telling herself she would find the
Groundists even if it meant traipsing from one end of Forsham to the next.

She hadn’t gotten far when a man called out from behind. “Miss! Miss, please wait.”

Ju doubted he was talking to her, but the desperate tone in his voice made her look over her shoulder. She was surprised and somewhat disconcerted to see it was the hawker with the long, straight nose. He hurried towards her, the hem of his overcoat flapping at his knees.

“Hard times,” he said when he reached her side. He drew the words out like a mage would, but his voice was as common as her own. The affectation made Ju wonder if he was gloating over her disappointment about not finding Gracie.

“If it’s superior merchandise you’re looking for,” he added. “I can show you aplenty.” He brushed her elbow and sent her a polite surge of well-wishing.

His intentions felt genuine enough, but there was something about the shifty look in his eyes that left Ju unconvinced.

“I don’t understand,” she said, feigning dull-headedness.

He scoffed. “I think you do.”

Ju regarded him, not trusting the upward curl of his mouth, not sure if she even cared for what he was hinting at. His eyes seemed to look through her instead of at her.

“The woman you asked about,” he added. “The milliner Mrs Bell, I recall. A sentry took her a few days ago. There’s been a lot of that going on lately. Rumour has it she was a Groundist and now the King’s cracking down, herding them up. It’ll be a lifetime in the chair for the likes of her from now on; and anyone else who’s caught unprotected. Soon there’ll be no Groundists left. There’ll be nowhere for anyone to go, unless they act now and disband while they can.”

Although his face was grave, his eyes seemed too bright and too calculating for the terrible news he was giving her. “I can’t see what Groundists have to do with me,” Ju said politely.

The hawker inclined his head. He backed away. “My apologies. I fear I’ve mistaken your intentions. One cannot leave these things too long, eh? Let me tell you this though: Hesitate, and you’ll risk finding yourself lost.”

Ju could still feel his well-wishing tingling beneath her skin. It felt different from the well-wishing she was used to: stronger yet at the same time prickly as if he’d not meant it.
She continued on her way, glancing over her shoulder, praying that he had not taken it upon himself to follow her.

Already food sellers were unpacking their carts for lunch, sending out smells of hot bread, roasted chestnuts, mussels and fries that contrasted disagreeably with the piles of fresh horse manure yet to be cleared by street wagons. Above them, midday sun broke through clouds, its brief warmth doing nothing to ease the sorrow that chilled Ju’s bones. She could not think where to go next. She’d heard rumours that Fate Wardens might help, but if that were true, wouldn’t Fate Wardens have been rounded up in the same manner as Gracie? Wouldn’t their churches be closed already?

For a long while, she walked aimlessly. She stopped at a cart to buy a potato cake and a tumbler of sweet tea. Clouds rolled in overhead, darkening with the first hints of evening. There was nothing to do but head towards home, thinking that tomorrow she would try to sell the dragonfly first. Then she would buy herself a ticket out of the city where surely the Groundists would have fled if the King’s mages truly were pursuing them.

The sudden click and whirr of gears made Ju look up to see loading automatons working on the pavement ahead. Beyond them, sentries had stopped passersby to check their work cards. Ju did not want to be explaining as to why she no longer worked at Grindle’s, so she turned on her heel to head the other way.

“You’re in frightful hurry, Missy,” a voice called out.

It was the hawker. He pulled alongside her in a two-door hackney carriage. As the driver reined in the horse, the hawker pushed the nearest door open. “Last chance,” he said in a low voice.

Ju glanced behind. One of the sentries was making his way purposefully towards her, his boots clicking over the cobbles. Yet another sentry was approaching from the other side.

“You can throw in your lot with them. Or you can throw it in with us,” the hawker said, gesturing to a well-dressed woman sitting in the carriage beside him. She fluttered an ornate paper fan in front of her face.

“Gracie?” Ju asked “Is that you?”

“It is, it is,” the woman said in a husky voice. “Do join us, quickly.”

“No.” Ju backed away. Although she had met Gracie only once, she remembered her voice had been softer and kinder, nothing at all like the voice
speaking to her now.

“Are you sure she’s the right girl?” the hawker asked. “She’s-”

The woman waved her fan. “Oh do be quiet, Cyril. You’re not helping.” Her words were crisp and impatient with a slight pause between each syllable.

Knowing that only a mage would speak like that, Ju turned on her heel, aiming to flee past the sentries and disappear into the chaos of the markets. She had barely taken a step when something struck her head from behind.

An explosion of pain sent her reeling. She backed into a lamppost and gripped it to steady herself. Then, improbably, it curled itself around her waist. She realized with an added jolt of panic that it was a man; except his hands were extraordinarily cold.

He rammed a rubbery palm over her mouth and wrenched her into the carriage.

She kicked and struggled. Her vision cleared enough for her to glimpse a silver hairless scalp leaning over her shoulder. Then an arm pressed her neck and pushed her face first onto an oiled leather seat. Barely able to draw breath, Ju concentrated on the nature of the thing that held her.

It smelled of rubber and machine oil. An automaton. But it stood the height of a man and, as far as she could tell, did not vent smoke, which was clearly impossible—

Its grip loosened. She gulped in a lungful of air and screamed. The hand rammed over her mouth again. She kicked out. Her boot connected with something soft. The hawker’s guts, she hoped, kicking out a second time.

The hawker groaned, cursed. “Hold her down for Fate’s sake.”

The automaton, now seated opposite the hawker, wrenched her across its lap. It wound its arm about her chest, pinning her thoroughly against its cast iron gut. She tried to kick out and felt what must have been the automaton’s legs wrap scissor-like around hers.

“Shame you did not cooperate when you had the chance,” the hawker said with mock sadness. His breath smelled like a sickly mix of tobacco smoke and pear drops. “We could have come to an arrangement, but now you’ve drawn attention to yourself, we’re forced to adhere to the law.

Ju struggled and screamed a useless, muted scream against the automaton’s grip. An odd calmness began to work its way through her. Her skin tingled at her
waist and legs – at the places where the automaton was holding her. Her body grew cold as skin-magic flooded through her veins, sweeping icy trails along her limbs. Her first thought was to fight it, but then she realized that the automaton was stealing her magic and the hawker would be expecting her to swoon like she was supposed to swoon in the powerhouse. Biding her time, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to go limp.

The automaton’s grip loosened.

From somewhere outside, Ju could hear the voices of approaching sentries.

“State your name and designation,” someone said.

“Officer Cyril Claver,” the hawker answered. “Department of Extractions.”

Ju groaned inwardly. She dared not move.

“State your purpose,” a voice demanded.

“Detention of suspect,” said Claver.

“State nature of suspect.”

“Groundist.”

A pause. “Detainee noted. You may proceed.”

The carriage door slammed shut. The carriage started forward, lurching and bumping as it picked up speed.

Ju’s skin-magic continued to rush into the automaton. She concentrated on reeling it in, but her grasp was too weak. Then her heart-magic shifted, burning through her bones to take its place.

“Well Cyril, you’ve positively ruined it now,” the woman said. Her voice held the distinctive, haughty lilt of a mage. “You should have let the sentries check the girl before we took her. You could have grabbed her afterward.”

“Couldn’t,” Claver said. “She might not have had a work card and the sentries might not have given her up. At least this way we have a small chance. But who would have guessed she’d be so stupidly stubborn about it?”

“Oh Cyril,” the woman said, exasperated. “What else could you expect from a girl snooping in Groundist territory to do? Give herself up to a complete stranger? You should have consulted me first. I might have talked her around.”

Claver gave a disgruntled snort. “The girl was uppity from the start. At least this way, we can use her magic, even if it is to feed Freddy here.”

Ju’s heart skipped a beat. Freddy?

The automaton shifted. Without thinking, Ju pushed against it.
“She’s still awake,” the woman said.

A moment later, soft, womanly hands took hold of Ju’s arm, tingling against her skin, calming her, reassuring her with a cloying surge of well-wishing.

Ju’s head spun. Her fear dissolved. She could barely remember where she was. The tingling in her arms and legs made her believe she was strapped in a chair and submitting to a powerhouse. Perhaps she had swooned and the hawker and carriage were part of a bad dream. Maybe, when she woke, the session would be over and she could go home and tell Papa that everything would be all right, that no one wanted to hurt her, that her magic was limitless and if the mages wanted it, they could take it as often as they needed, day in and day out and she’d barely notice…

Her handbag strap, still threaded around her arm, tightened. Ju stiffened. Someone tugged at her handbag. Stealing it, Ju feared.

Her head cleared. She was not in a powerhouse at all. She was still in the carriage and the automaton was taking her magic. How long had she swooned for? How long until she’d be drained?

She heard a snap. Her handbag catch opening.

“Christina, what are you doing?” Claver asked.

“Just looking,” Christina said. “You never can tell what these workers carry with them. I have a feeling this one’s more than she seems.”

Ju held her breath at the sound of tissue paper, rustling.

“Oh my, my. Fate be praised,” Christina muttered. “What have we here?”

Claver snorted derisively. “A silly trinket from a third rate tinkerer’s stall, no doubt.”

“No. It’s much more than that. It looks like something that could have sprung from the hand of a master, does it not?”

“A dragonfly?” Claver asked. “I suppose someone might be crazed enough to pay a small commission for it. A little extra income would not go amiss. You do intend sharing it, don’t you?”

Incensed at this latest insult, Ju’s anger flared. Her fingertips sparked. The automaton loosened its grip. Seeing the chance, she wriggled her arms free, pressed her hands against its chest.

“For Fate’s sake make that thing hold her still,” Christina said irritably. “The girl has the constitution of an ironmonger.”

Another flare of anger. Heart-magic seared into Ju’s fingertips. Her hands
sparked. Freddy’s iron torso grew warm, then hot like a newly lit stove. Its body jerked, throwing Ju to the opposite seat. Arms and legs flailing, she landed on her back into Claver’s lap. Waves of agony surged into her hands, burning her skin as heart-magic rushed into them.

At that moment, Claver was looking down at her, his eyes wide, mouth agape, his long nose comically askew. Without thinking she grabbed his shoulders to push herself away from him. Then all at once her fingers sparked again. Her heart-magic surged, haloing her hands in a red glow.

Claver’s face contorted into a mask of horror.

Hands burning, Ju tried to reel her magic in, but its flow was already too strong. It was as if Claver had caught hold of it and would not let go.

He let out a deep, gurgling scream. The carriage slowed, juddered to a stop. Ju knew that now would be her chance to leap out and flee, but the surge of heart-magic through her bones paralysed her. The thought of fighting it made it surge all the more. With terrifying speed, Claver’s face turned red and blistered. The flesh shrunk away, crusted, turned black. Smoke curled through the carriage, enveloping Ju in the sickly reek of burnt flesh.

“You’re killing him,” Christina shrieked. She huddled into the far corner of her seat.

Claver’s scream faded to a gurgle.

“Stop,” Ju screamed. Pain seared through her hands as their skin burned as fiercely as Claver’s. “I don’t want this. Stop.”

Gradually the flow of heart-magic slowed as if something inside her had heard. The burning eased, retreating through her bones. A band of agony flared up through her chest. She caught her breath.

Christina remained cowered in her seat, her eyes glassy. Beside her, Claver lay unmoving, his face as black and shrivelled as a prune. Slowly, he opened one encrusted eye and tried to speak. His chin dropped to his chest and his breath rasped once, twice, then stilled.

“Now you know why heart-magic is forbidden to the likes of commoners,” Christina said. Her voice was haughty, full of venom. “Your will isn’t strong enough to control it. You belong in a heart-chair where your magic will be put to good use.” Her terrified eyes hardened. “And if I can’t tie you to a prison chair, someone else will.”
Ju’s heart magic shifted and surged. Certain she was only moments away from burning Christina as well, she kicked the carriage door open and fled.

Chapter 10

The night settled, dank and heavy like soot. Ju ran and ran, winding her way through alleys and empty, upper class lanes, holding her hands away from her sides to keep their blistered, oozing skin from chafing against her coat. The air chilled her to the bone, but did nothing to ease the pain. She was afraid to stop in case she collapsed and the carriage caught up and that dreadful, painted woman, Christina, would summon her sentries.

Claver was dead. Yes, she’d killed him. She’d not even known she was capable of doing it without killing herself as well; and certainly not so quickly or brutally without so much as giving him a second chance.

She remembered Papa telling her that if a steam lorry ran over a worker, the world would have one less worker. Yet if a steam lorry ran over a mage, the world would have one less lorry. Never mind that the mage tried to threaten it. That was the way of things.

That was how it would happen to her.

The injustice of it kept Ju running. She needed to get her bearings, but she could not tell if she was heading towards home or away from it. Then the muscles in her calves began to cramp, so she paused in the shadows away from street lamps to catch her breath.

She guessed she was somewhere near Upper Slik, miles from home, for there were too many street lamps for her to be anywhere near even the middle class districts. Apart from the breeze sighing through eaves and treetops, the road remained silent. Not even footsteps, the chirp of a cricket or the rustle of a rat or mouse.

Gradually, her racing heart slowed. She felt dizzy. She made to clutch her handbag, to keep her dragonfly close to her, because with the Groundists gone it was all she had.

But her handbag was gone too. Where? How? She remembered wrapping the straps around her arm at the wharves. Someone must have taken it…

Christina! Christina had told Claver she’d sell her dragonfly. And now, and
Silently, she allowed herself cry. Tears ran into her mouth, tasting of bitterness and defeat. With sudden, cruel clarity, a new realization hit her. For workers with heart-magic, all roads led to a single place: to extraction.

To the chairs.

She wanted to run. Her legs now felt as ruined and useless as her hands. She stumbled deeper into the shadows where she leaned her back against the rough bark of a tree. Curiously it felt warm. She imagined it was Forley standing with her and the soft rustle of its leaves was his voice whispering...

*Stay with me. Then everything will be all right…*

It was almost as if he were beside her, in her head.

A little later, she heard footsteps approaching. Not steady like a sentry’s, but shuffling like someone old, or pretending to be old. Like a thief. She squinted ahead and saw only dark, swirling mist. Starting out along the road again, she knew she should walk briskly, but her heart was no longer in it.

She paused by a brass statue of a long-dead mage, closed her eyes. The air smelled as clear as it did by the sea when the breeze blew landward. No steam lorries here. No tenements or open sewers or decaying brickwork. Only mansions, nestled behind trees either side of the footpath, each one stately, protected, forbidding.

That shuffling again – closer, more urgent. She swung around to see a cloaked woman emerge from the shadows.

"Please, please help," the woman pleaded huskily.

It was too dark to see the woman’s face. Her voice sounded like Christina’s. She breathed hard, concealing something bulky beneath her cloak. She stumbled forward into a pool of lamplight where she teetered and fell heavily onto her rump. Her cloak flew open and Ju caught a glimpse of a bulbous, pregnant belly beneath it.

The woman shook her head, stunned. In the dimness she looked only a little older than Ju, with thick, dark hair that fell wildly about her shoulders. Beneath the cloak, she wore a long, white nightgown. Her feet were bare. She was clearly not Christina, but her eyes shone with the same madness that Ju had seen when she and Christina had faced each other over Claver.

"Please," the woman said. "We need you." She did not look at all in pain. Yet her fall had been hard. She gave a twisted little grin. "Ah, but you do not know me yet, do you? Rill and Arvin said you would help us, but you didn’t. Then Rill—"
paused, stroked her belly, tracing a circle with the palm of her hand. “The baby. She’s only a baby, you see. When she woke, she insisted on showing me where you were. Then she grew fretful and told me you were hurt.” The woman’s mouth trembled. She ran her hand over her eyes. “Please, please help us. Arvin said you would. You must.”

Ju blinked. “You’re a friend of Mr Grindle?”

The woman shook her head. “Is that what he told you? That we’re friends? Shame on him. No wonder you don’t trust him...” Her voice trailed away. “Listen, he’s here.”

Sure enough, Ju heard the clop-clop of an approaching horse. She stiffened, ready to flee again as a hansom cab drew closer. The driver was not Arvin, but a sentry dressed in the studded livery of the King’s first regiment.

Panic gave Ju strength enough to run. She expected the hansom to accelerate and catch up with her – try to run her down perhaps – but when she glanced over her shoulder, she saw it park by the kerbside. Two men were already helping the woman to her feet.

The road ahead of Ju was well lit. She veered into a tree-lined lane. She could hear the hansom behind her and the clop-clop of hooves drawing closer. She froze in the shadows with her back pressed up against a tree, catching her breath and praying to whatever Fate would care to listen.

True to form, Fate ignored her. A moment later, the hansom rounded the corner and slowed. Ju pressed herself deeper into the shadows. The woman called out, her voice distinct yet shaky. “She’s there, behind that tree.”

Ju lurched away and tripped on a tree root. The ground reared up to meet her just as an arm caught her at the waist.

“Good Fate, Miss Weatherton. What happened to your hands?” The voice was precise and cultured. Arvin’s voice.

Ju was too frightened and too wary to think that he might be helping her. He was a mage for Fate’s sake and mages helped no one but themselves.

He kept his arm around her, gentle yet firm, even when she tried to pull away. She refused to look at him. “Did Christina send you? She stole my skin-magic. My dragonfly. I only wanted to escape. I didn’t mean—”

Arvin muttered something too soft to hear, but it sounded like a curse. “Miss Weatherton, I’m not going to hurt you,” he said quietly. “Tinder must have known
you were in danger. Her heart-magic…it gives her prescience. She slipped out of her room without anyone knowing. Lord knows how she got past the guards. I was out looking for her, but she found you first.”

Perplexed, Ju paused. Since when could anyone tell the future using heart-magic?

The sentry leapt down from the hansom. “Is everything in order, sir?”

“Yes,” Arvin said. “We should return home.”

Ju pulled away. “A King’s sentry?”

“No,” Arvin said, softly “Not a King’s...well technically, yes, I suppose...but in reality, we’re friends. We grew up together. You’re safe.” He drew her towards the hansom. “Ju, err, Miss Weatherton— Your hands! Look at them. If you’re not in terrible danger, you soon will be.”

Ju shuddered. She wanted to wrap her arms around herself to ward off the cold and perhaps Arvin as well.

“Miss Weatherton,” he said softly. “It’s not safe out here. Those hands.” He put his arm about her waist and steered her towards the hansom.

Ju could not find the strength to argue. Her entire body ached. Come morning, people would notice her and it was only a matter of time before Christina did too. She met Arvin’s gaze and in the dimness of the street lamp his eyes seemed genuinely concerned and his hair even more errant than usual.

“Here, let me.” Arvin lifted her up into the hansom beside Tinder.

Tinder moved over to make room for her. “Don’t fret. You’re safe now.” She stroked the mound of her belly. “Ju’s with us, like we want her to be.”

Was the woman touched? Or was she talking to the baby? Ju looked to Arvin askance, but he only smiled.

Tinder patted the seat next to her. At that moment, Ju could see some of Arvin in the intense blue of her eyes and distinctive curve of her eyebrows. She wondered if Tinder were his sister.

“Come on, Ju,” Tinder insisted. “Don’t be shy.”

Arvin climbed up into the cab. He helped Ju turn around and get seated, then sat beside her, wedging her between himself and Tinder.

Suddenly, Ju felt more vulnerable than when she was out in the streets running.

“She’s cold,” Tinder said. “Arvin, look at her hands. Her poor, poor hands. I
told you she was lost. We couldn’t leave her like that, could we?”

“No, we couldn’t,” Arvin said patiently.

The hansom dipped a little as the driver climbed up onto the step at the back of the cab. “Take the old road, Tristan,” Arvin called out. “And take us in through the servants’ entrance. Quietly.”

The horse nickered as the hansom lurched forward. Ju leaned back in her seat, holding her hands up awkwardly in front of her, trying not to dwell on the dreadful, blackened sight of them. Arvin put his arm about her shoulders and sent her a deep surge of well-wishing. Instantly, she felt drowsy, content, safe.

“If I could heal you now, I would,” Arvin said. “But I’ve not an ounce of heart-magic to save myself. Imagine that. A mage without magic. As for Tinder… her magic is too unpredictable. You see, Rill, err, the baby—”

“Rill’s asleep,” Tinder interrupted. “Now Ju’s with us, Rill’s happy. She’s no longer afraid.”

Arvin sighed with what seemed barely restrained impatience. To Ju, he said, “We’ll be home presently. We can talk then.”

Ju knew she should not trust Arvin, but his well-wishing still warmed her. A mage without heart-magic, she thought dimly. How odd. How utterly, utterly perplexing. Mages born without heart-magic were treated as badly as workers born with it. How in the name of Fate had his stepfather, Grindle, tolerated him?

At last, as the hansom pulled into Arvin’s estate, Ju looked out to see high, guarded walls and lamp-lit gardens. At its centre, the house itself stood like the entrance to an impenetrable forest, its walls smothered beneath a tangle of ivy. Windows peeked out from behind leafy curtains, lambent and yellow, inviting her in.

Arvin helped Ju down from the hansom. He picked her up and cradle-carried her towards the house. At a loss as what to do with her hands, she held them up in front of her, feeling less and less at ease with Arvin’s presumptuousness.

“I can walk,” she assured him.

“I’m sure you can. But there’s no need.”

The idea of allowing a mage to carry her anywhere, let alone over a threshold was preposterous. “But really, I can walk…”

A maid dressed formally in black met them at the door. In the broad tongue of an Edge worker, she said, “I was worried sick about you—” Her face fell. She eyed
Ju up and down. “Oh Sir, her hands. Shall I wake Beth to help?”

“No, let Beth sleep. Miss Weatherton is a very good friend. I’ll see to her.”

Libby raised her eyebrows at that. She looked to Tinder.

“Bear with me,” Arvin whispered to Ju. “I’ll explain later.”

“Miss Weatherton’s special,” Tinder said to Libby. “She’s dear to us, very dear. We couldn’t leave her out in the cold all alone. She would have caught her death.”

“Yes Mistress,” Libby said mildly, ushering Tinder up a set of stairs.

Tinder paused, turned, stroked her belly. It jutted out so hugely and ponderously that the line of the baby’s backbone could be seen as a curved ridge though her nightgown.

“Mistress!” Libby said shocked. “Look at your bare feet! How could you go out like that?”

Tinder gave a little smile and turned away to continue up the stairs.

Still carrying Ju, Arvin started after her. “Let’s sort out these burns, shall we?”

The air inside the mansion doused Ju in a warm glow of gaslight. As the door closed behind her, shutting out the night, Ju cringed against a wave of apprehension. But her head felt oddly light. To remind herself she was not falling, she let her cheek rest against Arvin’s shoulder, noticing at once his scent of soap and sandalwood.

He carried her up the stairs. She caught a glimpse of velvet-covered walls, gilded paintings and a rich, mosaic floor. It seemed like a dream world. For a moment she wondered how it would feel to be part of it. Then she reminded herself that Arvin was Grindle’s stepson. This house, its contents and perhaps even Arvin himself were sustained through the sweat, labour and skin-magic of common workers – people like her, forced to submit to the powerhouse.

Preposterous! How could she allow herself to be seduced by pretty walls and gaslights?

“Please, put me down,” she said. “I’m not helpless.”

“Just a few moments more,” Arvin insisted.

They reached a door. He stooped a little to open it. His face brushed the top of her head and she caught that scent of sandalwood again. She almost forgave him for who he was.

“This is the guest room,” he said, easing the door open. “You can stay for as
long as you need.”

He lowered her onto a brocade daybed, covered her with a feather eiderdown and propped her up with cushions. A few feet away a fire blazed in a black, marble fireplace. Ju was grateful for the comfort, but everything—even Arvin himself—seemed too warm and too damnably convenient. “Tinder acts as if she knows me,” she said, swallowing. Yet…” Her voice trailed away.

It would not do to insult Arvin in his own home, but if she were truly a guest, then she needed to know why he was helping her. “When you called in last week, you said you wanted someone to look after your mother. But it seems to me that it’s Tinder who wants me.” Her head hurt. She had to force herself to concentrate on sustaining her train of thought. “By the way, where is your mother?”

Arvin looked insulted. “You’ll meet her in due course.” He pulled up a footstool and sat down. “But first, your burns.”

Unappeased, Ju held his gaze. “What does Tinder know about me?”

“Not as much as she makes out,” Arvin said. “She’s more than a little touched. Her prescience unbalances her. She has difficulty sorting reality from dream.”

“Is she your sister?”

Arvin pushed at his glasses. “We need to heal your hands first.”

Ju sank back into the pillows. “Is she your cousin? Your wife, perhaps?”

Arvin pulled his footstool closer. “Miss Weatherton,” he paused, pushed at his glasses again. “May I call you Ju? Formalities amongst friends are somewhat pretentious, are they not?”

She nodded curtly, annoyed that he had evaded her question yet again. “What shall I call you?”

Arvin smiled, holding her gaze. “You may call me whatever you like. But first, I must see to your burns. You’re going to have to trust me.”

“How can I when you will not answer my questions?”

He looked up at her, startled. “Oh, you mean Tinder? If it will put you at ease, then I assure you she is not my sister. Nor is she my cousin and most certainly not my wife.”

“Who is she, then?”

“It’s a long story that needs time to tell. An old family secret, so to speak. I would prefer to explain when you’re no longer ill.”
“I’m not ill. I’m just hurt.”
Arvin looked exasperated. He sighed.
Ju bit her lip, feeling suddenly guilty as if her concerns were unfounded.
“What I’m about to do is most unconventional,” Arvin began. “In fact, it’s potentially dangerous.”
Wary, Ju sat up again. “Do what?”
“If you were trained, you could use your heart-magic to heal yourself. However, you’re not, so I’m going to have to do it for you. But I’m powerless, you see.”
“Powerless?”
“As I said before, I’ve not an ounce of heart-magic to save myself.”
Ju stared at him. “How can that be?”
“I’m lucky I wasn’t sent to the factories,” he continued. “But you see, my stepfather, Sir Mathias, is in the same boat. His parents disowned him at fourteen, and sent him to a workhouse, but he ran away to make a fortune out of Tinkering. That’s why he single-mindedly strives for perfection. He wants to prove himself better than everyone else.”
Ju did not know what to say. Arvin’s disclosure did not make her feel any more comfortable under his care. Nor did she think any better of Grindle. But right now she could barely think beyond how good it would feel to plunge her hands into a bucket of ice until her fingers turned numb.
“Enough of my step-father,” Arvin said. “We must heal you before it’s too late.” He paused and took a deep breath. “First, I must take a little of your heart-magic. Not much, mind you. But this is where you must trust me. I promise I’ll not take more than I need. You must promise to keep it reeled in as much as you can. If we’re not careful, it could hurt us both.”
“What?” Ju swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She would not have him use electrodes on her, even if it were for her own good. She half stood and fought down a wave of nausea. She sat down again, closed her eyes, waited for it to pass.
It didn’t.
“Are you telling me you’re in the habit of stealing heart-magic?” she asked thickly.
“Not stealing it. Merely take a little.”
“From who?”
“Only from Tinder. When I was young, she didn’t want my impediment discovered, so now and then, she would give me some of hers. But not since we’ve grown.”

“So where do you get heart-magic from now?”
Arvin paused. “Until now, I’ve not had the need for any. My stepfather offers me access to the heart-chairs in the prisons, but I cannot bear to see human beings treated that way. Even if they are criminals.”

“No heart-chairs hold criminals.”

“No, of course, they don’t,” Arvin amended. “It’s naïve of me to suppose that the chairs were invented as a means of justice.”

Ju searched Arvin’s face, trying not to let his façade of vulnerability persuade her. He seemed genuine enough, but so did a thief when he offered a trinket with one hand and picked your pocket with the other. She leaned back into the pillows.

“Your burns,” Arvin reminded her. He slid from the stool to the bed and sat close enough for the side of his hip to touch hers.

Tactfully, Ju shifted away.

“Hold still,” he said. “I’ll not hurt you, I promise.”

“But I cannot guarantee I won’t hurt you,” Ju said warily. “If my magic flows out in a rush, I won’t know how to stop it.”

“Don’t fear me, and you’ll not hurt me.” Arvin’s jaw tensed, but his hands remained steady as they gently took hers.

She gritted her teeth.

Soothing iciness crept along the length of her arms, suddenly reminding her of when the shifter had taken her magic in the alley. She shuddered. He tightened his grip and the skin about her fingers grew icier.

Waves of heart-magic traced hot trails through Ju’s bones. After a moment, her hands began to feel numb. The numbness spread into her body and the room began to spin. Then, her hands felt warm again. Too warm.

She gasped, tried to pull away. “My magic,” she said. “How are you taking it?”

“It’s an old skill handed down through generations. Few mage families can do it.”

“But I’m afraid—”
Arvin tightened his grip yet again. “It’s only healing magic. Hold still. It’s
working.”

Soon, her hands began to feel cool in a pleasant, healing way. She closed her eyes…

…and saw herself moving towards a precipice that pulled at her, urging her to leap. Her heart raced as if she were running through Upper Slik, losing herself in endless circles…

She jerked her eyes open.

“Ju,” Arvin said gently. “We’re nearly done. Can you feel it working? Is it hurting less already?”

All at once, magic flowed from his fingers into hers, an intense, surge of well-wishing, soothing her, sending her almost into a swoon. The hearth crackled softly. She forgot why she was afraid. A delicious wave of exhaustion took hold of her. It felt good and right. Closing her eyes, she let it carry her along with it.

Chapter 11

Ruk rolled onto his back and wriggled deeper into the lumpy mattress. He dimly remembered passing out in a garret room with Solly and her friend Clapton; but now they were gone and the room was in darkness. He could not think of any reason why they would return, so he curled up under the blankets and drew his bony knees to his chest. Somewhere downstairs, a cacophony of clocks struck five. Outside, he could hear carriages and steam lorries passing, and voices rising up from the street. He could not tell if it was evening or morning. He did not care.

He reached into his coat pocket for a cigar, but the packet was gone. As were his money pouches. But the die was still there. He took it out and held it. He couldn’t feel its magnetic field and guessed that his ability to detect it had faded due to the damn locket, which he couldn’t take off because supposedly it protected him from demons.

He almost drifted off again; then the door opened, startling him. It was Solly. Candlelight flickered over her face, lighting up a strand of dark hair escaping from her headscarf. He watched her enter, suddenly aware that her lightness and darkness intrigued him as much as the veiled defiance in her step. It was as if, like him, she did not – and could not – belong.
The die felt small and cold in his hand. Remembering Blysse’s pretence of friendship, he replaced it in his coat pocket.

“Ah, you’re awake,” she said softly. She put the candle in its holder on the table and set down a plate of sandwiches. “George wants us to leave. If you’re anything like most boys your age, you’re probably going to need these before you can even think about moving.

Ruk’s gut churned. Boys? What was she talking about?

He reached beneath his shirt; and winced at the feel of his smooth, bony chest. The shirt was at least three sizes too large. Absurdly embarrassed, he said, “I’ve never lived as a child before.”

Solly smiled, her cheeks dimpling in the way that made him feel at once pleased to see her and afraid of liking her. “Not quite a child. And not quite a shifter, either. George says the locket has neutralized your magic. You won’t be able to turn to mist, or even heal yourself. You’ll have to be more careful about not getting injured from now on.”

Ruk thought about how easily he’d been overcome by Horace’s knife and the rubble of the collapsing powerhouse. He wanted to cry.

“I think you’ve stopped shrinking now,” Solly continued. “Unless you take the locket off and leave it off. Then you’ll grow back to how you were before. You’ll attract demons.”

Ruk rubbed his chin. He groaned at its lack of stubble. He fingered his hair. A strand of it fell across his eyes. It was blond and shoulder length, sickly like the whiteness of his skin. He had not merely grown younger, but he had also turned into a washed out version of the body he was supposed to be wearing.

“How did the ring do this?” he asked in a whiny voice. He bit his lip. How could he bear being a child, knowing there was nothing he could do about it? He was as trapped as the poor wretches who were forced to submit to the powerhouse.

Solly shrugged. “Henry thinks it’s something in the bone. Something that Saint Theobald’s shifter lover put there before Saint Theobald died. Maybe the lover tried to keep him alive with heart-magic, but it didn’t work. Instead, the bone neutralizes magic – weakens it so that demons cannot sense it, but shifters can’t use it either. As to why you grew younger, that’s still a matter of speculation. Maybe the bone weakens your assumed body as well as your magic.”

“That’s a ridiculous explanation.”
“You have a better one?”

Ruk pouted. He held up his hand, studied it, concentrated on the creases in his palm, the baby smooth skin on the back of his hand. He closed his fist. There seemed nothing weak about the movement of muscles and bones. In fact, it all felt perfect – better, in fact, that it had as an adult. Although at first, he had felt washed out, the truth was, he was simply young, a child, unfinished. “What good am I like this?” he asked petulantly.

“That’s for you to decide.” She proffered the sandwiches.

Ruk grunted a thank you and sat up. “How long did I sleep for?”

“All day yesterday; and most of the night.”

Ruk mulled this over. What if the Fear started whispering to him again? He fought back another urge to cry. His body may well have shrunk, but his emotions had swelled. Oddly, it felt right to give in to them.

“You should eat,” Solly reminded him.

He scarfed the sandwiches, barely chewing them, surprised that from a child’s point of view the act of eating could be so satisfying. When he’d finished, Solly brought him a mug of tea, then left again.

She returned later with George Clapton, the shop’s owner, who was now wearing a pin-striped shirt, grey breeches and peacock-blue braces. He looked as morose as he had in his dressing gown. Another man followed close behind. Ruk recognized his salt and pepper moustache. It was Henry Hawsted, the man who’d spoken briefly to him at Wishton Lane.

Hawsted licked his lips. He lit up a cigar. Its smoke smelled delightfully appetising. Ruk wished the man had manners enough to offer him one as well.

“So, tell me,” Hawsted said between puffs, “What business does a shifter have with us? Why should we risk ourselves sheltering you?”

Ruk remembered Solly saying that Hawsted had thought him a spy, as if he’d led the sentries there on purpose. “I’m helpless,” he said.

“And you believe we’re not?” Hawsted asked wryly. He moved to the window and looked out.

Ruk frowned.

“Mages have cracked down on us,” Solly explained.

“What does this have to do with me?” Ruk asked.

Hawsted turned back to face him, his eyes narrow. “Did you destroy the
powerhouse the night before last?"

Ruk smirked. He knew that it would have been wiser not to, but his younger self wanted credit for what in human terms would be considered to be a prodigious accomplishment.

“I assume you mean yes, then,” Hawsted said abruptly. “However, I wish you’d warned us first.”

Ruk shifted his weight beneath the bed covers, making himself comfortable, not sure if Hawsted’s reaction was one of admiration or censure.

“Well,” Hawsted said, taking a puff on his cigar. “This is an interesting development. Both good and bad, however. The mages blame us for the attack, so now they’ve put a higher price on our heads. Every sentry in Forsham is on the lookout for us. Every suspected retrieval point is under surveillance. Captured agents are being tortured and forced to betray us. In other words...” He gave a disgusted snarl. “We’re as good as finished.”

Ruk folded his arms, mouth trembling against a rush of childish emotion. Ungrateful lot. What kind of Groundists were they, anyway? An act of war from one side always bred retaliation from the other. The trick was not to bleat about it, but to remain a step ahead.

“Having said that,” Hawsted added. “I know enough about shifters to suspect that you couldn’t have destroyed a powerhouse with your heart-magic alone. Would you care to enlighten us as to how many people you violated to allow you to accumulate power enough to do it?”

Ruk let out a long, deep sigh. “Violated?” His child’s voice rose with indignation. “That’s not my way.”

Hawsted reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of stone. “See this,” he said in a low voice. “It’s a piece of Saint Theobald. We could administer larger doses of it to you in a number of ways and at this point there is nothing you could do to stop us. Within hours you would continue to shrink.” He paused, snapped his fingers. “Become smaller and smaller until you ceased to exist.”


Hawsted seemed taken aback. He stepped away from her, pocketed the stone. Softly, Solly added, “Please, Ruk. We may have different reasons for sabotaging powerhouses, but we both want it nevertheless.”

Ruk studied her face and saw honesty and perhaps a little sadness. “Your
heart-magic,” he said with childlike curiosity. “Is that how you lost it? In a powerhouse?”

She shook her head.

“She lost it in a chair,” Hawsted said sharply. “But not a powerhouse chair.”

Clapton gave an annoyed snort. “You need not explain to the likes of him.”

“It’s necessary, George. Tell him,” Solly said.

George nodded to Solly. “If you insist.” He glared at Ruk. “She lost her magic in a heart-chair, in prison. Her father was a well-respected mage. He sent her there at the age of twelve. Her mother was a servant, you see – a worker. Even Solly’s part-mage bloodlines couldn’t save her.” He paused, looked to Solly.

She swallowed. Hesitantly, she said, “I was there for four years, strapped in a chair and force fed twice a day while my magic was sucked out of me. They needed more than I could give. To encourage me to give up every last drop, I was taken to the brink of death, day after day. If Groundists hadn’t broken in and carried me out, I would have died soulless.”

In the silence that followed, the clocks downstairs seemed to tick all the louder. “That’s why your magic feels broken,” Ruk said softly.

“Miss Flood’s not broken,” Hawsted corrected. “She’s too strong-willed for that. She proved it by recovering and choosing to fight.”

Solly hushed him. “Do you know what the worst thing about prison is?” She spoke quickly and firmly, her cheeks flushed. “Most of its inmates are innocent – people plucked from the powerhouses for losing control and sparking at the electrodes. Prisons are run by factory owners – the likes of Sir Mathias Grindle, Sir Ronald Waddell and my own respected father, Sir Charles Winterby. They use the magic to power their machines, and in the case of Sir Mathias, to power themselves.”

She paused, swallowed. “Sir Mathias Grindle, you see, was born without an ounce of heart-magic. Woe betide anyone who speaks up against him.”

Without knowing why, Ruk reached across the blankets and took hold of Solly’s hand. His fingers looked even paler than hers, too puny to give anything so much as comfort. He tried to send her a surge of well-wishing, but the locket had done its work too well. He was as good as drained.

Surprisingly, Solly squeezed her fingers around his, giving him a brief surge instead. “It might do you good to be a child,” she said. “You’ll learn first hand how it feels to be helpless.”
Clapton scowled and snorted. “We’re not here to save the soul of a shifter.”
Solly rolled her eyes.
“George’s right,” Hawsted said. “With sentries hunting us, we’re running out of time.”
Ruk’s gaze flicked back and forth between Clapton and Hawsted. He sighed, “So why are you still here?”
“We want to know where you found heart-magic enough to destroy a powerhouse.”
“Ah.” Ruk looked away.
If he told them, maybe they’d leave him in peace so he could eat and sleep until he had strength enough to work out how to reclaim his adulthood. But Forley’s memories made his gut churn at the thought of uttering Ju’s name in front of them. What if they betrayed her to worse dangers than she already faced?
Then he remembered that Ju herself had wanted to join the Groundists, anyway. She would probably thank him if someone was sent out to retrieve her.
He squirmed inwardly. Could he face that look of accusation in her eyes again, hating him for not being Forley? Yet all that magic of hers! If anyone was entitled to it, it was he for preventing her from burning herself up in the alley.
Holding Solly’s gaze, he said, “Her name’s Ju Weatherton. She’s from the worker’s tenements, Portman Lane, a little east of Tendrill’s Edge.”
“One woman?” Hawsted asked incredulously. “You destroyed an entire powerhouse using the heart-magic from a single woman?”
“She had enough to destroy a battleship. Too much for even me to wield.”
Clapton and Hawsted exchanged glances. “She must be young, or else how is it her own magic hasn’t killed her already?” Hawsted asked.
“It nearly did. Her last powerhouse submission left her vulnerable. I caught her just in time – siphoned off the excess and used it.”
“To burn the powerhouse,” Clapton said flatly.
“Of course.”
Hawsted looked to Solly. “Get the shifter to help you find her.”
“Shifters only help themselves,” Clapton interrupted. “We can’t afford to trust him.”
Ruk gave an exasperated sigh, but his youthful lungs made it sound more like a wheeze. He drew his knees up to his chin, wrapped his arms about his legs and
looked to Solly. “I didn’t choose to return to human shape. I understand why your people despise me. Believe me, if I had a choice, I’d not be here.”

“If that’s the case, why are you here?” Clapton asked.

The accusation in Clapton’s voice made Ruk feel like a demon. The sides of his mouth trembled. Afraid of making a fool of himself, he clamped his lips tight, until the moment passed. “I’m not sure,” he said shakily. He suddenly felt the need to explain. He wasn’t sure if it was wise, but he couldn’t stop himself. “Something – someone – summoned me. At first, I thought it was a demon. But it’s not. I don’t know what it is. Sometimes it howls. Sometimes it talks to me, telling me what it wants me to do. But whatever it is, it’s terrified.”

“What does it want?” Solly asked.

Ruk shrugged. “At first, it wanted me to take this body. Forley Letonder’s. It knew he would die soon, so it led me to him, knowing it would take me to Ju. Then to the powerhouse to destroy it. After that, the Fear grew quiet. Now, I think, the locket is shielding me from it. I can barely sense the Fear’s presence.”

“Fear?” Hawsted repeated.

“Yes. That’s what it is. A terrible, terrible Fear. But there’s nothing I can do for it now. In this body, I’m as good as helpless.”

“With all due respect,” Clapton said. “He’s helpless only for as long as he wears the locket. How can we ensure he won’t betray us?”

“We can’t,” Hawsted admitted.

“I won’t,” Ruk assured him. “I’m not a demon.”

Hawsted took a long, hard puff on his cigar. The smoke smelled delicious and spicy. Ruk contemplated asking for one.

“There have been five documented cases of shifters being rendered impotent by a piece of Saint Theobald’s bone,” Hawsted said. “All five regressed into youths and remained harmless and cooperative until they could no longer bear the bone’s effects. After that, there was nothing to be done for them. They became demons.”

Clapton’s face was unreadable. Solly furrowed her brow.

“How long does it take?” Ruk asked glumly.

Hawsted scrutinized Ruk through a haze of smoke. “Two to five years.”

To Ruk’s now-childish mind, two to five years seemed a lifetime away. Surely it would be time enough to find an alternative.

“Listen,” Solly said. Her tone was supplicating, but her green eyes shone.
“Early yesterday, I saw him fight demons. He despises them. He also saved me when we were attacked on the roof at Wishton Lane. He didn’t have to. The bone hadn’t shrunk him yet. He could have evaporated and escaped, but he didn’t. We owe him the benefit of the doubt.”

Hawsted grimaced. “How do you know it wasn’t this ‘Fear’ that forced him to save you? Like it forced him to destroy the powerhouse.”

“It wasn’t,” Ruk assured him. “I saved her because I wanted to. Because before that, she saved me.”

He sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his hand, annoyed that his cheeks were wet.

“I believe him,” Solly said.

Grimacing, Hawsted stared at Ruk long and hard. “Very well. If Solly is willing, we’ll take the risk. I want you to find this Ju Weatherton. I want you to bring her here. Mages have absolutely no reason to suspect that George is one of us, so unless proven otherwise, we can assume these premises are safe. I’ll be leaving soon – organizing affairs from outside the city – but George will look out for you. As for Ju Weatherton, do not let her delay you. If she refuses to accompany you, abandon her.”

“She won’t refuse,” Ruk said adamantly.

“How do you know?” Solly asked.

Ruk looked down at his puny self. “This body – these memories – Forley Letonder. He knew her well. She’s been planning to join the Groundists all along, but…but…” He paused, sifted through Forley’s memories and felt a stab of anger at the way she’d pandered to the needs of her drunken father.

“What is it?” Solly asked.

Ruk shook his head. He felt protective of Ju. Her predicament, he supposed, made him feel unreasonably sentimental. He suspected it was only one of Forley’s instincts surfacing, but to his child-self, Ju’s memory seemed larger than he was. He could barely tell where Forley ended and he began.

“If we find her, where do we go from there?” His voice shook. He sucked in his lower lip to stop it from turning down.

“Be patient. You’ll see.”

He didn’t blame her for not trusting him enough to tell him. Even so, she was treating him like a child. He folded his arms and gave in to an urge to sulk.
“I’ll leave the young shifter in your capable hands then,” Hawsted said to Solly.

Solly inclined her head. Hawsted and Clapton left. When they were out of earshot, she said, “Look, I’m sorry about the way they spoke to you. They should be thanking you. Do you remember saving a piece of the automaton that attacked us? Well, Clapton spent all day yesterday tinkering with it, figuring out how it works. If you hadn’t looked out for me like you did, I’d be soulless now. No one would have known why. They’re grateful for what you did, but they’re wary. It’s not everyday a shifter barges his way in unannounced.”

Ruk was lost for words. He tried to draw on Forley’s memories to help him, but the more complex ones no longer made sense – even when he dug deeper into his older, shifter memories of the people he’d lived before Forley. It was like being yelled at by grown men in a foreign language.

He wanted to curse, merely for the pleasure of seeing Solly look as perplexed as he was. But there was no point in acting like a child, even if he felt like one. He drew himself upright and gave Solly what he hoped to be a reassuring smile. “What are the chances of you returning my cigars?” he asked sheepishly. “I doubt they’ll stunt my growth any more than Saint Theobald already has.”

“If you must,” Solly said, starting for the door. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Solly returned a little after sunrise. She handed Ruk another plate of sandwiches, a bundle of clothes, boots and socks. She tossed them onto the bed and turned her back. “Compliments of Clapton’s nephew. I doubt he’ll miss them.”

Ruk climbed reluctantly out of bed and frowned at the realization that Solly now stood at least six inches taller than him. The clothes she’d given him were threadbare and smelled of mothballs. The boots were fur lined, but too large, which suited him fine because he hated having his feet confined anyway.

He discarded the warden’s three-sizes-too-big shirt and breeches into a pile on the floor. He put on Master Clapton’s clothes, but when he got to the jacket, he wrinkled his nose at the missing buttons and frayed cuffs. “Demon’s arse if I’m going to wear this.” He shrugged out of it and replaced it with the warden’s oversized coat. It hung on him like a horse blanket, but at least it was warm.

Then he remembered the die from the gambling den and felt panicky. Quickly, he retrieved it, reminding himself that no matter how genuine human
kindness seemed, the prospect of betrayal should never be forgotten.

“Done,” he said, looking to Solly.

Turning around, she tossed him his confiscated packet of cigars. “You’ll pass.”

He raised his eyebrows and felt guilty about his reasons for keeping the die.

“Here.” She struck a match.

He lit a cigar, sat on the edge of the bed, taking a long deep puff, pleased that his child’s palate could still appreciate the tobacco’s flavour. Solly watched him, her eyes shining with silent challenge. Holding her gaze, he took another puff with practised relish. His lungs burned and his eyes watered, but he refused to give in to the urge to cough.

Solly gave a hint of a smile, her cheeks barely dimpling. She proffered a glass of water.

Incensed, Ruk ignored her. He took another agonized puff, merely to prove that he could. Then, eyes stinging, he stubbed the cigar out on the sole of his shoe and pocketed it. “For later,” he rasped.

“You look positively ill,” Solly observed, self-righteously pleased about it.

“This childish body does not enjoy mornings.” Fighting back nausea he scarfed down the sandwiches that Solly had bought him, hoping they’d soothe his throat.

They didn’t.

When he was done, Solly gestured to the door. “George wants to talk to you again.”

She led him down the stairs to a stuffy, fire-lit dining room full of enough clocks to set Ruk’s nerves on edge. A regal black crow eyed him suspiciously from a cylindrical cage hanging from the ceiling.

“Take a seat,” Clapton said from where he sat looking no less arrogant at a large dining table with Hawsted.

Ruk sat opposite and looked to the cage. “Crows are not meant to be locked up. Tameness doesn’t run in their veins. You’re torturing him every moment you keep him here.”

Clapton scowled. “She’s female. I raised her from a chick. Wildness no longer suits her.”

The crow lifted her head and wailed, an outraged declaration of misery.
Hawsted winced.

Solly poured them each a cup of tea. She seated herself next to Ruk. “Bear with them,” she said in a low voice. “They’ve a lot to contend with. We’ve lost too many agents, and are set to lose more before the week’s out.”

Clapton shot Solly a sour glance.

The room fell silent as if even the crow sensed the tension. Hawsted grunted as he unbuttoned his waistcoat that strained against his ample abdomen. He reached beneath it and pulled out the piece of the automaton Ruk had salvaged from Wishton Lane and put it on the table next to the teapot.

“Can’t say whose handiwork it is, but the attention to trivial detail makes me wonder who on earth would possess such a perverse sense of humour.” He grimaced and rubbed his salt and pepper moustache. “Its jaws are toothless, and its wings seem merely for the sake of decoration. Yet at the same time it looks predatory. There’s no need for it to be crafted like this. Something less off-putting would have worked just as well.”

“Who would think up such a thing?” Solly asked.

Clapton shrugged. “Someone who’s not getting enough from the heart-chairs, I suppose. Most likely a factory owner wanting more magic than the prisons can offer.”

Solly grimaced. “It’s positively disgusting.”

The crow pecked at the bars of her cage and wailed a short dirge, eyeing Ruk with an unsettling kinship.

“It’s an added complication we do not need.” Hawsted pocketed the piece of automaton again. “If it were made by a factory owner, chances are there are more. Thank the Fates the things can’t fly.”

Clapton nodded.

Then to Ruk’s surprise, Clapton and Hawsted’s chairs scraped over the floor as they rose and then left. Solly went to the kitchen and brought back another plate of sandwiches. “Fate knows when our next meal will be.”

They ate what they could. Solly wrapped up the rest and stuffed it into her bag. “How do you feel about taking a tram?”

“Hate the idea,” he said vehemently. “Hate it, hate it, hate…”

He was shaking and was instantly reminded of how small he’d become. Not wanting Solly to see, he folded his arms and said, “But if it’ll hurry things up, then I
suppose… I…” He shook his head. “This business of being a child. It takes time to
get used to.”

Solly gave that odd, yet endearing half smile of hers, rewarding him with a
glimpse of her dimples. “To be honest, it’s not something I’d want to do again.
Especially now.”

Ruk needed something to calm himself. He wasn’t ready for another go at the
cigar, so he focused on pouring himself a cup of tea. It was cold. He drank it anyway,
and poured another.

“What’s it like being a shifter?” Solly asked. “Do you wish you were
something else right now? Something with wings, perhaps?” She looked at him, her
eyes wistful. “I wish I had wings.”

He brushed his fingers over the stone locket at his chest. “Even without this, I
couldn’t be anything but a shifter or human any more. My memories are too human
to go back to being animal. They don’t fit.”

She looked at him sadly. “It’s like the crow, I suppose. Too trapped to use the
wings it was born with.”

“Exactly,” Ruk said, surprised at how quickly she’d understood. “Animal
existence is innocent and natural. It’s like tasting the world through your skin, rather
than filtering it through your mind. There are none of the irrational emotional swings
that humans experience. Going back is impossible for me now. It would turn me
insane.”

“You mean demon?” Solly asked.

Ruk bristled.

At that Solly held herself tense and subtly defensive, a posture common
across all species. In her, it seemed wrong. Days ago, in the attic, she’d used common
sense and daring enough to escape against the slimmest of odds. Now she looked lost,
beaten.

“What are you afraid of?” Ruk asked.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Really?”

Solly eyed him with wary interest. “It’s a long story – one I guard jealously.”

Ruk met her gaze. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“For a child, you’re uncommonly perceptive. But you know my story already.
It’s the personal details that haunt me. Unfortunately, they’re quite unsuitable for the
ears of a child.”

“Even a child of three hundred years?”

Solly smiled. “Especially a child of three hundred years.”

Ruk did not know what to say to that. None of his multiple memories contained a precedent. Peeved, he headed for the door. “Let’s wait for that tram then, shall we?”

Chapter 12

Ju woke to the sound of dogs barking and the gruff male voice ordering them to quieten. Light filtered in politely through ivy wreathing a cloverleaf window, tinting the room in leafy green. She stared at her hands with puzzled disbelief. They had healed overnight. Pale, unblemished skin betrayed none of yesterday’s horrors. Even so, the sight of them made her feel sick. No longer just hands, they were now weapons – weapons she had neither the sense nor the training to control.

Hating them, she thrust them under the quilt. She distracted herself by studying the clusters of paintings on the red velvet walls around her. They, too, seemed out of control: landscapes drawn sharply like the workings of machines, trees with fleshy branches linked like cogs and gears, human faces and animal faces frozen between misery and joy. Their combinations should have been ugly, but there seemed a cruel, desolate beauty about them; and a sense of abandonment.

Curiously there were no tinkerer’s works on display – no miniature automatons, no clocks or wind-up musicians.

And then a knock at the door.

Before Ju could answer, a young maid wearing a long black dress and white, frilled apron wheeled in a food trolley. “Good morning, Miss Weatherton. I’m Beth,” she said, curtseying. Her accent was perfect Upper Slik.

Ju smiled, liking the girl at once for her sweet, round face and the way her hair was pulled back beneath a lacy cap, giving her the no-nonsense appearance of an experienced matron.

Beth pushed the trolley to a chair by the hearth. She lifted the silver lid with a flourish, revealing plates piled high with preserved summer fruits, buttered toast, pastries and jams. Ju leaned back in the daybed and closed her eyes. She had certainly
not earned such generosity; so what did it mean?

Opulence, Papa once said, was comfort taken too far. It was like tea with too much sugar. Bread with too much jam. Those who grow accustomed to it were destined to choke.

Despite her misgivings, Ju ate heartily, not so much because she was hungry but because if she didn’t, her skin-magic would take too long to replenish itself. Then her heart-magic would be vulnerable again, leaving her more likely to lose control.

A breeze wafted through the chintz curtains sending ivy-leaf shadows over the bed. Silk carpets adorned a floor larger than her entire tenement. Wallpaper the texture of rose petals surrounded doors inlaid with gold and mother of pearl.

How many workers had died in extraction chairs to maintain it?

A little later, Beth returned, telling her that Mr Grindle would visit at eleven o’clock sharp.

“Which one?” Ju asked, fearing it would be the older one.

Beth chuckled. “Arvin Grindle. Sir Mathias hasn’t crossed this threshold for a month of Sundays. He’s not likely to with his new inventions keeping him occupied.”

At that Beth left the room briskly, but soon returned with a basin of warm water, soap, perfumes, towels and clothes. The clothes were handmade and perfect, but unstylish according to wealthy standards. They looked like they’d been hoarded away for years, unworn.

Ju held them up, one by one. “Where did they come from?”

“They belong to Tinder Morthock,” Beth said. “They were hers before she fell pregnant.”

“That was generous of her to offer them. But where are my own clothes? I should like to launder them myself.”

Beth curtseyed. “Your clothes, I’m afraid, are ruined. Mr Grindle himself has ordered them destroyed.”

His orders made sense, but his presumptuousness nettled. Besides, when Ju was well enough to leave and find her way to the Groundists, it would not do for her to be fronting up in clothes that had clearly been worn by a mage.

“I’d prefer to keep my old clothes,” she insisted. “Please, do not destroy them.”

“As you wish.” Beth backed away, clutching her apron. “I’ll inform Mr Grindle.”
When Beth had gone, Ju washed and dressed, mostly to keep herself busy enough to not dwell on the potential of her hands – killer’s hands. By law, they should be restrained in electrodes.

Feeling suddenly claustrophobic, she wanted to find Arvin. She tried the door, but it was locked. She rattled the handle and considered teasing it open with a spark of heart-magic, but wasn’t quite desperate enough to risk burning her hands again yet. To distract herself, she went to the window and looked out over immaculate gardens to stables and a winding path leading to the river.

On the windowsill, she found a lily sculpted from smooth, white stone. She picked it up and admired the precise way it had been carved. Stamens so tiny she could not imagine how anyone could wield a chisel with such precise accuracy. A speck of pollen – exquisite in its execution – clung to a petal as if recently fallen. She tried to imagine the size of the chisel that created it. Too small for human hands. So how?

A knock at the door startled her. “Ju! May I come in?” Arvin.
“I’d let you in,” she said, “But I’m afraid I have no key.”

He let himself in. He made a show of bowing. The curl falling across his forehead seemed as errant than usual. “The maid told me your hands have already healed,” he said.

“Am I a prisoner here?”
“No, of course not. I will ensure the maids do not lock you in again.” His words trailed away.

She was still holding the lily.
“How did you get that?” His eyes went hard. “Has Tinder visited you?”
“No. Why?”
“It’s hers. It’s part of her collection.”
“Who made it? It’s exquisite.”
“It’s years old.” Arvin said. “I’ll have the maid take it back to Tinder. Meanwhile, come, sit down. You should rest.” He gestured to the chair by the fireplace.

Ju sat. “The lily looks too real to be sculptured,” she pursued. “How was it done?”

Arvin smiled and touched her elbow, sending her a soft burst of well-wishing. At once, the lily seemed unimportant.
“Incredible.” Gently, Arvin lifted the lily from her fingers. “I didn’t expect you to heal so quickly. Your magic is formidable indeed.” He sent her another surge of well-wishing. “Did you feel that? It’s not something I’m accustomed to doing so effectively. My skin-magic is usually too weak.” He paused. “I must confess that last night I took more of your heart-magic than I should have. Not too much more, but enough for me to notice the difference. It’s extraordinarily strong. I couldn’t resist it.”

“You should not have.”

Arvin looked nonplussed. He pushed at his glasses. “Please, accept my sincere apologies.”

“I mean, you shouldn’t have helped me,” Ju amended. “I’m a criminal. That makes you one too for taking me in.”

“Criminal indeed,” Arvin scoffed. “You were using your magic in self-defence. Anyone would have done the same.”

“A mage like you perhaps, but not a worker.”

“Ju,” Arvin’s face turned at once serious and sincere. “I do not agree with the law. I never have.”

The words needed to be said, so Ju forced them out. “I killed a man.”


“How do you know it was him?”

“It’s in the papers. The man was burned to a crisp. You’re infamous now. But rest assured, your name remains a mystery.”

At that moment, Ju wanted to curl up and die. Groundists were supposed to burn factories and powerhouses, not people.

Arvin took hold of her hand. His fingers were soft – the kind of soft that had never seen a day’s work. “You’ve had a terrible ordeal. Thank the Fates that Tinder found you, otherwise who knows where you’d be now? But you’re safe here and you’re free to stay for as long as you need.” He paused, pushed at his glasses. “You see, I feel partly responsible for what’s happened. Tinder knew you had heart-magic. Rill foresaw it before Tinder met you. She wanted me to approach you about it months ago. At the time, I was afraid to bring up the subject in case I frightened you. I wanted to get to know you first, but you wouldn’t let me. I should have brought you here before Claver found you. Fate knows why Tinder didn’t see that coming. That’s the nature of prescience, I suppose: a glimpse of the future here, another glimpse
there, but never enough to know what to do about it.”

Ju could not speak. She could still picture Claver burning and the woman, Christina, huddled in the corner telling her that she should not have heart-magic because workers were too weak-willed to control it.

Arvin knelt beside her. “It’s up to you as to where you want to take things from now. But whatever you decide, there’s something you should know first.”

“And that is?”

“You must learn to prevent people like Claver from taking your magic. You must learn to protect yourself.”

“I think it would be more useful to learn how to protect others from me.”

Arvin smiled. “That comes with instruction.”

Ju leaned back in the chair and sank into its cushions. Instruction? After yesterday’s example, who in the world would be willing to do that? Even the shifter who’d stolen her magic had said she had too much for him to wield.

“I need to take the lily back to Tinder,” Arvin said. “I’ll return presently.”

He turned and left, closing the door behind him. Ju gripped the sides of the armchair, expecting him to lock the door anyway. She was only partly appeased when he didn’t.

#

After what seemed an age, Arvin returned with real lilies, deep yellow and white with star-shaped petals. Beth put them in a vase, and then Arvin took Ju upstairs to his sitting room where the walls were graced with the same desolate artworks that decorated her room.

“They’re mine,” Arvin said. “I’ve painted since a child. Once I came of age, Sir Mathias insisted I take part in the running of the factories.” He shook his head slowly. “One cannot study art and mechanics at the same time. For my mother’s sake I bowed to Sir Mathias’s will.”

Ju wondered what he would think of her dragonfly; but that was gone now. She couldn’t see the point in telling him about it. “Why do you not display tinkerers’ works?” she asked.

He gave a cynical chuckle. “Machines convey a sense of wonder, but little else. It’s emotion I prefer to collect. Emotion can never translate into a machine.”

“But your paintings…” Ju said, gesturing to them. “They’re sad. Yet some seem modelled on mechanicals.”
Arvin thrust out his chin. Ju wondered if she’d insulted him. Her cheeks stung. “Oh dear. I think I’ve chosen the wrong words. I do not mean to criticize. I think they’re beautiful. Yet at the same time, there’s something about them that makes me feel terribly sad.”

Arvin shrugged. “I painted them for my mother. She refuses to look at them.”

“Why?”

He pushed at his glasses. “I grew up here in the mansion, raised by my aunt because after my real father died, my mother became ill. She lost interest in everything outside of her own room. She rarely comes out.”

“Where’s your aunt now?” Ju asked.

“She’s tied up with bookwork.”

“And your stepfather? Sir Mathias? Is he your aunt’s husband?”

Arvin chuckled. “No, he’s her brother. Though they don’t see eye to eye. She’s never forgiven him for taking over the factory. She thought it would be hers to inherit. By law it should have been. Sir Mathias’s lack of heart-magic ensured he was ostracized.”

“So how did he get control?”

“His genius earned him unlimited access to heart-magic from the prisons. He never lets his power run down. He keeps his strength superior to hers – superior to all but the King’s, in fact. Now it’s she who must remain subordinate to him. These days, he allows her to manage the books, but little else. He will not even let her set foot in the workrooms.”

“Oh,” Ju said.

Arvin gave a tense sigh and smiled. “There’s no need worry yourself about them. They’re obsessed with their work. Sir Mathias never bothers himself with the likes of us, unless it concerns the factory.”

Ju stifled a shiver, imagining the horror of being strapped to a heart-chair. Would she be conscious? Would Grindle’s mechanical arms glow?

“So,” Arvin said. “Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your family.”

Ju was not ready to talk about Mama or Papa. “Please, do not think me ungrateful. But yesterday, at the markets, I was planning on leaving the city.” She did not like lying to him, but she dared not mention Groundists. “I cannot stay here. Now you know why.”

“It wouldn’t be wise to leave. Well, not immediately. Not unless you travel at
night.” He leaned forward and patted her hand. “Rest and gather your strength. At least speak to Tinder before you leave. She’s worn out from last night. She’d be terribly upset if you left without saying goodbye.” He took hold of her fingers and sent her a deep surge of well-wishing.

Embarrassed by its raw intensity, Ju pulled away.

“I won’t hurt you,” Arvin said. “But your skin-magic is weak. You need all you can get until it replenishes itself. Let me top you up with some of mine – at least enough to keep your heart-magic stable.” He grinned. “Think of it as protecting me as well as yourself.”

Arvin’s well-wishing uncoiled inside her, deliciously warm. His eyes seemed impossibly blue. She wanted to bathe in the pleasure of them; but where would that get her? He was an Upper Slikker, for Fate’s sake – educated and quite the dandy. What was she, but a worker; and now a criminal? She was about to tell him that she needed time to think, when he took hold of her hands and squeezed them, well-wishing her yet again. Skin-magic surged along her arms and spread into her chest, making her feel sleepy and grateful, wishing it would never stop.

Her fingers began to feel cold again. Her pleasure turned to unease. A wave of heart-magic spread down her arms, flowing towards him. She tried to pull away.

“Hold still,” he said. “I’m only taking a little. I need it to replace the skin-magic I’m giving you. Your instinct is to pull away, but that will only make the flow surge. It could hurt us both.”

Ju squirmed in his grip. “Stop. I’m afraid I—”

“I won’t hurt you, Ju. I’m helping you. This is for you. I need only enough to help my skin-magic replenish itself later. You do not want me to sicken, do you?”

Arvin’s words made sense. His skin-magic had already filled up the emptiness left over from when the automaton that had attacked her yesterday. He let go.

“There,” he said. “How do you feel?”

Her hands grew cold. She felt strangely abandoned. “I’m not sure…”

He regarded her, his blue eyes intense, confusing her. She felt tired, so very tired.

“You need to rest,” he said softly. “Stay here, if only for a few days. Let yourself recuperate until you’re strong enough.”

Ju nodded. “Only for a few days. Just a few.”

“That settles it,” Arvin said, grinning. “Let me walk you back to your room.”
He helped her stand. At her door, he took hold of the handle and his fingers threw out a shower of sparks. “Your heart-magic is beautiful,” he said, smiling. “Truly, truly beautiful.”

Vaguely, Ju remembered she’d meant to ask him something important. Something about how convenient it had been that Tinder had found her. Almost as if Arvin had planned it…

She frowned, feeling ungrateful. To date, Arvin had shown her only kindness. If he’d meant to harm her, he would have taken her magic like the shifter in the alley had. He would not have bothered to ask.

When he left her, she folded her arms across her chest as if to protect herself; though she was not quite sure from what. Yawning, she knew that Arvin’s skin-magic was working on her again, making her weary. Although the daybed looked inviting and safe, she refused to give in to it. Instead she took herself to the window and looked out over the gardens, taking note of the paths – how they wound through trees to the river, which ones bypassed the kennels and which ones would most likely conceal her should she decide to flee under the cover of darkness.

Chapter 13

The hansom rolled smoothly over the cobbled road. Arvin hunched behind the drawn curtains in the cab, meditating on the clop-clop of horse hooves. With Ju’s magic aching at his fingers, he should have at least felt a sense of empowerment; but right now he knew nothing could be further from the truth. He was, after all, still, undeniably trapped, still at the beck and call of his stepfather, Sir Mathias, and still within reach of his unborn sister, Rill. Thank the Fates she was quietening now, but her fear continued to whisper to him, terrified for Ju.

_Do not lose her, do not lose her, do not lose her…_

Pushing at his glasses to help clear his mind, he opened the carriage curtains and focussed on the street outside – taking note of every detail: the shapes of passing carriages, the bustle of workers on the footpaths beyond.

_Do not lose her, do not lose her…_

Wincing, Arvin directed his gaze to the passing factory walls, taking in their angles, planes, discolorations and flaws. Then, looking inwards, he recreated them in
his mind, using images of the real world to block Rill out.

Gradually, she withdrew.

Arvin leaned back in his seat. Pity, he couldn’t shut out his duties equally as thoroughly. He supposed his stepfather’s latest summons had something to do with his newest invention, whatever that was. When would the man understand that the factory meant nothing more than a painful duty? As its machines grew more complex and seemingly less useful, they grated on Arvin’s nerves all the more. If not for Tinder and Rill, he’d take himself out of the city and seek refuge in the mountains, away from the interminable barrage of obligations.

If Ju survived Rill, he’d take her with him.

The hansom rolled to a stop. “This is it,” Tristan, the driver, called down.

“The Exhibition Hall.”

Steeling himself for an afternoon of tedium, Arvin climbed out onto the footpath. Light rain wafted through the cold air. He lifted his face to it. Not even the sight of sunlight breaking through clouds – or the glitter of a rainbow over the glass façade of the exhibition hall – could lift his spirits.

“Are you unwell, sir?” Tristan asked.

Momentarily startled, Arvin blinked and gave a grim smile. “Same old palaver, I’m afraid. Best get it over with. What say we down a drink or two later?”

Tristan tipped his hat. Beneath it, his rusty hair lay flat, as if it, too, were struggling against obligation. “I won’t argue with that, sir,” he said wryly.

“Let’s hope it’s not too late then, shall we?”

At the hall, Arvin kept his eyes lowered and endured the doorman’s empty compliments, allowing him to take his coat.

“You’re here for the Grindle exhibition, I presume?” the man asked haughtily.

Arvin brushed past him, not deigning to answer, afraid that if he did, he’d spout something equally trite such as, “pleasant weather” or “Sir Mathias has certainly drawn a crowd.”

What he really wanted to say was for Fate’s sake get it over with and let me be.

Inside, the crowd milled about, thicker than usual, with men and women dressed in the finery of royalty, their faces glowing beneath a galaxy of chandeliers. Chatter spilled over tables laid out with fruits, pastries, meat platters, cakes and jellies. Music rose and fell while select groups of mages broke out into rounds of
laughter and applause.

At front of the hall, stood a vast, sweeping stage, where Sir Mathias lectured to a gathering audience. As always, he wore plain tinkerer’s garb with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, showing off his gleaming, mechanical arms.

Arvin wove through the maze of bodies, towards him, but was soon distracted by a metallic trill that set his teeth on edge. It came from a flute-playing automaton attached to pipes that no doubt led to thought processors and furnaces beneath the building. Disturbed by the sight of its spidery fingers, Arvin glanced about for a waiter bearing drinks or cigars or anything he could use to calm himself with.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He swung around to find a smokeless, human-like automaton proffering a tray of glasses. The thing, it seemed, was totally autonomous – no pipes and cables. Not even a furnace to fuel it. Arvin grimaced at the way its human face gleamed in chandelier light, making it look positively bilious. But the champagne looked excellent, so he snagged a glass and grimaced again when the automaton’s rubbery mouth puckered into a poor approximation of a smile.

“Disconcerting, are they not?” a voice said huskily from behind.

Arvin swung around and found himself face to face with his Aunt Christina who looked uncannily like a painted automaton herself. Her gown of red and black lace dipped at her cleavage, tracing a perfect hourglass to her waist before flaring at the hips and falling into frills at her ankles. She proffered her hand, no doubt expecting him to take hold of it in a polite gesture of well-wishing.

He folded his arms instead.

“Oh Arvin, you are being stuffy, this evening,” she said, pouting. “A little play hurts no one. Are you still refusing to top up your magic?” She looped her arm about his elbow and smiled up at him, her powdered face ageless in candlelight. “I suppose it’s your choice. No doubt you’ll grow out of it.”

Blatantly, Arvin ignored her.

Christina opened up an ornate fan and fluttered it. “The air’s close in here, do you not think?” She gestured to the chandeliers. “Too many of them. Their scent is like absinth.”

“Then, truly, Aunt, why are you complaining?” Arvin said. “I thought you enjoyed the occasional shot.”

She pursed her heavily painted lips. “Tell me sweetness, who have you been playing with of late?”
“You know me, Aunt. All work and no play.”

Christina smiled. “Come now. You cannot hide from me. I know who you brought home last night.”

Arvin bit back a curse. He supposed his aunt must be paying one of his servants to inform on him. As soon as he worked out whom, he would shuttle them directly to prison.

“Oh, Arvin, stop pouting. I’ve known about the girl for months. Any employee of ours who spends weekly sessions in the powerhouse and works as diligently as she does has to be special. Besides, yesterday Cyril caught her loitering at a known Groundist meeting point. If he’d listened to me and followed her instead of trying to take her, he’d still be alive.” She paused, feigned disappointment. “Now the girl’s destined for a heart-chair. Unless of course, you agree to share her with me. Then she can remain our little secret.”

“Christina,” Arvin said evenly. “Your friend Cyril tried to kill her.”

“Indeed,” Christina scoffed.

Arvin glared at her.

“The girl’s dangerous,” Cristina continued in a low voice. “She nearly killed me along with Cyril. Then she fled and left her handbag and work card behind. I have more than enough evidence to condemn her.” She paused, thinking. “The truth is, she’s far more useful to us alive. So that’s my promise. Cooperate with me and you can keep her.” She tugged him through the crowd towards Sir Mathias. “Quick. Look. My brother is unveiling his newest masterpiece.”

Guests began moving towards the stage. Morosely, Arvin allowed them to move him along. He could not possibly share Ju with his aunt, but how could he prevent it without sending Ju away?

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Sir Mathias called out. “I thank you for taking the time to indulge me on this perfect afternoon. I promise my presentation will not disappoint.”

Arvin flinched as Christina rested her hand on the back of his neck. She pulled him down to her level. “I’ve had the pleasure of dealing with one of his newest creations already,” she said. “The thing is quite perverse.”

Arvin straightened up, forcing down his unease and at the same time expressing the precise amount of ennui that she would expect of him.

“Most outrageous,” she added.
Sir Mathias cleared his throat. The audience gradually quietened. “It is with great pleasure that I unveil my newest invention: smokeless, steamless automatons.”

A murmur of appraisal passed through the audience. Christina gripped Arvin’s arm, as if to ensure he would not escape.

Sir Mathias’s monologue continued. “You’ve no doubt already encountered earlier models serving drinks for your pleasure. As you can see, they are purely mechanical. Yet their movements and responses are not predetermined. In other words, they possess the ability to think for themselves.” He paused and looked into the crowd, his eyes feverish. He gestured towards a tall cabinet fronted by a black curtain. “Let me introduce my latest models. Each item requires a minimum of heart-magic. In fact, once set in motion, they require none at all.”

The audience buzzed with a mixture of excitement and disbelief.

Sir Mathias raised his mechanical hands. The room quietened. “Furthermore, these machines are able to act in an intuitive and sensible manner, like any human being. Their purpose is to serve us unconditionally. They will attend their allocated tasks without supervision.”

Christina leaned in closer to Arvin. “Would you like to secure one of these fantastic servants for yourself? You could use it to pull your carriage. Imagine, no need for engines or horses. No disgusting ordure.”

Sir Mathias stepped to the side of the stage and pulled a cord. The curtains drew aside, revealing the contents of the cabinet – an automaton crafted in the image of a woman dressed in the black uniform of a chambermaid. The audience gasped, murmured, clapped, cheered.

Despite his aversion, Arvin could only stare. The automaton’s features were exquisite, the kind of beauty that only Fate could reproduce. It curtseyed, its bright, glassy eyes staring ahead, fixed in their sockets like dolls’ eyes.

Sir Mathias snapped his fingers. “Come. Step forward. Do not be shy.”

The room fell silent. The automaton took a tentative step. Then another. It faced Sir Mathias and curtseyed.

“Its movements are not determined by clockwork,” Sir Mathias explained. “It does not require coal. This splendid innovation frees it from pipes and engines, allowing it to function independently inside our homes without fouling the air with noxious fumes. It will carry out our commands willingly and efficiently.”

“The perfect woman,” a man called out.
The audience responded with a mixture of laughter and derision.

“The perfect slave,” Sir Mathis corrected. “A non-living slave whose only will is to serve.”

“How is it done without the constant injection of heart-magic?” another man called out.

Sir Mathias held up his hand. Its titanium planes gleamed in gaslight. “It’s a tinkerer’s prerogative to guard his most precious of secrets.”

Again, a mixture of agreement and dissention from the audience.

Christina whispered close to Arvin’s ear. “I must warn you, his secret is rather unsavoury.”

“Indeed,” Arvin said absently. The more he looked at the automaton, the less he wanted to know about it. He could sense an aura of despair about the thing, as if the heart-magic used to animate it still carried the memories of the prisoners it was stolen from.

“Does it converse?” a woman asked.

“Its vocabulary is limited,” Sir Mathias said. “Time will tell how much it can learn.”

Christina tugged Arvin’s arm. “This is all very novel, but rather tedious, do you not think? Why replace traditional servants? Imagine workers being denied work. They’d starve. There’d be nothing left for them but the powerhouses.”

Arvin decided it was time to extricate himself, but feared Christina was far from ready to let him go.

She fluttered her fan. “It’s so close in here. Would you accompany me outside?” She gestured to the chandeliers. “The candles are fogging my senses.”

She moved to the door. Arvin trailed behind her. He picked up a glass of champagne from a passing automaton and downed it in a several gulps. “Wait a moment,” he said. “I’m not finished.”

“Oh really Arvin,” Christina said irritably. “You’ve yet to hear my plan.”

He took another champagne. “Do you suppose your brother’s inventions enjoy the art of thinking? Do you suppose they feel?”

Christina laughed, but her eyes remained hard and disapproving. Taking Arvin’s hand, she drew him through the door.

They passed through the reception hall. A servant offered to fetch Arvin’s coat, but Arvin brushed him aside. Outside, the rain had eased, leaving the air crisp
and sobering. Champagne thrummed at his temples. Christina opened her parasol and led him to the centre of an open lawn. “My brother must be stopped,” she said in a low voice. “These automatons he’s creating…these things… He’s gone too far.” She glanced around and moved closer. “Of course, we could use your little friend to stop him. Then you, Tinder and that perverse unborn sister of yours can do whatever you wish.”

Arvin laughed. “As if you need automatons to motivate you. Honestly Aunt, I do believe you’ve been planning this for years.”

Christina stared up at him, unblinking. “Are you for me or against me?”

“This is a test, I’m supposing? You’re unsure of my loyalties.”

“Oh I know your loyalties,” she scoffed. “They’re the same as mine. Self first, self last and Fate help anyone who gets in the way. Besides, you know as well as I do, that my brother should not be running the factory. Give me power enough to take his place, and you’ll be free to leave. If not, my brother will learn about your little worker friend one way or another.” She fixed him with a meaningful stare. “Take care of Ju Weatherton. Use some of her magic if you must, but take care not to burn yourself up. And for Fate’s sake keep her out of sight.”

“May I ask how you intend to use her?”

Christina glared. “No, you may not.”

“I will not see her drained.”

“Of course not.” Christina pursed her lips. “I’m not my brother. But if she’s to remain unharmed, she’ll need to cooperate. I’ll call in tomorrow and reintroduce myself to her. Until then, it’s best you say nothing. Also, before you think about taking her away, do not forget, I know where she used to live. I know about her father.” She glanced at her pocket watch. “At this exact moment, he should be knowing about me.”

Arvin groaned, at once resentful and afraid that yet again his aunt had outsmarted him. “Bitter Fate, Christina, what have you done?”

“Oh Arvin, you really do not think well of me, do you? I’ve done nothing. Yet. If Miss Weatherton cooperates, her father will be housed and fed generously. If she does not…” Christina paused, shrugged. “There are Fates worse than prison.”

“It’s taken me months to gain her trust,” Arvin snapped.

Christina scoffed. “Has Tinder met her yet?”

“She has.”
“And the baby still sleeps?”

“She does.”

“That’s good. That’s very good. You look after your mother and Miss Weatherton. In the meantime, I’ll look after Sir Mathias.”

“Since when were you my stepfather’s keeper?” Arvin asked irritably.

Christina rolled her eyes. She dipped into her handbag and pulled out a small mechanical dragonfly. Carefully she wound it up.

Arvin was about to dismiss it as yet another useless trinket, but then noticed something exquisite in its execution. Despite being fashioned from glass and metal, it looked and moved as if alive – even more so than Sir Mathias’s automatons. Not just a piece of art, he realized, but a work of genius. “Where did you get that?” he asked.

Christina gave a wry smile. “Let us say that your little friend left it in my care.” She ran her fingers over its glassy wings. “I presume it was crafted by her hand. The design is unique do you not think? Coupled with the right pneumatics, I imagine it could fly.”

“What are you planning to do with it?”

“Sir Mathias needs a distraction. This will serve nicely, I should think.”

“He’ll want to meet its creator.”

“Of course he will. I’ll tell him it was I.”

Arvin could not help but appreciate her audacity. Laughing, he said, “I’m sure Miss Weatherton will not thank you for it.”

Christina curled her lip in what Arvin recognized to be a self-satisfied smile. “You may go,” she said evenly.

Freed at last, Arvin turned away, scowling. He wondered what she would do if she saw his fingers spark. But Ju’s heart-magic was too precious to be wasted on anything as crass as posturing.

As he started away, he could still hear the flutter of Ju’s dragonfly, as undeniably trapped in his aunt’s hands as he was. His temper flared at the thought of bending to both her and Sir Mathias’s will. Unlike the dragonfly, Arvin could fight if he chose. But where would that leave Tinder or Rill or Ju?

Fists clenched, he strode purposefully towards his hansom, stooping in the night’s shadows. He hoped that Tristan was still up for that drink.
Chapter 14

The view from Ju’s upstairs window was as delightful as any. But when sunset began to tinge Arvin’s gardens with the same dreamlike weirdness as the landscapes in his paintings, Ju could do little more than stare at it impatiently. Beyond them – beyond the dark slash of the River Slik – rooftops reared up like so many closed doors, anonymous, indifferent and unending.

As far as Ju could tell, she was somewhere in Upper Slik, but hopefully not at the centre of the mage district. Sweet Fates alive, how would she find her way to the Groundists now? Last night her hands may well have been burned – and certainly she was lost – but she must have been out of her senses to allow Arvin to bring her here. The longer she stayed, the less likely she’d be able to find her way out again.

She would tell Arvin that she needed to leave; and soon. She would thank him and promise to keep in touch. Then she’d walk away – at night she supposed – taking herself as far from the city as the cover of darkness would allow.

From somewhere below, there came the clop-clop of hooves and the crunch of wheels over gravel. A little later, she saw Arvin stride out from the stables. He followed the slate path to the house and slipped into the back entrance like a wayward servant. Curiously, the dogs around the kennels remained silent.

A little later, the door behind Ju clicked open. She swung around, thinking it rude that Arvin hadn’t knocked; then froze.

Tinder, wild-haired and bare-footed in her nightgown, walked silently towards her.

“What are you doing?” Ju asked.

Tinder looked surprised. “Forgive us. We wanted to see you were safe.”

Tinder’s eyes were the same intense blue as Arvin’s. They appraised her with what looked to be relieved adoration. She started forward and then paused at the lilies that Arvin had brought earlier. She plucked one from the vase and proffered it, smiling as it began to change colour – first the stem and then the lily itself, its petals whitening with a barely discernible crackle. The air smelled faintly of freshly turned earth, mossy and wet.

“This is what will come to pass if you let them steal your magic,” Tinder said. “Take it. It’s my gift to you.”

Warily, Ju took it. She turned it over in her fingers. The stem felt brittle and
cold – ice cold from a residue of heart-magic clinging to its surface.

The lily…

…was stone. When Tinder had first picked it up, it had been living. Now it was stone…

Flinching, Ju let go of it. It fell slowly as if sinking through water.

“Too much heart-magic,” Tinder said. “Like you, Rill has too much.” With a soft, strangled cry she brushed past Ju, and headed back to the door. Ju followed. When she reached the hallway, she found it empty and silent – no footsteps, no doors closing. Only a faint glow of finger-light, lingering

Then Arvin came up the stairs, two at a time. He was dressed in a formal suit with a subtle yet beautifully brocaded waistcoat. His gaze met Ju’s. Slowing his pace, he brushed his hair away from his glasses and frowned. “We need to talk,” he said.

“I’m afraid things aren’t working out.”

Ju let him into her room. He closed the door and regarded her, his jaw tense.

“Tinder was here,” she said. She pointed to the lily where it lay on the rug.

“Yes.” He grimaced. “I imagine Rill knows of the danger already, but has yet to understand where it comes from. I take it she didn’t touch you?”

Ju shook her head. Arvin smelled of alcohol. Not gin, but no doubt something equally as inebriating. He was steady enough on his feet, but behind his glasses, his eyes seemed bluer.

He sighed. “What did she tell you?”

“Riddles about heart-magic. Arvin, who is she?”

He pushed at his glasses. “Her mind…it’s gone, you see. She’s never been the same since—”

“That’s not what I asked,” Ju said firmly. “Tell me who she is.”

Arvin took a deep breath. Abruptly, he looked away. He gestured to the armchair. “Come, sit down.”

Although the hearth blazed agreeably, the look of despair on Arvin’s face made Ju shiver. Neck prickling, she sat. Arvin sat in the chair beside her, stared into the flames.

“What’s wrong?” Ju asked. “Are you hurt?”

He sighed. “Tinder is my mother.”

Ju almost scoffed at that. Were they talking about the same person? “Tinder looks barely twenty,” she said. “She could be your sister.”
Arvin gave a wry smile. “Blame Rill. Her magic stops Tinder from aging. She
doesn’t sicken. She doesn’t grow old. No one, not even a mage, can threaten her.”

“Your mother?” Ju was about to admonish him for not being honest from the
start — for exposing her to the danger of Rill’s magic without warning her first. But
from the misery in his eyes, she could tell he had more to say. If she wanted the
whole truth, there was no point in confronting him too harshly. “Who is Rill’s
father?” she ventured. “Surely she’s almost ready for birthing.”

Arvin looked up at her, his eyes pleading. “Rill’s father was my father.”

“But you told me your father died when you were a child.”

“He did,” Arvin said wistfully. “Rill should have been born eighteen years
ago. Something terrible happened when Tinder was almost ready for birthing. Rill
protected herself with heart-magic. It turned her to stone.”

“How?”

Arvin shook his head slowly. “She had too much heart-magic, I suppose. She
used it out of instinct. Now nothing can touch her, but she doesn’t grow and doesn’t
age or move, except to tell us confused snippets of what she believes will come to
pass. Tinder barely understands what’s happened to her. Which is a blessing, to be
honest.”

An unborn child turned to stone? That such a thing could be possible did not
bear thinking about. Ju remembered seeing the swell of Tinder’s belly when Tinder
had fallen on the street. How fragile it had looked. How perfectly natural.

Yet, if Arvin had told the truth, it wasn’t natural at all. It was a hideous
corruption of magic – a curse.

Ju did not know what to say without adding to the pain that Arvin most
certainly felt. “Oh… that’s… that’s terrible,” she stammered. “I’m sorry. I…” It
occurred to her that it was too late for words. Too unspeakable.

Arvin pushed at his glasses. “Tinder won’t talk about it. Or perhaps she’s
obliterated it from her memory altogether. I’ve always suspected it was my father
who threatened Rill.”

“Sir Mathias?”

Arvin shook his head. “No, my real father. Eln Morthock. He lost his mind,
you see. Turned completely insane, as all of his ilk do.” He paused, and stared into
the flames. He turned his gaze to Ju, his eyes wide and afraid. “My father was a
shifter.”
Ju leapt up from the chair. “So that’s how you were able to take my magic without electrodes. Are you the stranger from the alley? Was it you who forced me against the wall?”

Arvin sat up straight, his eyes suddenly ablaze. “You were attacked?”

“A shifter took my magic. He looked exactly like Forley Letonder.”

“Oh,” Arvin said softly. “No… surely not. That means Forley is—”

“Dead.” Ju swallowed hard against a surge of grief.

Arvin looked genuinely taken aback. “I knew there was something terribly wrong. Forley would never have left so abruptly.”

“Yes, he was leaving,” Ju blurted. “He was taking a freighter back to Cornica. He was afraid his heart-magic would spark in the chairs and he wanted me to go with him, but I couldn’t leave Papa without telling him first. Then at the last minute, Forley changed his mind…” She paused, swallowed, forced away tears. “Sentries stopped him and they…they…” Her chest ached. She could barely breath. “The shifter said it was quick.”

Ju sat down again. She pressed her hands to her face, stifling what threatened to be deep, wracking sobs.

“Ju,” Arvin said softly. He knelt beside her. He touched her arm, sending her a gentle surge of well-wishing.

Ju could not trust herself to speak. She closed her eyes. She did not like Arvin well-wishing her, but it eased the grief, if only a little.

“I’m not a shifter,” Arvin said at last. “You see, I was fortunate enough to inherit the human traits of my mother. But unlike her, I cannot make my own heart-magic. I can, however – as is the shifters’ way – take it from others if I choose. But only magic, not memories. I cannot shift. I’m stuck with who I am.”

Ju watched the fire and listened to him breathing softly, reeking of alcohol. “My sister, Rill,” he continued, “seems to have inherited a generous number of traits from our father; but Fate knows how many. My guess is that when our father threatened her, she tried to shift – to turn into something that could stand up to him. But she did not have dying memories to feed her. She would not kill our mother to take hers. So her magic turned her to stone. Now she’s trapped in her own protection.”

Arvin’s hair lay askew about his forehead. His eyes were miserably wan.

“Rill has never tried to hurt us,” he added. “My guess is she’s terrified that
our father will return for her – take her away to join him, as demons always do to their own kind.”

“Such a horrible thing for anyone to fear, let alone an unborn child.”

“She’s not a child,” Arvin said firmly. “If she ever appears to you or manages to speak to you in your head like she speaks to me, remember this: she may well choose to look and sound like a child, but she’s not human. She’s more shifter than I am. She can appear to us however she likes. She has not slept all these years in stone, she’s ridden on my perceptions, and on Tinder’s and sometimes…Fate knows who else’s. She may well be unborn, but to all intents and purposes, she’s eighteen years old. She uses her child persona to manipulate us – to make us bend to her will.”

“Why does she want me?” Ju asked.

“This is something I’ve pondered myself.” He tapped his head. “In the months past, she’s been telling me to watch out for you. My guess is that your magic can help.”

“That’s why you’re helping me? Because Rill wants you to?”

Arvin looked away. “At first, yes. I suppose most of what I do is for Rill. After I saw you at the workshop – after my stepfather insulted you – I could not help but admire your spirit. I’ve seen grown men grovel at his feet. But you…you stood up to him as I’ve seen you stand up to others in your rare unassuming way. I knew you’d leave the repair shop. It saddened me to think I’d not see you again.”

“My magic,” Ju said. “It’s too strong for me. I don’t know how to help you. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Arvin stood abruptly. “Right now, that’s not important. Right now, there’s a more pressing matter.”

Ju looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

“You’re no longer safe. My driver’s preparing a carriage as we speak. We must leave before dawn, out of the city. You, Tinder, Rill and myself.” He looked at her, his face pleading. “Can you trust me, Ju? I mean, we come from completely different worlds, but neither of us really fits into what’s expected of us. I know you think poorly of mages, and you have every right to. Sir Mathias is not my real father. A shifter is. Therefore part of me is less than human. Which makes me lowlier than even a worker.”

Lowly indeed. At face value, it sounded like an insult. Even so, Arvin’s gaze, fixed on hers, seemed humble and sad.
“What do you say?” Arvin pursued. “Stay with us. I’ll protect you and teach you to wield your magic as best I can.”

Arvin sounded both confident and afraid. Ju thought back to how he’d tried to speak up for her when Grindle had insulted her. Then later, Arvin had spoken to Cornby and told him to look out for her. The memory of that made her cringe. Arvin meant well, she knew. But neither of his attempts had made an iota of difference. They had, in fact, made matters worse.

Of course, the fault was not his. He’d not asked to be brought up by mages any more than she’d asked to be brought up by workers. Truth be told, mages and workers were only different because kings had made them so.

“You’re my opposite,” Arvin said. “You have so much power and no idea how to wield it. All I have is the ability to steal as much as I can find. Yet look at us. What we both value most has nothing to do with power at all. I help run the factory, but would prefer to paint. You tinker, but prefer to design. We crave for the chance to be ourselves.” He paused. “That’s what you want, is it not?”

Partly, Ju thought, remembering how much she still wanted to join the Groundists. She did not know how to put it into words without hurting him. She was a worker, for Fate’s sake. It didn’t matter that he was part shifter. As far as the law was concerned, he was human. And a mage.

“Who are we running from?” Ju asked.

Arvin reached towards her, no doubt meaning to send a surge of well-wishing. Fearing it would cloud her judgement, she pulled away.

He swallowed, looked contrite. “This is ridiculous. I can’t say…but I can’t not say either.” He pushed impatiently at his glasses. “Ju, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

She nearly told him she suspected as much, but he looked terribly shaken, so she stared at him, waited.

“We must leave tonight. My aunt, Sir Mathias Grindle’s sister, knows you’re here. You met her yesterday with Cyril Claver. She was working with him, illegally harvesting heart-magic, I suppose. Her name is Christina.”

Ju’s gut lurched. She backed away. “She’s your aunt? That woman. She—”

“She wants to use your magic against Sir Mathias. I fear she won’t let you go.”
Ju remembered Christina’s face in the carriage, despising her, challenging her for daring to exist. “She said I belong in a heart-chair.”

“Yes, I’m afraid she would. Ju, I promise I’ll not let her hurt you. We must leave tonight.”

He moved towards her, put his hand on her elbow, but did not well-wish her. His eyes seemed both honest and vulnerable. Despite their fierce blueness, they seemed disconcertingly pale compared to Forley’s dark brown. Sweet, sweet Fate, how she wished Forley was still with her. No matter how much they’d bickered with each other, he’d never once lied to her, never given her cause to not trust him. It had never once mattered to her that he’d come from Cornica. He’d been one of the few people to understand her love of tinkering, her struggle with heart-magic, her yearning for something better and, of all things, of who she was.

Eyes stinging, she bit her lip.

Arvin took hold of her hands. “You’re cold.”

She closed her eyes. His hands were deliciously warm. Just for a moment, she told herself – to prepare herself before telling him that as much as she wanted to help him, it would be best for them both if she found her own way to safety.

Then the sandalwood scent of his jacket reminded her yet again of what he was and who he was not.

Wealth rarely perpetuated itself by helping others...

Without warning, her fingers began to feel cold. Hot trails of heart-magic seeped along her bones.

He was taking it.

“No,” she snapped. She tried to pull away, but he held on.

“If you don’t want me to,” Arvin said softly. “Stop me. Reel it in.”

Her hands grew icy. She felt faint, like she had when the automaton in the carriage had latched onto her. Heart-magic coursed through her fingers.

“Let go,” she hissed.

“Reel it in like you reeled in your skin-magic in the extraction chairs. That’s how you stop your hands from sparking, isn’t it? By holding your skin-magic back. Try to do the same with your heart-magic, but remember it’s much, much harder.”

Her pulse thrummed in her ears. She could not tell if it was her heartbeat or her magic. “Let go,” she demanded. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t hurt me,” Arvin said calmly. “Make yourself want to reel your
power in. Think what will happen if you don’t.”

In her mind’s eye, she saw Claver burning up. She recalled the hideous smell of his burning flesh. She could almost hear his voice, croaking; then his eyes congealing, sightless, crusting…

Arvin held on. Magic washed though her fingertips, heating her bones and freezing her flesh. “No,” she shouted. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Something inside her shifted. Power surged, not out of her, but towards her – into her.

Arvin gasped, pulled away.

Her skin grew cool again.

She was afraid to look in case she’d hurt him.

“You did it,” Arvin said. “You stopped me. You did it.”

Ju opened her eyes, expecting his hands to be blistered at the very least. He was still kneeling in front of her, unhurt and grinning. “You reeled your power in because you didn’t want to hurt me. That’s the secret, see. Never lose sight of what you can do.”

Shivering, she bit back a curse. How stupid of him to take such a risk. She stood up, wrapped her arms about herself and started for the door. How dare he treat her this way. She would walk out now, forget she’d ever met him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Learning to protect yourself isn’t easy. If it were, the extraction chairs wouldn’t work. I could have taken more of your magic if I wanted to, but I didn’t. You needed to see.”

Suddenly Ju could not bring herself to move, afraid her shivering would overtake her.

Arvin shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over her shoulders, keeping his arm on her back. “I’m glad I found you, even if we haven’t gotten off to the best of starts,” he said softly.

“For all I know,” she said. “You’re using the magic I gave you right now. You could have turned it back on me to calm me – to make me see things your way.”

He let go of her and stood back. “That’s not what I want, Ju. I want friendship. I want you.”

The room fell suddenly silent, except for the crackling of the fireplace. She felt herself blush, knowing that she should leave, but was not yet ready to because she was tired of turning people away, tired of running and tired of...
There came a muffled crash from beyond the hallway. Arvin rolled his eyes.

“Clumsy housekeepers. One would think—”

A scream. A terrified woman’s scream rose to a shrill crescendo. In its aftermath, the air felt preternaturally still.

“Rill!” Arvin shouted, sprinting to the hallway.

Ju caught up with him at the hall’s end. He fumbled with the lock to Tinder’s door.

The maid, Beth, pulled Ju aside. “I wouldn’t be going in there, Missy. It’s not something you’ll want to see.”

Ju shook herself free. Arvin looked over his shoulder. “Return to your room. I’ll explain later.” He wrenched the door open to be greeted not with chaos, as Ju expected; but with a spectacle of green.

The bedroom looked and smelled like a greenhouse. Twisted wooden branches spilled in through a half-open window, filling it with a forest of stems that wound up along the ceiling and down the walls, blanketing them in curtains of ivy. At the room’s centre, Tinder stood crying, taking in short, strangled gasps. A life-sized statue of a chambermaid stood beside her.

“Libby betrayed us,” Tinder said between sobs. “She told that dreadful, dreadful Christina about Ju. She knows we’re planning to leave.”

Tinder gasped and swayed. Arvin put his arm around her shoulders and steered her to a bed. “Christina can’t hurt us; not with Ju helping us. We’ll leave before she reaches us. We’ll go now.”

Ju stared at the bed. Ivy wound around its four posts, festooning the length and breadth of its canopy. Amongst it all, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, hung the perfect stone replicas of flowers and small animals—hundreds. Stone mice peered out in various odd poses. A litter of stone kittens lay curled up at the foot of the bed with a pair of stone gloves, lacewings, grasshoppers and butterflies arranged about them.

With rising horror, Ju looked back to the statue of the chambermaid. It stood with its feet apart and its knees slightly bent as if ready to flee. Like the flowers, its moulding was exquisite, its clothes rendered in perfect detail down to the ruffled lace of its petticoats and apron.

But it was the eyes that gave it away. Terrified eyes. And a mouth open in frozen protest.
Or maybe a scream.

For a long drawn out moment Ju’s heart stilled as if it too had turned to stone. When it raced into life again, she blurted, “It’s not a statue, is it? It’s real.” She swept her gaze over the other carvings. “She doesn’t collect them, she makes them. Sweet Purgatory, they were once alive, but now….”

Arvin swung around and glared, his glasses askew. “Ju, please, not now.”

“Can Ju protect herself?” Tinder asked urgently. “Does she know how?”

“Not quite,” Arvin said.

Tinder let out a sharp yowl. She twisted herself up from the bed. With surprising agility, she pushed Arvin aside and lurched at Ju.

Ju backed away, but Tinder was too fast. She took hold of Ju’s shoulders with both hands and dug her fingers into Ju’s flesh. Ju’s skin felt at once ice-cold and burning.

“Reel your magic in,” Arvin said. “Protect yourself.”

He tried to ease Tinder away, but her grip was too solid, too demanding. Suddenly, the air smelled earthy and mossy. Tinder’s fingertips grew red. She lashed out and hit Arvin sharply over the knuckles, sending up sparks of heart-magic. He yelped and lurched backwards, his hands blistered and smoking.

The chill spread to Ju’s feet. Heart-magic swirled, gushed, traced searing trails along her bones, surged out of her and into Tinder like a deluge at last released.

“Rill! Not like this,” Arvin said, firmly. “You’ll kill her.”

Tinder’s face was set and determined, her dark hair a wild halo about her shoulders. Her pupils were round pits of blackness, reflecting Ju’s face back into her. The reflection changed, became a face of grey stone, unmoving.

“Reel your power in.” Arvin’s mouth spoke close to her ear. He groaned, trying to pull Ju away, but Tinder would not let go.

Ju’s heart-magic surged out in a violent, burning wash. Pain exploded along her bones more intense than when the shifter had pushed her against the wall.

The shifter…

…he’d not hurt her nearly as badly. He’d been kind to her, she realized. His attack had been nothing as cruel as this…

“Ju. Wake up. She’ll drain you,” Arvin shouted. “Reel your magic in.”

Through the corner of her eye, Ju saw a flash of heart-magic. The smell of damp earth grew strong, overwhelming. Arvin staggered backwards, fell.
Ju’s vision blackened.

Then, as if from a distance, different hands took hold of her. Warm, womanly hands that ran up and down Ju’s arms, spreading skin-magic into her chilled flesh.

“Let go of her,” the woman demanded, huskily. Her voice shook and paused on each word. “Rill…let go…now…before you hurt Arvin as well.”

“Rill,” Tinder rasped. “Look at Arvin. He’s hurt. He’s hurt. Oh, sweet Fate, please do not kill him. It’s not his fault, it’s not.”

Still unable to move, Ju saw a baby in her mind’s eye, twisting on its umbilical cord, opening its mouth, screaming. Then gradually the flow of power through her bones began to cool. Her skin warmed.

She could sense the others standing around her, waiting. Her vision cleared. She looked to the woman who had helped her.

The woman appraised her with kohl-rimmed eyes, her face glowing with haughty triumph, her painted lips frowning. It was the woman from the carriage – Christina.

If Ju had the strength to flee she would have. Instead, despite the power that now tingled hotly at her fingertips, she balled her fists and looked down at Arvin, sprawled on his back, senseless.

Tinder dropped to her hands and knees beside him. She stroked his forehead. “Arvin, I’m sorry. We didn’t mean…” She looked up at Christina, her eyes suddenly clear and lucid. “Miss Grindle!” She gestured to the stone chambermaid. “You should have kept your spy on a tighter leash. This would not have happened, otherwise.”

Arvin moaned and opened his eyes. Blinking, he looked about, confused. He took a shuddering breath. “Christina. You did this.”

“No, you did,” Christina countered. “You planned to leave tonight. You tried to betray me.” She looked to Ju. “So much as contemplate attacking me like you attacked Mr Claver and your Papa will suffer. I have him, you see. Yesterday you left your handbag behind – and your work card. I knew where to find him.”

Ju’s gut twisted into a sickening, painful knot. “Papa? Is he hurt?”

“No at all,” Christina said. “If you do as I say, he’ll be well cared for. He’ll remain perfectly safe.”

Ju clenched her fists as heart-magic threatened to surge again.

“Well done,” Christina said, smoothly. “I knew you’d see it my way.”
Rain drizzled in fits and starts, sending cold rivulets down the back of Ruk’s collar. He kept to the cover of eaves, annoyed that his overcoat would keep him dry for only so long.

“Trust me to forget my parasol,” Solly muttered. “How typical of Henry and George to allow me to go without one.”

At Portman Lane they found the single streetlamp smashed, the footpath uncommonly dark and deserted. The windows in Ju’s tenement block were unlit.

“There’s something wrong,” Ruk said. “Ju never works this late.”

Forley’s memories told him that the baker’s children should have been sheltering under the eaves across the road, selling bread. But the shop was closed, the windows dark. Not a customer lingered.

Ruk fought back a disturbing urge to cry. “Demon’s arse to the Fates,” he muttered. He was so close to finding Ju again, yet so damnably far.

“Do you know your way in without a key?” Solly asked.

“Forley does.”

Her smile seemed half mocking, which he forgave instantly when her cheeks dimpled. “What are we waiting for then?” she said.

The trick of lifting the boiler room door from its hinges was not as easy as it had been the first time when he’d broken in to wait for Ju days before. “Damn half-grown muscles,” Ruk grumbled. “As weak as piss.”

Solly tutted. “Here, we’ll do it together.”

They positioned themselves awkwardly, one each side of the door and heaved it upwards. The hinges creaked and separated, but the door was too heavy to manipulate. Once it was free, it began to teeter backwards.

Solly winced, frowned. “It’s too heavy.”

“Let go of it then.” Ruk stepped aside.

The door fell between them, resounding like a drum on the gravel.

“Well, if that doesn’t wake the neighbourhood, nothing will,” Solly said, lighting up her fingers with skin-magic.

Ruk headed into the boiler room. He refused to look at the shadowed hulk of the boiler, flinching at the memory of almost kissing Ju. His Forley-self wished he
had. His childish self was horrified to think he’d even contemplated it. Strangely, as Solly lit up the way with finger-light, part of him did not know what to think. Part of him wanted to kiss Solly.

Ridiculous, he thought, shaking his head. Had he forgotten how he’d earned the ward-die already?

At Ju’s tenement, they found the door open and the room inside dark. Ruk fought down yet another urge to cry.

“Ju,” he called out, hoarsely. “Mr Weatherton, are you there? It’s—” He paused. He was about to say: it’s me, Forley.

Solly brushed past him. “There’s no one here. There’s been a struggle. Look.”

She swept finger-light about the room. The tea chest where Papa usually rested his feet lay askew. The dining table leaned on its side against the wall. Beside it, a teapot and cups spread out along its length, smashed.

Ruk took Solly’s hand and dragged her into Papa’s room. The bed was empty, neatly made. “What…who did this?”

He hurried back to the living room, knowing already that Ju’s bed would be just as empty, but the child in him longed for a miracle.

“Ruk,” Solly said, softly. “They’re gone.”

“She said she’d join the Groundists; but she hasn’t, has she? What could have happened?” He took himself to Ju’s bed and sat down, suddenly afraid at how utterly miserable he felt, but unable to do anything to stop it. Ju’s scent lingered in its blankets, reminding him of how she’d wordlessly walked away, daring him to take her magic. The effort of holding back tears made his face ache.

Cursing aloud, he let his fingers stray again to the die in his pocket, reminding himself that the moment he’d let his guard down for Blysse, she’d betrayed him. He’d best not forget that his concern for Ju was Forley’s sentiment. In reality it wasn’t her love he missed, but her magic.

As for Solly. He’d better keep thinking of her as merely his accomplice—nothing more than a means to find heart-magic and placate the Fear should it return.

“Listen,” Solly whispered. “There’s someone—”

A flash of carapace leapt into Solly’s finger-light. Solly screamed and swiped at it with her hands. But the thing was too quick, just as it had been too quick on the roof at Wishton Lane. Before Ruk could stop it, it latched onto Solly’s chest. She screamed again, grappling with it, her body thrashing from side to side.
For a long terrified moment, Ruk was too shocked to move. Then Solly’s finger-light dimmed and the room fell into darkness.

“No,” Ruk screamed. All thoughts of her usefulness were banished. In the silence that followed, her safety meant everything.

He couldn’t see her. Stumbling forward, he cursed his inability to conjure finger-light. Then he tripped over her where she lay unmoving on the floor. The thing on her chest began to glow softly with magic – Solly’s magic. He threw himself onto the floor beside her, took hold of the automaton’s brassy body, and pulled. It rocked and pulsed, but would not pull free.

Cursing, he leaned back on his haunches. Damn his childish mind. The automaton was killing Solly and all he could do was sit shaking. Even if he took off the locket, it would take hours, maybe days, for his magic to return.

Solly gasped, shuddered. He leaned forward, put his hands either side of her face. “What can I do?” he muttered.

The locket fell out of his shirt and dangled on the end of its chain, hitting Solly in the face. Ruk wrenched the chain from his neck, flung it across the room.

“Solly,” he screamed. “Fight, damn you.”

Desperately, he grabbed hold of the automaton again and used his weight to pull it backwards. It shifted an inch, pulling Solly with it. Curiously Ruk’s hands began to grow warm. A pale glow suffused them.

Warmth coursed through his veins and into his bones. Skin-magic and heart-magic glowed in a soft halo about him. He felt alive again – truly, truly alive.

It was Solly’s heart-magic, he realized. It may well have been stunted, but the automaton had no qualms about taking it from her. Now, because he no longer wore the locket, his hands were taking it from the automaton.

Squirming, the thing lurched away from Solly’s chest, throwing Ruk backwards. It twitched, beat its legs, scratched and kicked.

“Curse you,” Ruk shouted. He gripped the automaton tighter, and pulled hard on its magic, absorbing it, flinging his head backwards at the pure joy of its power surging through him.

His bones ached. Joy stabbed through him at the realization that his arms and legs were stretching, lengthening, growing.

The flow ceased. The automaton cooled, still. “Curse you again,” Ruk muttered. He dropped it and stomped on it hard, shattering its metal carapace. Sparks
sizzled in a spray of cogs and wires.

His trouser belt had grown uncomfortably tight. His boots pinched his toes. He inhaled and popped two shirt buttons. Damn human clothes!

He undid his belt, knelt beside Solly again. “Come back,” he demanded, sliding his arm beneath her shoulders. He lifted her up and held her against his chest as he lit up his fingers with skin-magic.

Her skin was cold, her breath shallow. He knew it would be dangerous to succumb to any kind of emotion towards her, but he could not stop himself. Cradling her against him, he buried his face in her hair and sent her magic back into her.

For a long time, she barely moved. It frightened him that it meant so much to him that she should. Gradually her skin grew warm. He felt puzzled that this small sign of recovery filled him with so much hope – that he should cling to it as if nothing else mattered. He should be afraid of feeling this way, but he didn’t. It felt wrong, yet at the same time, terrifyingly right.

She began to thrash and call out, “No, please, don’t. Let me go, let me go…”

Ruk tightened his grip to prevent her from hurting herself. “Shush,” he whispered. “It’s over, you’re safe.”

At the sound of his voice, she grew calm. She wound her arms around his back, squeezing him. He loosened his grip, afraid he’d smother her. She began to tremble. Forley’s memories told him he should talk to her, soothe her; so he massaged her shoulders and told her she was safe. The room seemed to contract around them, shutting all else out. His senses reeled from the sweet scent of her hair, the pale smoothness of her skin. To his utter surprise, she made no effort to push him away.

Breathing in her scent, he was afraid to move, afraid to say anything in case she remembered he was a shifter and accused him of tricking her.

She opened her eyes, drew gently away and blinked. “Oh,” she said hoarsely. “I dreamed I was in a heart-chair again. I thought I’d died and the mages were bringing me back. I’m not in a prison at all, am I? What happened?”

“An automaton,” he said. “Like the one in the attic. It drained you.” He dimmed the fingers of his right hand and brushed strands of hair away from her forehead.

She looked confused. “I don’t remember—” She paused and stared up at him. Her mouth quirked at the edges. “You’ve grown. So quickly.”
“It’s your heart-magic. The automaton took it. I took it back. Then I returned it to you.”

“Ah.” She paused, furrowed her brow. “I’m surprised it could do anything so spectacular as make you grow. It’s all I have left. I cannot use it because once it’s gone, it’s gone. Without it, I’ll—”

Ruk swallowed against a surge of anger. So that’s what he’d felt when he’d tried to test her on the tram. Her magic wasn’t stunted. It was all she had – all she could ever have. Damn the mages. Their prison chairs must have taken her to the brink so many times that her soul had given up. If Groundists hadn’t rescued her, her next extraction may well have been her last.

She ran her hand down his long, ropey hair. “Thank you.” She closed her eyes. He feared she would swoon; but then she looked at him and said, “Do you still have the locket?”

Ruk contemplated telling her that he did; but could not bring himself to lie. He shook his head. “I threw it away.”

Her eyes widened. “You can’t. Where is it?”

“There’s no risk. The demon’s miles away.”

Solly lit up her fingers. “The moment it smells your magic, it’ll swoop.”

“Your magic,” Ruk corrected.

“It doesn’t matter. It’ll still find you.” She swept finger-light about the room, stopping at a glint of white stone by the hearth. “There it is,” she said. “Quick, put it on. We’ve had enough disruption tonight. We don’t need a demon as well.”

Ruk sat back on his haunches. “Childhood’s impossible. It’s utterly incomprehensible how any of your kind survive it.”

“You’d prefer demonhood instead?” Solly drew herself to her feet and retrieved the locket. “Come on, put it on.” She proffered it. “If we’re going to find this Ju Weatherton of yours, we’d best get moving.”

Ju? He barely cared about her, as if at last he’d outgrown her, like his damnable childhood.

“Put it on,” Solly demanded. “I don’t want to lose you to a demon.”

“As you wish.” The idea appalled him, but he allowed her a thin smile.

With her brow wrinkled the way it was, she looked brimful of worry. He wanted to hug her again, but hesitated and gathered his wits. He worried that the impulse was nothing more than a remnant of childish emotion blown out of
proportion when his body had grown again. Or perhaps it was just Forley’s. Unwilling to give into it, he stood up and faced her, arms by his side, his gaze challenging.

She held up the locket, undid the clasp. Reaching up, she put her arms about his neck. Her fingers were steady, but she almost lost her balance, so he caught her about the waist in case she fell. “You’re shaking,” he said.

“I’m not.” As if to prove the point, she fastened the clasp with practiced efficiency. She lowered her arms and looked up at him, her lips not quite smiling, and not quite cross at him either.

She was close enough for him to catch the scent of her hair again. He liked the way it reminded him of herbs. He hadn’t noticed before. Now he wanted to hold her again. It took all of his willpower not to.

“I doubt Henry or George would know what happened to Miss Weatherton,” Solly said. “But someone else might.”

Ruk frowned. At that moment, he’d forgotten what they were here for. “Oh, of course,” he stammered. “I didn’t think…” Damn human emotions had crept up on him yet again. He still could not tell if the way that he cared about Solly was his fault or just his childish self, lingering.

“What’s the matter?” Solly asked.

Chagrined, he shook his head. “Nothing. Let’s look for Ju, shall we?”

Together, they searched the remainder of the building; but the doors to the other tenements were locked, the rooms behind them silent. When they returned outside, Solly noticed that the window in the tenement next to Ju’s was broken.

“Automatons,” Solly said, frowning.

“The one I pulled from you had only your magic in it,” Ruk said. “So, if anyone else was attacked, there must have been others.”

Solly shuddered. “What dreadful Fate would allow such a thing?”

Ruk’s arms and legs were already beginning to feel weak, like they had when he’d first started shrinking on the tram. He feared that it would not take so long to happen this time because his magic reserves were all but drained. He supposed he should have kept some of Solly’s back for himself; but at the time, he’d wanted nothing more than to see her recover.

Solly took hold of his hand and sent him a gentle surge of well-wishing. The pure honesty of it felt so good that he did not want her to stop. “You should conserve
your strength,” he said. “No need to waste it on me.”

She met his gaze. It shocked him to see how quickly he had shrunk. His eyes were already level with hers.

“Oh dear, it’s happening,” she said. “Does it hurt? Do you want to rest?”

He grunted a petulant “no”. By the time they reached the end of the street, his boots no longer pinched and his trousers were loose. Cursing, he tightened his belt.

At a bread stall three streets away, they found a woman with lank hair selling corn cakes and half loaves of bread. Forley’s memories told Ruk that her name was Amelia Birch, a friend of Ju’s. “We’ve been looking for Ju all afternoon,” Ruk said. “We’re hoping you’d know where she is.”

Amelia would not look at him. “I really cannot say.” She wrapped up a half loaf of bread and handed it to him. The air smelled of rain. The streetlamps fizzled and steamed.

“Cannot or will not?” Ruk asked, struggling against tears.

Amelia paused.

“We fear she’s been taken by mages,” Solly said, handing Amelia a copper coin. “Her Papa as well.”

“Are you a friend of hers?”

“We’re trying to help her.”

Frowning, Amelia made as if to start away.

“Please,” Solly said. “If she’s in trouble, we can help.”

Amelia looked from Solly to Ruk, her thin face tense. “Miss Weatherton wasn’t taken,” she said at last. “I watched the raid myself from behind the curtains in the attic window above the bakery. They took her Papa and some others. Bundled them into a prison carriage and left. Later I heard a man and woman screaming, but I was too frightened to see what it was about. I’ve got the welfare of my children to think of, see. So Arthur went about business as usual, fired up the ovens and took his bread elsewhere.”

“Did you see Miss Weatherton return from work at all?” Solly pursued.

Amelia shook her head. “Can’t say for sure. One of my kids saw her going out yesterday morning all dressed up – not looking at all like her usual tinkerer self. I don’t think she came home. Maybe sentries took her. Or maybe she knew something and got herself away while she could.” Amelia frowned. “It’s not like her to leave her
Papa though. She’s always so protective of him.”

Solly thanked her and paid for the half loaf of bread. When Amelia was out of earshot, she said, “George may have heard about Ju by now. If he does, either he, or one of our other agents will leave a message at The Edger’s Prow.”

Ruk frowned, unwrapped the bread took a bite, barely tasting it. He remembered The Prow from decades before when it had been the city’s noisiest inn. He supposed it could have only grown worse. Even so, as Solly set off, he realized there’d be no arguing. Petulantly he broke the bread in half and shared it with her.

He had now shrunken to the level of her shoulders. At the same time, his concern for Ju had escalated into outright panic. It was as if his return to his smaller stature had made his emotions swell up all the more. His child’s mind turned over and over, imagining Ju chained to an extraction chair. Or being confronted by a sentry or being dragged kicking and screaming into a prison cart. His hand strayed to the locket. To prevent himself from tearing it off, he said, “The demons that attacked me outside the church. They wanted me to join them because they used to be my own kind. But how do they wield humans?”

Solly frowned. “They feed on magic. Heart-magic, skin-magic, worker or mage, it doesn’t matter. It’s as if they burrow their way into their minds and souls like parasites until they either wear their hosts out or discard them of their own accord.”

Shuddering, Ruk fingered the locket. “The bone protects humans from that?”

“Only for as long as we wear it.”

“Do mages wear bone?”

Solly laughed. “If it were set with diamonds, maybe.”

“Why do you not distribute the bone to everyone at risk?”

“There’s not enough. Saint Theobald is all we have. That’s why most workers die young. If the powerhouses don’t ruin us, demons eventually will.”

“I’ll not let you die young,” Ruk blurted.

Solly smiled, her face serene and her hair glossy, even in the wan light of a gas lamp. “When the time comes, I doubt you’ll have any say in it.”

Ruk sniffed defiantly. “Don’t lose your locket,” he said with childish conviction.

The rain grew heavy, slicking the paths and overflowing the drains, bringing with them the stench of sewerage. At The Edger’s Prow, the bar seemed to burst at
the seams with drinkers, but the fires were warm and the lights mellow. Solly purchased two cups of soup, then sat with Ruk at a grease-stained table sipping hers in silence. Carefully, she glanced around.

Ruk was hungry enough to drink his soup in a single gulp, but it was still steaming, so he forced himself to sip it instead. “Any messengers in that lot?” he asked, following Solly’s gaze into the crowd.

Solly ignored him, but then Ruk groaned inwardly when he saw George Clapton sitting morosely on a bar stool with his foot resting on its rusted, iron rail.

Clapton took his time coming over, bringing a pint of ale for himself and a glass of mulled wine for Solly. He was dressed like a common worker but still managed to retain his air of arrogance. He pulled up a chair. “Can’t find a drink suitable for a lad of your tender years,” he said to Ruk with obvious delight. “But there’s water enough outside.”

Ruk ignored him and slurped his soup with exaggerated relish. He contemplated lighting up a cigar in defiance, but for Solly’s sake, refrained.

At first Clapton and Solly kept up a familiar banter pretending to be old friends newly reunited. After a while, Clapton lifted his ale. “It’s been confirmed,” he said between sips. “The Weatherton girl was picked up off the street. Hands burnt.” He paused meaningfully. “The young Grindle took her in. Nothing we can do now, so take the shif—” He paused, inclined his head toward Ruk. “Take him with you. As planned.”

“What are you talking about?” Ruk demanded.

Solly put her hand over his. “Not now.”

He snatched his hand away, angry at being left out yet again, unable to pursue it without sounding too much like the child he certainly was.

Clapton downed the rest of his ale and stood. “Well, it’s been pleasant seeing you again. Send my regards to your mother.”

“Your mother?” Ruk asked.

Solly shushed him. She waited for a few minutes, finished her drink and, without explanation, ushered Ruk outside.

“He’s given up on her, hasn’t he?” Ruk said.

Solly grimaced. “Afraid so.”

Ruk knew he should dismiss Ju as yet another missed opportunity, but Forley’s sensibilities wouldn’t let him. He dug in his heels. “I can’t abandon her.”
"I imagine not." Solly strode ahead, hands in coat pockets, shoulders squared and determined. Ruk had no choice but to catch up with her. "She meant a lot to him, didn’t she?” Solly added.

"To Forley? Yes, she meant everything."

"I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

There was a certain finality about her words that stuck in Ruk’s craw. He wanted to rail at her for giving up so easily, but wasn’t sure why. Certainly his anger was Forley’s; but his childish inability to acknowledge common sense was unlike anything he’d experienced before – not as a human and certainly not as an animal.

Solly hurried him away from the tavern, away from the ears of departing drinkers. Street lamps glowed dimly through misting rain. Telling himself that he’d earned it, Ruk lit a cigar and inhaled on it furiously, expecting Solly to admonish him. Instead, she disappointed him by picking up her pace, not uttering a word. When he’d finished smoking, he tossed the stub into the dark.

Solly sidestepped a puddle. "George dares not endanger any more agents than he has to. Thanks to the recent crackdown, Groundists are disbanding as we speak. We’ve had an agent watching the younger Grindle’s mansion for years because his mother has been held there under house arrest. But even he’s been told to leave”

"Watching the mansion for what?” Ruk asked.

"The mother’s insane. Perhaps she’s possessed by a demon.” Solly folded her arms, huddled into her coat. “Whatever the case, she’s as cursed as it gets.”

"Cursed? How?”

"She turns things to stone. Anything or anyone that hurts or frightens her – even her own unborn child. She’s been pregnant for nearly twenty years. With that kind of corrupt magic anyone else would have ended up in an extraction chair.

"Demon’s arse, that’s not corrupt magic you’re talking about,” Ruk said. "That’s shifter magic. It’s what we risk if we try to shift without memories to guide us.”

Solly frowned. “Maybe Henry was right. He always thought the baby was a shifter, but could never get anyone close enough to prove it.”

Ruk thrust his hands in his pockets. Poor shifter child. Something terrible must have frightened it. Always on the brink of demonhood, he supposed, and nowhere to escape to. Now Ju’s magic was within its reach, he could not say what that would mean.
He tried not to think about it, but it niggled at the edge of his mind. Ju in Arvin’s house? How in Fate’s name had that happened? The more he tried not to think about it, the more it niggled. Jealousy, he told himself – nothing more than Forley’s memories eating at his emotions. But there was something else he didn’t like, and he couldn’t quite grasp it.

They came to a tram stop. Solly paused beneath the shelter. Ruk shook his head. “I can’t. My change back to childhood… It’s made my hatred of machinery worse.”

“It’s a long walk to the church,” Solly reminded him.

“We’re not going back to the shop, then?”

“No point.”

Ruk sniffed. “The walk will do me good.”

Shrugging, Solly started along the path without a word, hunching into her coat, running between overhangs and porticos to avoid the misting rain. A clock tower struck eleven. The road beside them was mostly deserted except for the occasional steam lorry, and then the tram. Solly frowned as it rumbled past, making Ruk feel useless for forcing her to walk. Afraid of being the fool, he smoked another cigar and tried to remember what Forley knew about Arvin Grindle. What was it that now bothered him?

The rain eased. They slowed their pace. “I used to share a drink,” Ruk began. “I mean, Forley did, not me. With Arvin after work. The man didn’t see eye to eye with his stepfather, but he didn’t say anything about his mother. Not once.”

“I expect not,” Solly said.

“Now Arvin has Ju,” Ruk said petulantly. “He’s as weak as piss.”

Solly looked at him askance. “How well did you know her?”

“Not well at all, but the man whose shape I wear – Forley Letonder – he would have protected her with his life.” He paused, thinking. “This Arvin…his interest means something we should be worried about. It’s important…”

He sifted through Forley’s memories and recalled that Ju had laughed about Arvin once, something about him wanting to dally with her after work.

Yes, that was it! Arvin had also said something strange to her about the powerhouse. Something about suspecting that she knew how to reel in her skin-magic because she never seemed worn out enough afterwards. And it was a good thing, he’d said, because he didn’t want to see her caught.
Ju hadn’t told Forley what Arvin had meant by that. At the time, Forley hadn’t known she had heart-magic; but he could tell that Arvin had upset her. Now, in retrospect, Ruk understood why. “Arvin Grindle must have suspected that Ju had heart-magic all along,” he told Solly. “He was sounding her out. Wanting to use her perhaps. To take her magic. To help the baby fight whatever it was that had frightened it and turned it to stone.”

“How do you know?” Solly asked.

Ruk told her of Arvin’s attempted dalliance, repeating exactly what Ju had told Forley.

“That’s definitely suspicious,” Solly conceded. “We should tell George. He might change his mind about not retrieving her.”

Ruk’s spirits soared. Childish joy gripped him, impossible to hold back. He picked up his pace. “If we look for her, it won’t end up badly like it did for Forley. I promise I won’t let it.”

Solly’s step faltered. “As if you’ll have a choice.”

He looked up at her. She was frowning, so he took her hand. Her skin was cold and he wanted to well-wish her; but the locket had done its job far too effectively already. He was as good as a child again. And powerless.

A little past Pendleton, the rain grew heavier. Ahead, a woman climbed into a steam-carriage, dropping her parasol in the gutter. As the carriage lumbered away, Ruk ducked behind it, and scooped the parasol up. He bowed to Solly and presented it to her, opening it with a flourish. She smiled, her cheeks dimpling.

In that instant she seemed her carefree self again, like she had in the soup kitchen. “Hurry,” she said, holding up the parasol between them. “If we’re to talk Henry into helping Ju, we need to reach him before he leaves.”

She took his hand and they ran together. As rain misted his face, he was all too aware of her beside him. He did not want the night to end. He did not want to stop running.

Chapter 16

Arvin brought his fingers to the verge of sparking. He was tempted to feel the thrill of it one more time, but knew it would be wise not to. Thanks to the magic he’d taken
from Ju, his burned hands had already healed. Now that magic was running out, there was no point wasting it on theatricals. Only Fate knew what he’d need it for next.

“Fate’s demons,” he cursed. If he were to stand up to Christina, he’d need an order of magnitude more. He should have taken a heart-full of Ju’s magic when he’d had the chance.

Damn his aunt for interfering. Damn the informer who’d alerted her about the carriage. Clenching his fists, he supposed it was his driver Tristan. Yet, the man had been his friend – the only true friend he’d had.

Or so he’d thought…

Feeling quite the fool, he let himself into Tinder’s room to find her lying on her back on her bed, staring senselessly ahead exactly as he’d left her the night before. Fate only knew what internal battle was playing out inside her now. He knelt beside her bed and brushed away the ivy strands that had fallen across her face. At least with her eyes closed he couldn’t see the reflection of Rill looking back at him. At least Tinder looked peaceful.

Gritting his teeth, he opened his mind, expecting to feel fear. Instead he felt a struggle, a mental tug-of-war between Tinder and Rill.

Rill, he supposed, was trying to use the magic she’d stolen from Ju. Tinder must be pitting all of her strength against it, reining it in to stop it from hurting anyone else.

He smoothed Tinder’s quilt, avoiding the mound of her belly. “What do you mean to do with Ju’s magic?” he asked Rill softly. “Now that you finally have it, what will you become?”

He put his hand over Tinder’s. Finding it cold, he sent her a surge of well-wishing. Unexpectedly he felt a surge back, followed by the unmistakable smell of wet moss. The quilt beneath Tinder’s hand crackled and shimmered into pale, grey stone.

Cursing, Arvin lurched away. “Rill! You can’t!” He stiffened, waiting for the inevitable surge of Rill’s terror to grip him; but none came. His mind remained silent – clearer than it had for years.

“Rill, destruction is not the answer,” Arvin said softly. “Ju can help us. If we let her.”

Crackling greyness spread across the quilt, turning the trailing strands of ivy to stone. Sighing, Arvin backed away. “We can save you,” he said. “But not if you
hurt Ju.”

Tinder’s hand twitched. The spreading greyness halted. Words echoed inside Arvin’s head, a voiceless rasp.

*Help me. Help me help me help me...*

“I’m trying to,” Arvin said. “But you’re not helping yourself.”

The rasping faded, grew silent.

Grateful, Arvin backed away, pausing for a moment at the stone corpse of the chambermaid where it still stood at the room’s centre, perpetually bewildered, its eyes focussed on Tinder’s bed as if pleading with Rill to turn it to flesh again.

“Good luck with that.” Arvin said, starting for the door. “Take your place at the back of the queue.”

#

Arvin entered the dining room. Christina’s painted lips curled into a self-satisfied smile. Ju stared at her empty plate as if wondering what she should do with it. The two sat opposite each other, Christina swathed from neck to toe in burgundy velvet, while Ju wore a modest gown, most likely one of Tinder’s from years before. Someone – a maid, Arvin supposed – had made an effort to style her hair, tying it up with pins and ribbons. The pale curls spilling over her neck and temples, made her look untamed yet elegant in contrast to his aunt’s shameless extravagance.

“Do join us,” Christina said amicably. “Miss Weatherton and I have been talking about our plan, haven’t we, dear?”

Ju continued to stare at the plate. “I beg your pardon, Miss Grindle,” she said. “Firstly, the plan is not mine. Secondly, unless you can prove that my father is safe, I will not allow you to strap me into an extraction chair of any sort.”

Arvin raised his eyebrows with mute admiration. He had not expected Ju to willingly comply with anything his aunt suggested, but this – this show of defiance was quite a surprise.

“See what you’ve done to her, Arvin,” Christina said. “Treat her like a mage and before you know it she begins to speak like one.”

Arvin took a seat at the head of the table and poured himself a cup of tea.

“What’s this talk of extraction chairs?”

Christina dabbed her lips with a napkin. “It’s my plan – a sound one. If you want to be free of your stepfather, I suggest you consider it.”

“I could have been free of him last night if you’d not meddled,” Arvin said
“Do you believe he would have left it at that? Come now. You know as well as I do that he’d never allow you out of his reach. Especially if you spirited Tinder away.”

Arvin snorted. His aunt knew as well as he did that, with Ju on his side, Sir Mathias would not stand a chance.

“Arvin, please,” Christina said, patiently. “Listen to my plan. When you’ve heard me out, I’m sure you’ll agree that the end will more than justify the means.”

Arvin looked to Ju. She gripped the edge of the table, making her knuckles white. He could sense her heart-magic like a cloying aura spreading out from her.

So, Rill had not taken all of it then; though admittedly it seemed somewhat weakened. He felt a stab of guilt for not telling Ju about his ability to sense it; but what could he have said? Sorry, I didn’t think you would find it important? I’ve told you enough sordid details about myself already? Or maybe he should have just been honest and stated the obvious.

I wanted to see if you’d lie to me—

He jumped as Christina interrupted his thoughts. “Let’s be honest with each other,” she offered. “If Sir Mathias were…” she paused, no doubt mulling over a suitable euphemism. “If Sir Mathias were eliminated, I could take my rightful place at the helm of Grindle’s Automata Works. Then you, Tinder and Ju can board your carriage and take it as far away as your hearts desire.”

“And the means?” Arvin asked.

“Yes, I’m getting to that. Let me put it into context.”

Ju looked up at him, her grey eyes pale yet at the same time hard. “No,” she mouthed. “Not without Papa.”

Pursing her lips, Christina looked at Ju askance. To Arvin, she said, “You no doubt remember the smokeless automatons unveiled at Sir Mathias’s latest exhibition. Recall also that he alluded to the use of heart-magic, claiming that his methodology would remain a secret. Well, secret indeed! Does he truly think my only interest in the business remains with the petty balancing of ledgers? Grindle’s Automata Works has a standard to uphold. That standard must include integrity.”

Arvin sighed. “Spare me the sermon. Your point is?”

“Sir Mathias’s secret is highly controversial.

“I’ve no doubt of that.”
“It’s something he’s been working on for years and has not been able to come anywhere near achieving without first modifying the design of the extraction chairs.” She inclined her head, arched her eyebrows.

Arvin stared back at her. She was taking too long to get to the point. He tried to catch Ju’s eye, but she kept her face purposefully averted. Then the maid brought in Arvin’s usual breakfast of scrambled eggs and set it down in front of him. He picked up his cutlery and began to eat slowly and patiently.

“You may go,” Christina said to the maid. She pursed her lips, waiting for the woman to leave. “I’m surprised that any of your servants still work for you after what happened last night.”

Arvin chewed a mouthful of egg, swallowed. “Faithful servants have never been harmed. It would be wise for you to remember that.”

Christina took a sip of tea. “Are you not at all interested in what Sir Mathias is doing?”

“Even if I’m not interested, I suppose you’ll tell me anyway.”

“Very well.” Christina sighed. “I’ll dispense with the preamble. The truth is: Sir Mathias has created a form of automaton that functions under the same principles as the extraction chairs. Not powerhouse chairs, for what use is harvesting skin-magic? What I’m alluding to here, are the prison chairs. Do you understand what that means?”

“It means they attack workers,” Ju interrupted flatly.

Christina nodded. “Taking every ounce of heart-magic, draining them soulless.”

Arvin laid down his knife and fork. “That seems rather wasteful, destroying a good source of heart-magic like that. I do not condone forced extraction, but it makes good business sense to keep the prisoners alive while they’re still productive.”

“This is not about productiveness. Once Sir Mathias’s soul-harvesters are sated, they return to him. He then inserts them into the chest cavities of automatons, one for each. That’s his secret, you see. His smokeless, steamless automatons are fuelled, not only with heart-magic, but with souls. Human souls.”

Arvin blinked. What in Fate’s name was the woman talking about? “Souls cannot not be separated from bodies and kept as prisoners. If a body dies the soul either ceases to exist or gives itself up to Fate’s will.”

“Not necessarily,” Christina said. “Besides, if that were the case, why does
the complete stripping of heart-magic also strip the soul? Don’t you see? The two are inextricably bound.”

Arvin sighed. “Then what does that make me? I have no heart-magic. Am I soulless?”

“Of course you have heart-magic,” Christina countered. “But like most workers you have so little that your heart consumes every last drop to keep itself beating. In contrast, people like myself and Miss Weatherton have more than enough. We could feed an entire planet of hearts if needed.”

Arvin felt sick to the core. Sir Mathias’s plan was disgusting, criminal. “So, what he’s proposing,” he said. “Is that with a soul installed, the automaton can make its own heart-magic? Sweet, sweet Fate, what a perverse existence. How do we know the soul does not remember what it used to be? How do we know it doesn’t suffer? Why do you not inform the King? Surely he’d not allow such perversity.”

Christina sighed. “Arvin, you really should pay attention to politics. Then you’d know that Sir Mathias has the King’s blessing.”

“The plan is hideous.”

“So is the King for knighting Sir Mathias in the first place. Besides, Sir Mathias believes the soul feels no pain. He says that separated from flesh it becomes little more than a means to provide the automaton with perpetual motion. Any memory that it carries of its former self is simply a reflection left over from its existence as a corporeal being.”

Arvin scoffed. “How can anyone possibly know that? Who would be willing to risk their own soul to see?”

The clock chimed eight, echoing with hollow finality. Arvin pushed away his breakfast as nausea washed through him. Ju stared at her plate.

“It’s inspection day,” Christina said. “Sir Mathias will we be expecting you at nine o’clock sharp. I trust you now agree that our only hope of eliminating his perverse project is to eliminate him as well. If he’s allowed to continue, who can tell where he’ll go when his legal sources of heart-magic run out. Even your mother and sister will not be safe.” She fixed her gaze on Ju. “I’m sure you’ll agree, that the situation is one that your precious Groundists would be only too happy to deal with. You should be grateful for the opportunity to help them out.”

“My father,” Ju said, lifting her chin. “I want to see him.”

“It would do no harm to keep him here,” Arvin suggested. “Miss Weatherton
would not have to worry over his well-being then.”

Christina gave an impatient sigh. “Arvin, I do not intend to divulge his whereabouts to anyone. One must keep one’s insurance secure. Rest assured he is very, very secure.”

“Give me your word that he’s not being mistreated.”

“You have it,” she said. “What do you take me for, Arvin? A monster?”

Ju clamped her lips into a thin line, turning them white. She met Arvin’s gaze, her eyes filled with accusation and defeat. “How can I be assured that my father and I will be released afterwards?”

Christina’s painted lips flashed a benevolent smile. “Why, Arvin will see to that, won’t you my dear?”

Arvin stood and threw down his napkin. “I most certainly will.”

“Do you not want to hear the remainder of my plan?” Christina asked.

“No. It doesn’t take a soul full of heart-magic to work that out.”

He started for the door. Ju called out to him, her voice tinged with accusation.

“Do you know what your aunt is planning?”

Arvin paused. “I have an inkling.”

“When my heart-magic has replenished itself, she means to send me to prison. She means to strap me to a heart chair to let the mages feed from me. She’s promised to teach me to control my heart-magic so as not to hurt any of them. But when your stepfather, Sir Mathias, feeds, I’m to let my magic surge – all of it, all at once. She wants me to purposely and callously burn him up.”

“Surely, you do not have qualms about that,” Christina interrupted icily. “It won’t be the first time you’ve murdered a man in self defence.”

Ju glared at her.

“If we’re to survive this little coup,” Christina added. “It’s not ethics we must rely upon, it’s cunning.”

Arvin held Ju’s gaze and saw not the fear he’d heard in her voice, but anger and defiance. He wished he could speak directly into her mind like Rill spoke into his. He’d tell her he was sorry – that there was little he could do, that without her magic he was as helpless as a common worker, that thanks to Rill, he must bide his time and wait. Even so, he wouldn’t give up. He’d find a flaw in his aunt’s plan. Then, if Ju could help him, he’d strike…

“I won’t desert you,” he said. Turning away, he headed for the door.
He heard a languorous swish of velvet from behind as Christina caught up with him. Before he could turn back, she snatched his wrist and sent him a surge of heart-magic, spiteful enough to make his skin blister.

Hand stinging, Arvin pulled away. “Fate’s demons, Aunt, what was that for?”

“A reminder, dear boy, that your strength lies in me. I know exactly how to use heart-magic to its full extent, but tell me, does she?” She angled her chin towards Ju. “As for you, my girl, so much as think about burning me and your father will suffer.”

Arvin cursed himself for not taking more of Ju’s magic when he’d had the chance. It took the remainder of his reserves to hold up his hand and heal. As the skin defiantly smoothed over, it still smarted, but at least it looked presentable enough for him to face his stepfather.

“If that’s the best you can do,” Christina said, “then you’d better choose your allies well.”

Glaring, Arvin stormed out of the room. He was tempted to slam the door, but instead closed it softly for Ju’s sake.

Damn Christina. Damn her! She had him well and truly trapped. There must be a way around it. There had to be. Fuming inwardly, he allowed the butler to help him into his coat. Hands in pockets, he crossed the ivy-lined path to the stables. Tilting his face to the cold morning sky, he ignored the hounds that eyed him with their usual fawning admiration; but stopped abruptly at the sight of their handler kicking one in spite.

“Explain yourself,” Arvin demanded.

The handler froze. “Sir? The dog…it’s a mean one. It needs—”

Arvin held up his hand to silence him. “If a handler cannot control a hound without beating it, then he’s not a handler at all. He’s a miscreant. Do you understand?”

The fellow flinched. He was one of those scrawny, pinched-face types with nastiness set in his bones. Arvin remembered that the previous handler – a kindly gent who had kept the dogs controlled without so much as a harsh word – had run off a day or two before without warning. This must be the replacement. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Fingle Sir. Lance Fingle.”

Arvin gave a noncommittal grunt and turned away. He’d sort the fellow out
later.

At the hansom, Tristan greeted Arvin as pleasantly as always. He did not mention Christina’s arrival. Nor did he offer any explanation as to why the carriage wheels were now chained to the floor. Arvin considered challenging him about his loyalties; but decided not to. No point in ruining a mutual friendship, even if it was only a semblance. Besides, a replacement driver would have no less potential to be equally disloyal. Best to keep the demon he knew than to learn how to deal with a new one.

“To the factory?” Tristan asked, as Arvin climbed into the hansom.

Arvin gave a perfunctory “yes”. Drawing the curtains, he leaned back in the seat and concentrated on blocking his connection to Rill.

#

As the hansom pulled up at the entrance to Grindle’s Automata Works, Arvin stepped out onto the pavement, averting his gaze from the stark, limed brickwork of the factory. A cold wind swept in from the wharf district. Or a stinking one, depending on how sensitive one’s nose was to the ordure of machinery. At least, without Rill whispering between his ears, Arvin’s half-shifter nose wasn’t too bothered; but he breathed through his mouth to avoid it anyway.

Tristan stepped down from the hansom. “Sir,” he said. “A quick word if you please.”

Arvin paused, lifted his eyebrows. “I don’t know who informed your aunt of your plans to leave,” Tristan said in a low voice. “But rest assured, I’ll find out who did. Woe betide the traitor when I do.”

Arvin snorted. “What do you propose to do?”

Tristan frowned. His jaw tensed as his habitual mildness turned suddenly sinister. “That depends on when and where I find him. In any case, he’ll not know what’s hit him.”

Arvin wanted to believe Tristan. Fates alive, he needed a friend more than ever right now. To date all Tristan had offered him were words. The carriage he’d prepared to escape in was still chained to the ground; and no one except Tristan had known of Arvin’s plans to take Tinder and Ju with him.

“Sir, I fear you look a trifle out of sorts,” Tristan ventured. “Is there anything I can do?”
Arvin gave a cynical chuckle. “Pray for the gold,” he said.
“May the gold protect us,” Tristan intoned.
Leaving it at that, Arvin turned his back and took the polished granite steps to the factory.

Before he could enter his stepfather’s drawing room, Arvin steeled himself against the interminable cacophony of machinery. Birdcages of various shapes and sizes hung from the ceiling, swung from wall hooks, teetered on pedestals, sat atop tables, bureaus and shelves. Their wind-up occupants twittered, sang, shrieked, cawed and cuckooed. Wings of brass, crystal and silver fluttered like bright, ruffled lanterns.

Arvin had never enjoyed the practice of caging birds. He enjoyed the clatter of mechanical ones even less. When he finally mustered courage enough to enter, Sir Mathias did not look up. Instead, he continued tinkering with the rat-sized automaton nestling in the palm of his hand. The gears inside his metal fingers clicked and whirred as he manipulated a screwdriver with the steady efficiency of a master artist. After all these years, the sight of those skeletal fingers still made Arvin uneasy. Movements that suited the living grace of flesh were quite perverse when translated into metal. Looking away, Arvin took the liberty of pulling up a seat and helping himself to the shot of whiskey already set out for him.

“You usually do not partake so early,” Sir Mathias observed from above the clutter of his desk. His face was partially hidden behind the life-sized bust of a rubber-skinned automaton. “Is there something bothering you this morning?” He clicked his fingers. The mechanical menagerie fell silent.

“Thank you,” Arvin said. “That helps.”

Sir Mathias smiled thinly. His skin had an odd pallor about it, making the automaton bust appear more human than he did. Arvin wondered if his stepfather had spent the entire night tinkering.

“I know these things are not entirely to your liking,” Sir Mathias said. “However, tell me, what is your opinion of this?”

He proffered the automaton. Reluctantly, Arvin took it and was surprised at how little it weighed. He turned it over and saw that it was an ugly thing for sure – body like a grotesque insect, suckers for feet and a concave mouth that looked better suited to snuffing out candles. If not for the delicate structure of its wings – and the exquisite attention to detail – he would have dismissed it as a failure in good taste.
“The wings…” Arvin ran his fingers over the finely, crafted veins. “Surely they’re more suited to the body of something less unconventional. A lacewing perhaps? Or a dragonfly?”

“Well observed.” For once Sir Mathias’s gaze seemed interested in what Arvin had to say. “The wing mechanism was a gift from my sister. She claims the design was her own, but I fear her mind is somewhat muddled from being buried too long in ledgers. It’s certainly not her work, which begs the question. Whose is it?”

Arvin shrugged. “I imagine she picked it up from some street market. There’s certainly an excess of dross to be found there. But now and then, one has been known to find the occasional gem.”

“Perhaps,” Sir Mathias said, dubiously. “The original piece was nothing more than a petty trinket for admiring. Its pneumatics were almost a work of genius, but too heavily crafted to fly. Hence, I’ve been tinkering with its design to produce this.”

Arvin remembered his aunt telling him about the mobile automatons designed to steal heart-magic. He almost dropped the thing.

“It won’t bite,” Sir Mathias said. “Allow me to show you.” He leaned forward as if to take it, but instead pressed a switch beneath the automaton’s belly.

The automaton’s wings fluttered, whirring tinnily. Like a bird hovering, it rose out up out of Arvin’s hand, and paused in front of him like a horribly deformed hummingbird. Arvin resisted the urge to swat it.

“Truly, it won’t hurt you,” Sir Mathias assured him. He reached over the desk and caught it. Its wings tinkled against his metal fingers. “Unlike my earlier models, these are more discerning about their feeding habits. Skin-magic is of no interest to them. They feed straight from the heart; but only if that heart has the power to make its own magic. It poses no danger to the likes of you and I whatsoever.”

He turned off the switch. The wings stilled.

“What is it?” Arvin asked.

“A harvester. I built it as a form of protection. Protection for us.”

“What do you mean?”

Sir Mathias gave an exasperated sigh. “Clearly my sister gave me the design of these wings to distract me. Has she said anything to you about it?”

Arvin pushed at his glasses, more out of habit than necessity. Without Rill sharing his perceptions, his vision was as clear as it could possibly get. “Nothing whatsoever,” he said calmly. He remembered Christina saying that Sir Mathias had
created the things to animate machines. He fought down a wave of disgust. He’d always considered his stepfather insane. This proved it beyond a doubt. If he didn’t know better, he’d believe it was the work of a demon.

Holding Sir Mathias’s gaze, Arvin said, “Christina never talks to me about anything to do with the factory. Unless it’s to do with the ledgers.”

Sir Mathias frowned. He ran his thumb over the harvester’s wings, stroking them fondly as if they belonged to a loved and appreciative cat.

Appalled, Arvin fought the urge to turn away.

Chapter 17

Christina Grindle’s curled-up lip looked much like a piece of candied fruit peel dipped in cochineal. Gleaming above her bodice of frothy, cream lace, Ju could not help but compare them with the over-decorated cupcakes and frilly doilies on the tea tray beside her.

“My dear Miss Weatherton,” Christina said. “I cannot possibly show you to how to protect yourself against the fire of your own heart-magic. Imagine the danger it would put me in. It would be as good as giving you a knife, tying my hands behind my back and trusting you to not stab me.”

Christina paused, took a sip of tea. “You must understand. Heart-magic is forbidden to workers for good reason. Its wielding is not something that can be taught overnight. It’s a gift – a precious gift handed down through generations from mage parents to mage children. Training must begin in the womb. Workers like yourself – born like animals to mothers without heart-magic – grow up wild, uncontrollable, dangerous. By the time their magic shows itself, it’s too late. The damage of not being trained cannot be undone. The kindest thing to do is to relieve them of their magic to prevent them from hurting themselves and from hurting others.” She took another sip of tea, dabbed her lips with a starched white napkin. “But of course, no worker willingly gives up their magic, do they? Which is why we must have extraction chairs.”

Ju bit her lip. Arguing would only lead to another lecture. Instead she asked. “Does that mean if I do as you say and submit to the heart-chairs, my skin will be burned as badly as it was the last time?”
“Only at your wrists and ankles. Only when you let your heart-magic surge with strength enough to kill. If you learn to hold back – and let out small amounts to feed the electrodes – the flow will not hurt you, especially if you shield it with skin-magic.”

“Won’t they be taking my skin-magic as well?”

“Of course not. The aim of the heart-chair is to keep prisoners alive for as long as they’re productive.” Christina’s voice was flippant as if she were talking about nothing so much as a stroll along a promenade. “Take note, that as Arvin so perceptively noted earlier, it doesn’t make sense to weaken one’s source of power. Besides, there’s skin-magic enough in the powerhouses, anyway.”

Ju shook her head slowly, appalled. Her bones still ached from Rill’s attack the night before. She felt as though she’d been picked up and flung across the room. The thought of anyone touching her to take her heart-magic again – or even to well-wish her – sickened her.

She clasped her hands in her lap. She still could not feel any signs of her heart-magic replenishing itself. She wished her fingers would at least tingle. All these years it had frightened her. Now it was almost gone. She felt strangely vulnerable without it.

“Show me that you understand what I taught you earlier,” Christina said. “Why can you not control heart-magic in the same way you control skin-magic?”

Ju sighed, exasperated and afraid. She’d spent her entire life avoiding mages, yet here she was being taught by one. “I can’t control it,” she said flatly. “Because heart-magic is connected to the soul as well as to the heart. It cannot be influenced by the mind alone.”

“How do you influence it?”

“I must connect to my instincts. I must not merely think. I must believe that the connection will happen.”

Christina inclined her head graciously, regarding Ju from beneath kohl-lined eyelids. “Tell me, are worker instincts strong enough to accomplish it?”

Christina’s green eyes were as hard and self-satisfied as her brother, Sir Mathias’s, had been when he’d insulted her in the workshop. Ju clamped her mouth into a tight line.

“I’ll take that as a no, then.” Christina rose from her chair. “If I were you, I’d not forget it.”
Ju seethed inwardly, wondering how in Fate’s name she could escape.

As the afternoon wore on, Ju struggled to keep her wits about her, deflecting questions that were clearly engineered to remind her of the inferiority of workers. Despite knowing that Christina’s teachings were for Christina’s benefit alone, Ju paid attention, hoping to discover a weakness in the mage’s understanding of magic, hoping to find something—anything—she could use to her own advantage.

But the more Ju heard, the more she realized the weakness was clearly her own.

“My soul is a piece of Fate tied to the wheels of reality,” she intoned at Christina’s demand. “My mind is my soul’s guardian. My magic is a child of the two. Instinct is its liberator…”

Ju fought down a surge of anger. This was stupid, stupid, stupid. The last thing she intended was to cooperate.

When finally Christina left, Ju struggled to not panic. Her body cried out for sleep, but her mind could not bring itself to even try. On the red velvet walls around her, Arvin’s impossible paintings loomed accusingly. Some even seemed to make sense now she understood the destiny their artist had been forced into.


Later, Beth brought in a tray of afternoon tea. As she set the tray on the table, Ju took hold of her wrist. In a low voice, she said, “Can you tell Arvin I’d like to speak to him, alone.”

“I’m afraid he’s out for the day,” Beth said. “His aunt has him on a tight rein, I fear. If you’re to be alone with him, he’ll need to seek her permission first.”

Ju looked at her, appalled. “He’s not a child, surely.”

Beth twisted out of Ju’s grip. She curtseyed, her face unflustered. “It’s always been like that between mages…” she paused, swallowed. “The one with the most heart-magic lays down the rules. Best you talk to Arvin about it if the opportunity arises. I can’t.”

She hurried away, locking the door behind her, refusing to return when Ju called her back.

The air was beginning to sharpen with the chill of evening. Ju drank the tea, ate the scones, barely tasting them. For a long time, she stood by the fire, warming her hands, going over and over in her mind what she should say to Arvin:

“I cannot stay, but I cannot leave, either! You have me thoroughly, thoroughly
trapped…You, Christina, Tinder, Rill. Even Papa…”

No, she told herself. It wasn’t Papa’s fault she was here. She should have known better than to trust a mage. Even a fool would not have.

Anger rose in her throat. Her hands began to tingle. Her head spun. Fearing she’d swoon, she lowered herself into the chair.

Then she was falling. A dream, it seemed; but not a dream…

A baby, crying. A child, whispering. A woman, pleading…

At first Ju thought it was Tinder. As the woman approached, it became clear that her stomach was flat. She was no longer pregnant. Nevertheless, there were aspects of Arvin in her face, his intense blue eyes, Tinder’s dark curls.

“What do you want?” Ju asked.

The woman’s features sharpened. Her rosebud mouth turned down, conveying a sense of unending hopelessness. “I’m Rill. I’ll not hurt you.” She held out mottled fingers. Ju flinched. Before she could pull away, stone flesh touched hers, as cold and insistent as electrodes.

“This is what I should be if I could allow myself to grow,” Rill said. Her voice was husky – Tinder’s voice. She tightened her grip. “I hide myself in stone because there’s nowhere else. I’m sorry I hurt you yesterday. I was afraid.”

Her hand grew warm. A strong surge of magic began to flow from Rill’s hand, suffusing Ju with a gentle and familiar strength, coursing through her veins, filling her bones.

“I’m returning your heart-magic,” Rill said. “I shouldn’t have taken it. I want you to know that I’m not your enemy. Can you forgive me?” Tears streamed down her cheeks, rolling like tiny white pearls. “I cannot bear being unborn. It’s killing me. Your magic is strong. Delicious. Unbearably strong. Never turn your back on it. Never forget it’s yours.”

Ju could not tell if she was dreaming or awake. Then an arm reached out from behind the curtain, a brass mechanical arm that stretched like a concertina, its skeletal fingers, clicking and grasping.

Rill shrieked and babbled. Her face blurred, grew fainter and younger as her body shrank and shrank until she lay on her back on the floor, a newborn, squalling, stone hands waving as delicate as petals. Greyness crept along her arms, her face, her body and legs. She curled up, shrank to the size of a pea; and vanished.

Ju let out a low, terrified moan. She opened her eyes and saw a movement by
the window – the fluttering of a curtain. She sat up, terrified it would be the arm. But this time it was Tinder. The curve of her belly gleamed in a ribbon of finger-light, outlining the press of a tiny foot through her nightgown.

“We’re sorry,” Tinder said. “We were afraid.” She hurried out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Ju slid out of bed and followed. She paused at the smell of wet moss and the feel of ice-cold gravel beneath her feet. She knelt and examined the gravel.

Teardrops made from stone.

She tried her bedroom door and found it unlocked. The hallway beyond it was empty. It took all of her resolve to not walk along it – to not take herself down stairs to the front door and let herself out.

For that she would need patience and the cover of darkness.

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At seven, when Beth came to escort Ju to dinner, Ju shook her head. “I’m not hungry,” she said. “Today’s instructions with Christina have left me feeling poorly. Please send my apologies.”

Beth curtseyed. “I will ask the cook to send you up a tray with Mrs Morthock’s.”

“Mrs Morthock? Is that Tinder’s name?”

“Yes. It’s Mr Grindle’s real name too; but the story goes that Sir Mathias ordered him to change it to Grindle when he adopted him. It’s his way of showing Mrs Morthock that although they live apart, he is still her master.”

“She didn’t marry Sir Mathias, did she?”

“Oh my sweet Fate no. I doubt anyone would marry him. Not with those arms.” She curtseyed again. “I must go. Mr Grindle does not like me to keep his mother waiting.”

“Yes, of course,” Ju said. “But tell me. How well do you know Arvin Grindle? What sort of man is he?

Beth looked askance. “I’m nothing but a servant.” She inclined her head towards Tinder’s room. “If she…Tinder… If she found out I’d said anything against her son, I’d be turned to stone. Please, do not ask.”

“Beth,” Ju insisted. “You know I’m an Edger. We’re not like Upper Slikkers. We don’t betray our own kind.”

Beth licked her lips. “He’s well-meaning,” she said hesitantly. “At least as
well-meaning as a mage is capable of being. But when it comes to making choices that matter, it’ll always be for his own gain.”

“He risked a great deal sheltering me here.”

Beth gave a low cynical chuckle. “He is as good as Miss Grindle’s son. She brought him up, you know, while his mother kept to her room upstairs. People think she’s under house arrest, but that’s not true. She chose to imprison herself there, and now her mind is so addled, she refuses to leave. Did Mr Grindle tell you that when she went out to find you, it was the first time she’d left the house, ever? Before that, she’d only left her room three times. Mr Grindle has begged her to escape with him more than once, but she won’t.” Beth tapped the side of her head. “They say the baby is so terrified, it’s turned them both insane. They want to flee, but they’re like rocks caught on a cliff, refusing to roll.”

“Such a terrible existence,” Ju said softly.

Beth curtseyed. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that Mr Grindle is helpless. The likes of him risk nothing. Don’t ever forget it. Please, I must see to his mother.”

Ju nodded and let her go. A little later, a meal tray arrived as Beth had promised. As Ju ate a light meal of soup and scones, she expected that either Arvin or Christina would call in and admonish her for not appearing at dinner. But much later, when she heard footsteps pass her room and doors opening and closing at the far end of the hall, she guessed she’d been spared.

Agitated, she paced back and forth in front of the hearth. She put on one of Tinder’s warm yet unfashionable coats and opened the window. The air smelled wet with rain, so she closed it again. The clock struck ten and then ten-thirty. Shivering, she watched the passing of Arvin’s guards in the grounds below – one for every half hour. When the clock struck eleven, she opened the window again and waited for the guard to disappear around the bend below.

Unable to wait a moment longer, she counted to ten, hoisted her skirts and climbed out.

Light rain misted about her. Scudding clouds glowed silver beneath a hidden moon. Ju started across the building, finding footholds in the interlaced branches of twisted ivy, wooded enough to be a hundred years old. She passed beneath the windows of the rooms next to her, for she did not know if they would be occupied or not. At the building’s far end, where she knew Tinder’s window would be, a light flickered – candlelight – so she avoided that as well.
She turned the corner, surveyed the grounds a storey below. Wet. Deserted. Arvin’s day room was the third window, she knew. If this side of the building followed the same logic as hers, then the window after that – the one that glowed steadily with finger-light – would be his bedroom. It was a risk, she told herself. But, under the circumstances, she had little choice.

Carefully, she eased herself along. Ivy brushed her face like so many slippery fingers. As she neared Arvin’s window, something quick and black sprang out from beneath her hand. She froze, pressing her body against the foliage. But it was only a rat, skittering through the shadows.

Calming herself, she made her way to Arvin’s room and looked in. He was standing at the window looking out.

From the look on his face, he seemed as startled as she was. “Sweet Fate, Ju, what are you doing?” he demanded, wrenching the window open.

She let him help her inside. When she was safely standing in front of him, he put his hands on her shoulders. “What’s happened to you? You’re different.” he said.

She pulled away, afraid he knew that Rill had given her magic back, afraid he’d want to take it. “I can’t possibly face the heart-chair,” she said through chattering teeth. “I can’t desert Papa, either. No matter how hard I practice, I can’t even begin to understand how to reel in my heart-magic.”

“Your Papa’s a grown man,” Arvin said, abruptly. “He’s not helpless.” He picked up his jacket from the chair. Ju tensed, thinking he was going to put it over her shoulders, but he put it on himself instead.

“He cannot stand up to your aunt,” she reminded him.

“My aunt won’t harm him while she believes she has a chance with you.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Unfortunately no.”

Ju huddled into her coat, shivering, not knowing what to say next.

“Ju, I’m truly sorry for my behaviour in this,” he said. “But if we are to escape unscathed, and even attempt to find your father, I must at least put up a pretence of bending to my aunt’s wishes. Her heart-magic is too strong for me. It will be too strong for you too, unless you learn how to fight back.”

“How can I do that without killing myself as well?”

Arvin shook his head. “I’m sorry. After seeing what happened between you and Rill, I know now that what little I can teach you will be as useful as trying to stop
an avalanche with a twig. Someone like my aunt could help; but I fear her priorities lie more with protecting herself than with protecting you.” He started towards her.

Ju flinched, held up her hand. “Please, don’t well-wish me. I don’t want to feel magic of any kind. Rill’s attack…it still hurts.” She folded her arms across her chest. “As for your aunt…she’s—”

“Unbearable,” Arvin said pushing at his glasses. His dark hair looked uncommonly neat but his eyes were tense and his shoulders stooped. “She…” He shook his head slowly. “To be honest, she rarely sees past her own ambition. She was once like a mother to me, but now she’s nothing more than an impediment.”

Ju was only partly consoled by this. “So,” she said. “Do you intend to go through with murdering your stepfather? Do you believe what Christina says about his automatons?”

Arvin frowned. “It’s rather coincidental that you should ask. You see, I was wondering if I should explain matters to you before I left.”

“You’re leaving? Deserting Tinder? Walking away? Just like that?”

He held up his hand. “No, of course not. Rill would compel me to return the moment she sensed my distance.”

Ju’s shivering grew worse; but not from the cold.

“I’ll be back by dawn,” Arvin said softly. “Come on, I’ll take you to your room. I’m going to the factory to break into Sir Mathias’s workshop to see what he’s up to for myself.”

“Take me with you.”

“No, it’s too dangerous.”

Ju folded her arms. “You think, it’s less so here? Besides, if you require an opinion on the workings of automatons, you might need a tinkerer.”

Shrugging, Arvin started for the window. He paused and turned back. “I do not suppose your heart-magic has replenished itself enough for you to share a little?”

Although Arvin had never hurt her, she did not want him or anyone capable of taking her magic to so much as touch her. He’d well-wish her for certain, and then his skin-magic would eat through her wariness. Next she’d be trusting him again. Before she knew it, he’d be on his way to Grindle’s and she’d be back in her room in a swoon.

And of course, there was Beth’s warning: Don’t fool yourself into thinking that Mr Grindle is helpless.
“No,” she told him. “It has not replenished itself.”

He held her gaze and sighed. “If you insist on following, be prepared to accompany me to a place best not frequented by one as polite as you. If I cannot beg heart-magic, I’m afraid I’ll be forced to buy it.”

Ju’s heart careened against her ribs. “From prisoners? At this hour?”

“Dear Ju,” Arvin said, wryly. “You’re really not as streetwise as I thought you were.” He checked his pocket watch, lifted his leg over the windowsill and climbed out.

Chapter 18

Ju reached the ground at the same time as Arvin.

“We’ve got ten minutes until the guards make their next pass,” he whispered.

“Keep close to me and the dogs won’t bark if they see us together.”

He led her briskly and silently across the lawns under the shadowed protection of trees. At the river, he picked up his pace, following the shoreline west, past the high walls of rambling Upper Slik mansions. He kept his finger-light dim and aimed at their feet. When Ju turned her ankle on unstable rocks, he clicked his tongue and made no effort to help.

Watching her, he said, “There’s not time enough to take you home, but you know the way. You can hide in the boatshed and I’ll be back before dawn to see you past the dogs to your room.”

She stared up at him. He offered his hand, but she refused it and drew herself to her feet. “I’m not hurt.”

Arvin shrugged, his jaw thrust out making him look more like a petulant mage and less like the vulnerable stepson she’d believed him to be. Starting forward, hands in jacket pockets, he said, “You’d help me more by letting me do this alone.”

“You’d help us both by not trying to make me give up.”

“We need to be back by five. I don’t need the added complication of seeing you hurt.”

Glaring, Ju picked up her pace and continued ahead of him. She suspected, that like true shifters, he could sense her heart-magic and was now punishing her for lying to him about not having any. If that were the case, she wondered why he hadn’t
taken as much as he wanted. No doubt she’d be helpless to stop him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, not quite sure why she’d apologised.

Arvin caught up with her. He sighed. “Rill’s stirring. Her fear’s like an ache behind my eyes. If I’m lucky, I’ve got a few more hours before she’s fully awake but, right now, her presence is one distraction too many.”

“What frightens her the most?”

Arvin gave a soft snort. “Everything.”

“She sends it all to you?”

“Fates no,” he said irritably. “Mostly, she tries to ride on my perceptions. I can usually lock her out, but it’s a constant struggle. I don’t suppose she can help it; but it keeps me tied to her. I’ve no idea why she took your magic like she did. That wasn’t what we wanted from you. You’ve seen what happens when she tries to use hers.” He paused. “The chambermaid. She’s not the first one to be turned to stone. That’s why my poor mother’s insane. Always trying to keep Rill under control. Fate knows what’s going to happen when she and Rill wake up. With your magic at her disposal she could probably turn the entire mansion to stone if she wanted.” He looked at her, his eyes searching.

Ju pushed down a pang of guilt. She was tempted to tell him that her magic was safe, but the less said about that, the better. In the end, curiosity got the better of her. “Why won’t Tinder leave the house?” she asked.

“I wish I knew. I really wish I knew.” He pulled up his coat collar and looked ahead. “Hurry,” he snapped, picking up his pace. “We haven’t all night.”

They left Upper Slik and made their way to the tram terminal. Arvin hailed a hansom to take them to the commercial strip where shops, markets and offices formed a barrier between the wealthy districts and poorer ones. The driver let them off outside a tall, narrow establishment with a sign proclaiming it to be Matheson’s Apothecary.

“This way.” Arvin conjured finger-light. He started into a lane, led Ju past run-down offices and makeshift stalls. The rain had eased, but the air was cold enough for Ju’s breath to make frosty clouds in front of her.

The lane opened out to a grand square with music, light and laughter spilling through the doors of taverns and gaming houses. Arvin paused, faced Ju and frowned. He put his hands on her shoulders.

Ju flinched.
“Don’t fret.” Arvin said, tightening his grip just a little. “I’m not going to well-wish you or take your magic. But you must admit, there’s no valid reason for you to be accompanying me.” He thought for a moment. “Unless, I suppose, you were my sweetheart or mistress—”

“Mistress?” Ju extricated herself from his grip. “Why can’t I be your sister? Or cousin?”

He gave a mocking smile. “One does not bring family here.”
She bit her lip. “Go on. What else?”

“We’ll say you’re buying heart-magic too, but when it’s your turn, you can change your mind, if you want.” He let go of her, and started away. He turned back and added, “Oh, if I behave strangely, it’s because I’m looking out for you. The real you, not the mistress.”

He linked his arm in hers, and started forward. “It’s either this or you wait outside on your own.”

Laughter and music rolled out from the gaudily lit taverns, a raucous medley of dissipation. As they neared the entrance to The Tinkerer’s Dale, the air smelled heavily of pipe smoke and spilled ale. Ju could see men lifting and lowering tankards, women in brazen dresses, finger-lights pulsing.

“Do you really need heart-magic that badly?” Ju asked.

Arvin sighed. “I know you have it again. And I know Rill hurt you yesterday, so I will not press the issue.”

He steered her through the doorway. She wanted to explain why she could not bear the thought of yet another extraction, but the interior of this tavern – with its laughter writhing about her like the living walls of a prison – was clearly not the place to do it.

At the bar, Arvin brought a tankard of ale for himself and a glass of mulled wine for Ju. He took them to a worn velvet sofa by a central, circular hearth where he gestured for Ju to sit down beside him. “Drink up,” he said, putting a propriety arm about her shoulders. “If you don’t need fortifying now, you’ll need it soon enough.”

Ju tensed at his touch. “I thought we were in a hurry,” she said close to his ear.

“Believe me, this is as long as it takes.”

Ju sipped the wine reluctantly. She did not want her senses clouded by alcohol, but unlike the insufferable bite of home-stilled gin, the mix of spices and
honey in the wine tasted deceivingly pleasant. She took a long, deep draught like she would have a cup of warm milk. “This is good. Very good.” She sipped a little more.

Passersby stared at her. She supposed she looked out of place beside Arvin and wondered what they made of the handsome dandy and his dowdy companion. She took another sip of wine, mostly for the comfort of giving herself something to do and not having to look at Arvin.

He turned to her, his face serious. “Have you ever been happy, Ju? I mean deliriously happy?”

Ju was not sure what he meant by this. “Not for a long time.”

He gestured beyond the hearth where couples swayed with drunken abandon. “What about when you dance?”

She gave a cynical chuckle. “I’ve not danced before.”

“No, I suppose not. I suppose you do not waltz where you come from.” He grinned. “To be honest, I do not either.”

He downed the rest of his ale, took the wine out of her hand and set it down on the table. Taking her hand, he stood and pulled her to her feet. “The noise,” he said loudly. “Let’s find somewhere more conducive...” He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her close. Into her ear, he whispered, “For appearances’ sake only.”

She stiffened, thinking he would well-wish her, then froze, stunned, when he pressed his face against hers. For a long moment, he held it there, unmoving, not so much as drawing breath. She could feel well enough that it was only the pretence of a kiss, but when his arms slid down to her waist, drawing her closer, bystanders guffawed and clapped, clearly believing otherwise.

Ju could smell and taste the ale he’d been drinking, and also the scent of sandalwood and the laundered newness of his jacket. His face was smooth, freshly shaved. It unsettled her that his closeness sent her pulse beating a frantic rhythm in tune to the throb of her skin-magic.

It was the wine, she thought dimly. She should stop him before he tried to go further.

He drew away, slowly, holding her gaze. “Well done,” he whispered against her ear. His breath made her skin tingle. “Now walk with me, as if there’s nowhere else you’d rather be.”

Grateful that he had not well-wished her – and furious at him for not giving
her sufficient warning – Ju let him take her arm and lead her away. They passed up a set of stairs to be greeted at the top by a woman in an emerald silk gown, her auburn hair piled high beneath a peacock-feathered hat. “Your usual room, sir?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you Mrs Allsop.”

Nodding, Mrs Allsop regarded Ju with raised eyebrows and said, “Will she also be requiring?”

“She will.” Arvin reached beneath his waistcoat and brought out a money pouch. “I trust you’ll accept double the usual fee for such short notice? I’d be obliged if you could arrange for a horse-driven hansom to pick us up afterwards.”

“Very well.” Mrs Allsop took the pouch without bothering to weigh or count its contents. She handed Arvin a key. “I trust you’ll be as considerate as always. The boy is unusually delicate today.”

The woman left. Ju looked at Arvin and mouthed, “What?”

He put his hand on the back of her neck. She forced herself to not flinch at his touch. “You’re doing well,” he whispered. He took her hand. “Come, my sweet,” he said aloud. He led her to a room at the end of a dimly lit corridor, unlocked the door and gestured for her to enter.

The room was heavily scented with sandalwood and decorated with subtle elegance. Ju dug in her heels. “I’m not going anywhere until you explain.”

Arvin frowned. “I thought I already had,” he whispered. Aloud, he said. “Isn’t it delightful, my dear. Come, see.” He pressed his hand between her shoulder blades, then firmly and resolutely pushed her into the room.

“Now,” he said, locking the door. “You may sit and watch, or you may close your eyes and let the wine lull you. Whatever you choose, do not interfere. It’s for the lad’s own good. It’ll stop him from sparking in the powerhouse. He won’t end up in prison like his father. It’ll also provide him money enough for an education.”

The lad sat stiffly in a padded version of an extraction chair, his hands and ankles already attached to the electrodes. No more than fifteen, his grey eyes gazed out from beneath a shock of black hair. “You’ll not take me to the brink, will you?” he asked.

“Of course not, Wilfred,” Arvin said. “You know I’d never do that.”

Wilfred swallowed. “I don’t mean you, sir. Her. She won’t drain me, will she?”

“I promise, she won’t,” Arvin assured him.
The door on the opposite side of the room opened, admitting Mrs Allsop. Without a word, she waited for Arvin to seat himself in the identical chair beside Wilfred’s. He took off his boots and socks and rolled up his sleeves.

“I’m ready,” Arvin said, wriggling against the back. He laid his arms on the armrests.

Mrs Allsop secured the electrodes at his wrists and ankles. She stepped away, folding her arms nervously. Arvin closed his eyes. Wilfred’s face blenched. At once, the boy fell into a swoon, eyes open, staring blankly ahead.

“I’ll never get used to this,” Mrs Allsop said to Ju. “But it’s the kindest thing for him. I fear he’ll not have enough to feed the two of you, though. He’s only a lad.”

Sweat broke out on Ju’s forehead. Nausea washed over her. She looked over at Arvin who was now grinning with his eyes closed as if some amusing scene was playing out in front of him. She could not bring herself to speak, fearing that her voice would give away her intense aversion to this…to this…

Bitter Fates alive! It was hideous what Arvin was doing – sucking out the child’s heart-magic, no doubt taking layers of his soul with it. “It’s cruel,” she said. “I won’t.”

Mrs Allsop broke out into a smile. “That’s very kind of you, Miss. Kind indeed.”

Ju lowered herself into a wing-backed chair and stared ahead, counting under her breath as if she were the one submitting. The minutes stretched out, insufferable, unending.

A clock in the hallway struck one. Arvin stirred and opened his eyes. “That’s enough,” he said. “Please, unstrap me.”

With the electrodes removed, Arvin put on his socks and boots and stood up. He looked to Ju, eyebrows raised, inviting her to take his place in the receiving chair.

“No,” Ju said. “Absolutely not.”

Arvin shrugged. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He helped Mrs Allsop unstrap Wilfred, then lifted him onto the bed. The boy looked too pale and much too fragile. “He’s warm,” Arvin said. “There’s magic enough for him to sell a little more tonight if needed, but take care who you choose. A greedy recipient could drain him in minutes.” He held out his hand to Ju, “Come my sweet. We have miles ahead of us yet.”

Ju followed him out, but did not take his hand. He led her down a rickety
wooden staircase to the back of the building. Outside, in a dimly lit alley, a horse-drawn hansom waited as Arvin had requested. He motioned for Ju to climb inside, but did not offer to help her. He sat as far away from her as the narrow seat would allow, a hunched shadow in the darkness.

When the carriage rolled forward, muting their voices from outside ears, Ju asked, “How many of them are there?”

“People like him? Only three that I know of. There must be others, I suppose. I thought you’d know.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing before. If there are more, they must keep themselves hidden. Even Forley didn’t know about them.”

Arvin laughed. “Of course he did. I even asked him if he’d sell me some of his magic once, but he refused. To be honest, it would be a good thing if a law were passed to allow workers to sell their heart-magic, like they do in Cornica. The atrocity of prison would only be required for those who broke the law.”

“Both options are positively awful.”

“At least workers could be paid for their talent.”

Ju snorted derisively. “By selling pieces of their souls, layer by layer? I do not think anyone would choose that option willingly. In Cornica—”

“In Cornica civil war is brewing,” Arvin interrupted. “There are too many workers with heart-magic. Their mages will fall.”

“You think ours should not?”

Arvin sighed. “It doesn’t matter what I think. Exploitation will carry on no matter who’s in power.”

“Only because mages benefit from it.”

“You sound like Forley,” Arvin said sadly. “Did you know he thought a lot of you?”

Ju could not bring herself to answer. She closed her eyes and swallowed, forcing down her grief by focussing on the clatter of horse hooves over cobbles. It struck her that if Arvin had shifter powers, he could easily have taken Wilfred’s magic without resorting to the use of electrodes. “Why did you use the chair?” she asked.

“You mean back there?” Arvin asked, puzzled. “You think I should have taken the lad’s magic without it? You think I should advertise my shifter heritage as well as my unfortunate lack of heart-magic?” He leaned back in the seat, the leather
squeaking beneath him. Ju heard him rustling his jacket pocket, then smelt the tang of fresh tobacco. He lit a cigar with a spark of heart-magic and took a long, appreciative puff. “Why are you here? You didn’t have to accompany me?”

Ju shrugged. “You helped me once, so I’m helping you.”

“Is that all?” he asked. “Are you sure it’s not Rill compelling you? Do you feel her?”

“No.”

“She hasn’t tried to speak to you?”

Ju almost confessed that Rill had indeed spoken to him. She wondered why Arvin had not known the answer himself? Maybe Rill didn’t want him to know. If that were the case, she needed to first know why.

“No,” she said.

Arvin sighed. “We’ve four hours left. Once we’re there, remain at my side. I don’t want to be wasting my time keeping track of you.”

Chapter 19

Arvin ordered the hansom to let them off in an alley between high factory walls that loomed like the sides of an immense fissure. As he took her through a maze of alleys to Grindle’s, the air hung eerily quiet, muted by darkness and a misty pall of rain. A sharp breeze bit through the layers of Ju’s coat. Her teeth chattered, but not from the cold.

Last time she’d set foot here, Grindle himself had sneered at her for failing to uphold his impossible standards. She’d promised she’d never come back; yet here she was, sneaking in with Grindle’s son, and not sure why she was doing it.

At the back door, Arvin pulled Ju behind him. He hit the lock with a bolt of heart-magic, sending up a shower of sparks and splintered wood. The mechanism glowed red.

“Stay back,” he whispered, kicking the door open. “One, two, three…”

A sentry charged out from the dimness inside, truncheon raised. Arvin hit him square in the chest with a bolt of heart-magic. Ju screamed and backed away. The sentry opened his mouth, but instead of screaming, his voice fizzled tinnily. His body crumpled, glowing hotly about the middle, his shirt and jacket bursting into flame.
The sentry lifted his face to reveal the skin melting and receding from the shiny contours of a metal skull. The air smelled of burning rubber.

“Lucky for us, oil ignites quicker than blood,” Arvin said, stamping out the flames. “Stay behind me and keep quiet. He dragged the twitching automaton back inside. “If you can spare a little finger-light, it’ll leave me free to deal with the next one.”

Ju stepped over the still-twitching body. She lit up her fingers and sent out a thread of light. Arvin swung the door shut; then propped the body against it to hold it closed.

The hallway took them past offices and workshops, doorways gaping like hollows in the dimness. Arvin’s confidence both surprised and frightened Ju. She couldn’t tell if he was drunk on heart magic, or if he knew exactly what he was doing. When the next sentry challenged them at the foot of a staircase, Arvin retaliated with casual ease. The automaton fell as easily as the first, its head clattering like a brass bell against the stair rail.

“If those things are souled like my aunt claims,” Arvin said. “Fates hope they can’t feel.”

Shivering, Ju stared at the twitching carcass. It would be worse than being tied to a heart-chair. No hope of escape, even in death. Only decades or years confined in rubber and steel...

Arvin pulled her up the stairs. “Hurry.”

The next sentry charged from the top of the landing. Arvin felled it in an instant, but unlike the others, its scream rang out, undeniably human. It hit the ground with a dull thud. Ju gagged at the stench of burning flesh.

“Damn.” Arvin knelt at the sentry’s side. “Human sentries were supposedly replaced weeks ago.” He checked the man’s pulse. He’s still alive. And he saw us.” He laid his hand over the man’s forehead.

“You can’t—” Ju said, tugging him away.

He shook her off, replaced his hand on the sentry’s forehead. His fingers glowed red, sparked and flared. The sentry jerked, stilled.

“He wouldn’t have hurt you,” Ju said. “Not once he saw who you were.” “He would have relished the idea of reporting me. Besides, it was him or us. If you still want to join the Groundists, you’d better get used to it.”

“He was only doing his job,” Ju pursued.
Arvin clicked his tongue. “So were we.”

Ju gaped at him. “Can you not feel an ounce of pity for the fellow?”

“You didn’t. Not on purpose. I couldn’t stop it.”

“Ju,” he said firmly. “Haven’t you paid attention to anything my aunt’s been trying to teach you? If you burned Claver, you must have wanted to. You might not have thought so at the time. But here, in your heart, where it counts...” He tapped his chest with his fist. “You wanted it.”

“No.” It hadn’t been the same with Claver. She’d wanted to stop him, not kill him.

“For Fate’s sake, Ju, not now.” Arvin stood, grabbed Ju’s hand and wrenched her past the sentry’s body. “Hurry. Unless you’d prefer to wait here and discuss this with my stepfather when he arrives at sunrise.”

He let go of her and started down a long, wide corridor.

She caught up to him at an iron door.

“My father’s workshop,” he said. “But there’s two more automatons loose and I’ve no idea when or where to expect them.”

He melted the lock with a burst of heart-magic, lit up his fingers and kicked the door open.

Ju followed him inside. She swept her finger-light around the room, pausing at a desk cluttered with fragments of automatons. The room was silent. Birdcages hung from the ceiling, sat atop pedestals and shelves; but the birds inside them remained unmoving. It took Ju a few heartbeats to realize they were automatons.

“I cannot bear this room,” Arvin said softly. “If there were time and energy enough, I’d burn up every last trace of it.”

He strode to a door partially hidden behind a wood and jacquard screen. He melted the lock, kicked the door open and made his way purposefully inside.

A few steps later, he hesitated. “Bitter Fates alive,” he said. “If my aunt is right, then my stepfather is utterly, utterly insane.”

Ju caught up with him. At first she thought the hundreds of rat-sized things arranged in rows like so many brass trinkets on the benches were toys. As she drew closer, she saw they were crafted to resemble locusts – hideous things with suction cups for mouths and sharpened talons for grasping.
She reached out to pick one up.

Arvin snatched her wrist “Don’t,” he hissed. “You might activate it.”

At the far end of the table, something familiar and glassy gleamed in finger-light. Ju moved in for a closer look.

The automatons here were fitted with wings. As she cast her gaze along their coppery veins and glass facets, her breath caught in her throat. She knew them! Every angle, plane and joint. The wing’s patterns were exactly as she’d designed them.

“My dragonfly!”

“Yes, I know. Your creation.”

“Your aunt. She said she would sell it. She must have known this is what it would be used for.”

Arvin shook his head. “No. She gave the design to my stepfather to distract him. I doubt she even contemplated what he’d do with them.”

“But why? What are they for?” Ju paused, remembering what Christina had said about Grindle creating mobile automatons. Suddenly, she could see them in her mind’s eye, swooping out of the sky, talons stretched, mouths gaping. Her stomach lurched. She backed away.

“I designed those wings for the sake of beauty, not murder. Oh bitter, bitter Fate. No one will see them coming.”

“He calls them harvesters,” Arvin sneered. He rummaged through a drawer and pulled out a cigar tin. His face seemed alive with a kind of excitement she’d not seen in him before. He emptied out the cigars, returned to the table. “Supposedly they’re for Sir Mathias’s and my protection.” He picked up a harvester, stared at it.

“These are new. They’re not interested in skin-magic at all. Their instructions compel them to steal heart-magic.” Carefully, he lowered the harvester into the cigar box, folding its wings against its sides. He shut the lid, closed its lock and stuffed it under his waistcoat.

In the glow of his own finger-light, his face looked haunted, his hair dishevelled, partially obscuring his glasses. “So who do you think threatens him enough to want to make these?” he asked. “Or more accurately, what threatens him?”

The hairs on the back of Ju’s neck prickled. Grindle had everything a man could want, except for one thing.

“Heart magic,” she said. “The only thing he cannot make for himself.” She stared at the rows of harvesters. They looked less like toys and more like brass and
steel demons. “Why does he need so many? Workers with heart magic are a rare thing.”

“It’s not workers he despises.” Arvin stared ahead. “It’s his own kind. Mages. He wants them all destroyed. Then no one will look down on him again. No one will snigger over his lack of heart magic.”

Ju shook her head slowly. “By stealing theirs? By tying their souls to machines? No. That’s ridiculous, insane.” She paused, remembering how Forley had told her that Grindle had once cut off his own arm in the name of perfection.

“Insane,” Arvin repeated. “All of it.” He lifted his hand. A jagged bolt of heart-magic shot from his fingers, hitting the table at its centre. As the harvesters ignited, each one into a ball of fire. The air shook. Arvin kept his hand steady, sweeping it to and fro, back and forth, sending out an unending stream of magic until the entire table crackled and glowed.

He smiled grimly, clenched his fist. The flow diminished. “Best not use it all at once.” He lowered his hand. “I’m not done yet. We’ve still got those sentries to deal with.”

The glow about the table faded as the ruined harvesters cooled. Although the speed and fury of the destruction terrified her, Ju knew beyond a doubt that what Arvin had done was right. She noticed that his hands were unharmed and fought down a stab of anger, realizing that he must have known all along how to protect himself from the heat of heart-magic. Yet, when he’d tried to teach her how to rein her magic in, he’d not so much as tried to explain. Just like his aunt, she supposed. He feared she’d pose a threat.

But now was not the time to challenge him. She looked to his waistcoat where he’d hidden the final harvester. “Why have you kept one back?”

His eyes were intense and troubled like Rill’s had been in her dream.

“Insurance,” he said wryly.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“No now.” He waved his hand, turned away from her and started past the table towards another locked door on the opposite side of the room. “We’re on borrowed time. I’m not done yet. There’s still those other guards to worry about.”

He melted the lock, kicked the door open. Ju caught up with him. “Stay behind me,” he hissed. “Look out for sentries.” He tensed, sent out a steady stream of pale finger-light, scanning the room from wall to wall. He whistled through his teeth.
“It looks like he keeps replicas of his past designs in here. I assume one day he plans to build a museum or monument of sorts.” He chuckled derisively. “The Sir Mathias Grindle Memorial. I suppose if there’s no one left to stop him, he may well get away with it.”

He started into the room. Automatons of varying shapes and sizes stood lined up like soldiers: chambermaids, guards, musicians, dancers… “These are his latest models,” Arvin said. “The kind that require harvesters to activate them.”

The length of Ju’s spine prickled. The things looked too much like works of art, their blank-faced beauty concealing all too well the hideousness of their purpose. “What are you looking for?”

“He’s never let anyone in here. Not even my aunt. Rill knows about it. There’s something she wants me to see. She’s tried to show me for years, but when she pictures it, her thoughts turn to babble, all caught up in her fear, midway between panic and madness. Fates alive, sometimes she carries me along with it too.”

He swept his light about the room again. It was long, like a hallway. Tables and automatons receded into darkness. “Whatever it is, it has something to do with why Rill is so frightened—”

Ju took hold of Arvin’s arm. “It could trap us,” she said. “The sentries—”

Arvin pushed at his glasses and winced. “Be patient. I can’t think.” He looked to Ju, his eyes wide and unfocussed, looking black in the dimness. “Sorry. It’s Rill, not you. She’s trying to take over again. Please, give me your hand. I need to remember who I am.”

His hand felt cold. Without thinking, Ju sent him a soft surge of well-wishing. He squeezed her fingers, but did not well-wish her back. “I’m glad you came,” he said. “I need to see this from my perspective, not Rill’s.”

Ju kept hold of his hand. They made their way past tables and shelves littered with partially assembled automatons. Some had their bodies splayed, their cogs, pistons and wires converging to cavities the exact size and shape of harvesters. “Sweet Fate in purgatory,” Arvin cursed. He lifted his hand as if to hit the automatons with heart-magic; then clenched his fist and continued on.

They came to a long, wooden bench where the automatons were less sophisticated and less human, much like the automatons of decades before. Amongst them, lay shining, silver ears, brass hands with pointed fingers, gleaming knee joints and a decanter of glass eyes, each one staring out from its own peculiar angle,
compelling Ju to stare back.

Arvin pulled her away, continued to the far end of the room. He paused in front of a row of tall, metal cupboards, closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

“We’re close,” he said. “Which one?”

“You’re forgetting the sentries,” Ju hissed. “We’re as good as cornered.”

Arvin looked at her blankly. “Of course. The first one. Obvious.”

He went directly to an iron cabinet set low in a wall at the room’s farthest end. He knelt in front of it, hands shaking as he melted the lock and wrenched the heavy door open. Slowly, he leaned back on his haunches. “Well, damn the Fates,” he muttered, staring.

Ju moved in closer. “Arvin, we’re vulnerable here. We can’t—”

“Look inside,” Arvin said tonelessly. “Tell me what you see.”

Ju directed her finger-light into the cupboard. Inside, lay a human arm, carved from smooth, grey stone, fist clenched, veins standing out like ridges along its forearm. The rest of the arm was concealed beneath a rolled-up shirt sleeve, also stone. It ended at a shoulder carved into a stump of jagged bone and flesh.

“Tell me what it is,” Arvin said. “I don’t know if what I’m seeing is real or a figment of Rill’s imagination.”

“It’s an arm,” Ju said softly. “Carved from stone.”

Arvin’s shoulders shook. Ju crouched beside him, thinking he was sobbing; but when he looked at her, he let out a harsh laugh. “All these years I believed he cut it off himself in the name of perfection.” He threw back his head, laughed again. “Do you recognize the handiwork?”

Ju stared at, knowing the answer, but too horrified at the implications to want to believe it. “Rill’s?” she asked.

“No doubt she meant to turn all of him to stone. All of him! But his arm was all she could reach.”

Tears streamed down Arvin’s cheeks. “Rill’s with me now.” He tapped his head. “In here. She remembers. All these years she’s been too afraid; but now she remembers.”

Ju tried to pull Arvin to his feet. He refused to budge. “It’s getting late,” she reminded him. “You’ve seen it now. Remember the sentries. We should go.”

He closed his eyes, shuddered. “I see it happening. Rill’s dreamed about it over and over. She barely understood what it meant. I see it now. As she sees it. Oh
bitter Fates alive, I see it.”

“Later,” Ju said. “Tell me later.”

He seemed not to hear her. “Sir Mathias tried to bargain with Tinder. He claimed it was the King’s decree. He tried to take Rill’s soul. He wanted her heart-magic for his automatons. He said, when it was done, Tinder would be free to do as she pleased.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at Ju. “He tried to put Tinder in a heart-chair. Rill fought back in the only way she could. She turned herself to stone. She nearly turned Sir Mathias with her.” His face blenched. “My poor dear mother. She wants nothing more than to flee, but Rill’s fear paralyses her. Now it’s paralysing me.”

Ju sent him a surge of well-wishing. “Arvin, we’ve got to go. It’s getting late.”

Arvin’s gaze remained blank. He shifted his attention back to Grindle’s arm. “That’s why his arms do not match. His brass arm was attached years before, to replace the disfigured one. When Rill turned his other arm to stone, the force of her magic ruined the brass one – fused it to his soul – making it impossible to remove. Now he’s stuck with it, a perpetual reminder of what Rill can do.”

“Arvin,” Ju said, shaking him. “It’s dangerous.”

Arvin lurched away. He pushed at his glasses and ran his hands down his face, exploring its planes. “I’m not Rill, am I? Remind me. Who am I? Ju, tell me, am I still Arvin?”

“You’re not her,” Ju said.

Arvin gave twisted smile. “Will you help us Ju? Will you?”

Ju sent him another surge of well-wishing. “If we leave now, I’ll help you. This place. It’s horrible. We have to go.”

Arvin winced, pushed at his glasses and stood. “Something else frightens Rill. It frightens her more than Sir Mathias ever did.”

Ju tugged at Arvin’s hand. “If I can help you, I will. But we’ve got to go. Now.”

“Yes,” Arvin said absently. “We should.”

Exasperated, Ju wrenched his elbow upwards. This time he stood. She steered him away from the cupboard, led him past the tables, past the lined-up automatons, and finally, through the door into Sir Mathias’s sitting room. He paused, surveyed the
desk, started towards it.

“There’s no time,” Ju hissed. “Hurry.”

Frowning, he ran his hand over Grindle’s high-backed leather chair. “The first thing I’m going to do when this is over, is change my name back to Morthock.”

“Arvin—”

Just then, Ju heard a squeak of metal joints behind her. She swung around, but it was already too late. Something struck her head with blinding force. Agony flared behind her eyes. She forced herself to look up and saw a pair of brightly lit globes staring back at her. They were set in a face she’d seen before, but she couldn’t think where.

Strangely she was lying on her back. How had she gotten there? She squirmed and tried to sit up, but something held her down. Her head cleared. A man loomed over her – a guard – its knees either side of her hips, its hands pressing down on her shoulders. Its scalp was hairless, silver.

Her skin grew icy cold where it touched her. Skin magic rushed through her veins, a torrent flowing out.

At once she recognized the face staring down at her – the glowing eyes, the silver pate. It was Freddy – or a replica of Freddy – the automaton that had attacked her in Claver’s carriage. Her fear turned to rage.

No matter who or what touched her, was that all she would ever be? A source of magic?

She struggled, but was thoroughly pinned. Where’s Arvin, she thought dizzily. She arched her back and turned her head, wondering if the automaton had floored him as well. But he was still standing behind Sir Mathias’s chair, staring dumbfounded at his hands.

“Arvin,” she rasped.

Her heart-magic began to shift, trickling in the wake of her escaping skin-magic. “Arvin! Help!”

Her fingers sparked. The sentry’s eyes flickered for a moment, blinked. In that instant, Ju took the opportunity to twist herself out of its grip. She shimmied away from it.

The sentry caught her around the ankle. “Get away,” Ju shrieked. She took hold of the sentry’s wrist, sent it another spark of heart-magic. But the thing held on. She sent out a stronger shot; and yelped as her skin popped and blistered.
The sentry let go. It lifted its hand and brought it down swiftly towards Ju’s face. She ducked, shimmied frantically away. She came up hard against the side of Grindle’s desk. The sentry leapt to its feet with surprising agility, and lunged.

Ju wanted her heart-magic to surge. She wanted it more than ever, but at the same time, she relived the agony of what it would do to her: her own skin burning, her hands turning black.

*Help her,* a voice in her head shrieked. *Help her, help her, help her.* Then it howled—a dreadful, deafening unfolding of fear, rising and falling with the cadences of a newborn.

The howling grew louder. Ju cringed, expecting the automaton to deal her yet another blow to the head. Then a jagged bolt of heart-magic arced through the air above her. It hit the sentry between the eyes, blazing into a cascade of sparks. The sentry’s shiny pate grew molten and glimmered. It swayed drunkenly, fell forward.

Ju rolled out of its way as it struck the ground with a metallic clang. Something cold brushed the back of her neck. She twisted to avoid it and shrieked.

“Ju. It’s over,” Arvin said, crouching beside her. “It’s dead.” He rested his hand on her neck. His skin felt cold—ice cold as if he were about to steal her magic. But he didn’t.

His dark gaze frightened her. For a moment she thought she saw a reflection of Rill in them, her baby face contorted with terror. Then Arvin’s eyes softened, became blue again. He gave a thin, yet relieved smile. “Your magic is as much your enemy as your friend, isn’t it?”

Ju wanted to hit him. “I could have killed the sentry myself if…” she took in a shuddering lungful of air, “if…if… I knew how.” She rounded on him, full of rage. “You said you wanted to help me, but you’re as bad as your aunt. All you can do is tell me how to rein my magic in; but you won’t tell me how to protect myself because you’re too busy protecting yourself against me.”

Arvin blinked. “It’s not like that,” he said softly. “To be honest, I don’t know how to wield heart-magic any more than I know how to regulate my own heartbeat. It just happens. When I need it, it’s there.”

Ju drew herself to her feet, and stumbled. Arvin steadied her with both hands on her waist. His grip was like ice. “Look at your hands,” she said, pulling away. Why do they not burn? I suppose that just happens as well.”

“I’m afraid so. It’s not something I’ve ever had to think about.” He sighed.
“It’s a shifter trait, I suppose. Ironic, isn’t it? I can wield heart-magic like a shifter. I can steal it like one. But I can’t make an ounce of it to save myself.”

“Demon’s arse to you,” Ju spat. “How many times has your lack of heart-magic almost killed you?”

A look of hurt crossed Arvin’s face. He no longer looked like a mage or a shifter. He reached into his pocket and drew out his watch. “It’s nearly four. We should go.”

“Yes.” Ju glanced at the twitching automaton. “I’ve tried to tell you that more than once.”

Again, that look of hurt. Dimming his finger-light, he pushed at his glasses and said, “You realize it was Rill who saved you? I was as helpless as you were. If she hadn’t taken over, Fate knows what would have happened.”

Ju took a deep breath and let it out again.

Arvin paused as if listening. “There’s one more sentry, and probably not far away. If I remember correctly it’ll look like this one.”

“It has the same face as the one that attacked me in the carriage – the day your aunt tried to kill me. It nearly drained me of skin-magic, and then…” her voice trailed away. She lifted her hand and let her blistered skin speak for itself. “I think I destroyed it.”

Arvin relaxed visibly beside her. “Ah, that explains the human guard earlier. He must have been called in to replace it. My stepfather only made two of these models; they run on skin-magic, but their appetites are insatiable.”

He offered his hand, but she did not take it. Its coldness had reminded her too much of the sentry, of Rill stealing her magic, of Freddy in the carriage, of the shifter in the alley…all of them using her.

She looked at Arvin’s hand, but still could not bring herself to take it. “I can walk,” she said.

They made their way to the door in silence to find the first automaton still propped up as they’d left it. Arvin wrenched it aside. Ju stepped out ahead of him, telling herself nothing – absolutely nothing – would convince her to ever return. The rain had stopped. The beginnings of fog swirled thickly in front of her, blanketing the alley in jaundiced silence. Her head throbbed. Her blistered hand ached.

As expected, there were no hansoms to be hailed, no trams running. The only living souls were the homeless huddled beneath porticos and the empty carcasses of
street stalls. Arvin turned down the main road, towards gamblers’ row. “It’s out of our way, but if we’re to get back by five, we need a cab. There’ll be cabs for the picking there.”

They continued in weary silence, their feet haloed in a wash of Arvin’s finger-light, their shoulders hunched against the cold.

“Do you think Grindle will know it was you who broke into the factory?” Ju asked.

Arvin laughed at that. “He has enemies a plenty. Chances are, I’ll be the last he suspects. Besides, I’ve never used heart-magic in front of him. As far as he knows, I’m powerless.”

“Then why do you not stand up to your aunt?” Ju blurted.

For an instant Arvin’s step faltered. “That would require more magic than a lad in a tavern chair could give me. Even if I could bring myself to access it in prison, I’d be as clueless as you as to how to stop magic of that intensity from killing me.”

Ju bristled. “I’m only clueless because the King decrees it.”

Arvin stared ahead and picked up his pace. He pushed at his glasses, then folded his arms over his chest. “Ju, why didn’t you tell me that Rill gave you your magic back?”

Ju’s face grew unpleasantly warm. Her cheeks stung. She shivered, feeling exposed and vulnerable. “Did Rill tell you?”

“No. I knew the moment you climbed through my window. The truth is, I can sense heart-magic from a pace away. It’s a trick that neither a shifter nor a human can do with such accuracy.” He grimaced. “It’s a demon trait, I’m told.”

Ju bit back a cross reply. Struggling to keep her voice even, she said, “So that’s why you pursued me at the workshop. You knew.”

“You’re lucky it was me and not a demon,” he snapped. “If I’d known how to help you then, I would have. The truth is, the most I can do without hurting the both of us is to siphon off your excess when you have it.”

Ju looked ahead, not trusting herself to say anything in case she insulted him. “My hand,” she said at last. “Where I burned it trying to fight the automaton. Can you see to it? It hurts—”

Arvin wrapped his fingers around hers. At first his skin felt cold. Then gradually, it grew warm, making her bones ache. She flinched. He loosened his grip, but kept up the flow of magic; not away from her, as she’d expected, but into her. It
warmed her skin, seeped into her bones. Gradually the deep ache left over from Rill’s attack lessened. When he let go, her blistered hand was already beginning to smooth over.

#

They reached Gamblers’ Row a little before four-thirty, but remained on the outskirts to avoid sentries. When a hansom approached, Arvin hailed it and instructed the driver to drop them off near the riverfront at Upper Slik. Once they were underway, he drew the curtains, leaned back in the seat and sighed. The gentle roll of the carriage and the warmth of the brazier at Ju’s feet made her eyelids heavy; but it would be hours yet before she could think about sleeping.

How tempting it would be to ask the driver to keep driving. To forget about Tinder and Rill and even Papa. Then she heard Rill, whimpering in her head. Don’t leave us, don’t leave us, don’t leave us...

She looked over at Arvin who pushed at his glasses and stared ahead, frowning. He’s trapped as thoroughly as I am, she realized. And I’m trapped as thoroughly as Rill.

Tentatively, she put her hand on Arvin’s elbow. “Take some,” she said. “Now would be a good time. If I have less heart-magic, I shan’t have to worry about stopping it from sparking.”

Arvin took a sharp intake of breath. “To be honest, it might not help at all.”

“Just do it.” She held out both hands, closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

His taking of her magic did not hurt. Instead, the coolness of his fingers about her hands infused her with a sense of peace and contentment. When he was done, he kept hold of her and touched his forehead to hers. “Today,” he said softly. “I’ll find out where your Papa is. I’ll make sure he’s safe, so that when we leave, he’ll not be punished. In the meantime, pretend to cooperate with my aunt. She’ll not suspect anything until it’s too late.” He put his arm about her shoulders and sent her a deep surge of well-wishing.

Ju closed her eyes. Just for a moment, she thought, despite knowing that a lot stood between Arvin’s promise and what he would need to do to carry it out. Even so, the pretence gave her strength enough to face the cold. It kept her from shivering when they left the hansom, picked their way along the stony riverbank and dragged themselves up the ivy-clad walls back to their rooms.

At last, she struggled through her window, her arms and legs working numbly
as if by clockwork. As she sat on the edge of her bed, waiting for Beth to call her for breakfast she could still feel the skin-magic left over from Arvin’s well-wishing, turning and turning inside her, keeping her awake with all the insistence of an invisible key.

Chapter 20

At the top of a clock tower – higher than any roof, dome or chimney pipe – Ruk breathed in the smoky, morning chill. The crank and turn of gargantuan clockwork shuddered through the masonry at his feet. It took all of his strength to not leap as far away as his spindly muscles would take him. Machinery was bad enough close up. But machinery that could screech beneath him at any given moment appalled him.

Shivering, he cast his gaze over the misted spread of rooftops glittering as wetly as the brackish waters of the River Slik. To the left, the high walls and arched gates of Arvin Grindle’s mansion flaunted a self-assured opulence. On the house itself, rows of oddly shaped windows reflected greenery within greenery.

Solly had told him that the mansion was covered in ivy, but he had not realised the effect would be anything more than an odd curiosity. It was, in fact, stunning. Like a forest.

Like home.

Stunning or not, he reminded himself, it was just another mansion built over what had originally been tussock and rock. Even the neighbouring rooftops seemed ambivalent to its presence – the way they kept their distance like poorly dressed cousins.

The clock struck nine. Ruk rammed his hands over his ears and muttered every curse he knew. He was tempted to climb into the clock itself and destroy the chimer so it could no longer torture him. Then he saw Solly in her dowdy coat, striding purposefully towards the mansion, clutching a suitcase in one hand and the burgundy parasol he had given her in the other.

His heart clenched at how fragile she seemed. He did not want her to go inside alone, but it was too late for that. Nothing he could say would stop her.

It had been her idea to infiltrate the mansion to retrieve Ju; but both Clapton and Hawsted had tried to talk her out of it. “We pulled out the previous agent three
days ago,” Hawsted had argued. “It’d be bad sense to put another one in while things are going so badly.”

Ruk had flown into a rage at that; but despite knowing that it had been Forley’s emotions mixed with his child self’s, it had been surprisingly satisfying to vent them. Ruk had then told Hawsted that Ju had wanted to join the Groundists for years. Both he and Solly had shook their heads stubbornly, so Ruk had added, “The magic I used to destroy the powerhouse was only a fraction of what she harbours.”

Neither Clapton nor Hawsted could pass up the prospect of having that kind of power at their fingertips – and Solly was willing – so they’d agreed to Solly’s plan.

“On one provision,” Clapton had added. “That you go in without the shifter. It’ll be difficult enough watching your own back. You can’t risk having him getting in the way to ruin things.”

“She can’t do it alone,” Ruk began, but Solly had shushed him. Later when she told him she’d procured herself the position of chambermaid, he’d promised her he would find his own way into the mansion and look out for her. She’d smiled at that, her cheeks dimpling in the way that made him want to reach up and protect them.

With Solly safely in the mansion, Ruk scrambled down the side of the tower, his hands and feet finding easy purchase in its wrought-iron fretwork. The unspoilt agility of his young body both surprised and delighted him, despite its more dangerous emotions. He made his way to the ground unnoticed, then crossed the road towards a section of wall that was partially hidden by trees.

He scaled it with ease, barely noticing that the wall was three times his height. At the summit, his overcoat caught on one of the metal spikes that ridged the wall’s length, making him lose his footing. Acutely aware that the spikes were meant to maim intruders rather than keep them out, he had no choice but to curse at the sound of tearing fabric and let himself tumble into a hawthorn hedge. It certainly wasn’t the most elegant entry into the estate, but so long as he remained unseen, there was no point in wishing for a better one. Flinching against thorns, he wormed his way deeper into the undergrowth; then curled up on his side and waited.

Previously, his efforts had focussed on getting in. Now he wondered what he should do next. He needed a hiding place. Somewhere less prickly. He crawled out, inspected his coat and swore at the size of the tear. Yet another sign that he didn’t belong.
He could hear sentries approaching from beyond the trees. He dove back into the hedge and watched their boots crunch past him over gravel. Hounds followed at their heels. A large, brindled bitch stopped and snuffled as Ruk shimmied backwards on his belly. She eyed Ruk benevolently.

Ruk put his finger to his lips, waved the bitch away. It was a stupid gesture that should have resulted in a mauling, but the bitch merely looked at him curiously before retreating. Ruk was partly amused and wholly relieved at his good fortune. He had imagined himself to be as good as fully human, but the bitch must have recognized him as something different. Maybe, despite Saint Theobald, some of his shifter qualities still showed through.

He waited in the bushes and ate one of the sandwiches that Solly had handed him earlier. It was barely enough to satisfy him, but he thought it best to save some for later when his prospect of an evening meal would be at best unlikely.

After sunset, he made his way towards the mansion under the cover of shadows. He reached the kennel where a large, broad-skulled hound snuffled a wary greeting. Ruk dropped to his hands and knees and crawled over to it. The hound cocked its head, clearly not used to seeing humans approach it at its own level. It sniffed his face, shoulders, back, rear.

“Don’t expect me to do the same to you,” Ruk whispered. More than once, he’d revelled in the act in wolf form, but the prospect made his human side shudder.

“Sorry old friend,” he whispered. “If we’re going to get along, it’s my rules.”

He crawled to the nearest kennel, which was low and flat-roofed with a stone slab at its base. The hounds shifted to let him pass. He felt his way through musty dimness, wrinkling his nose at the smell of unwashed hound. In a far corner, away from the press of bodies, a large black male attached to a chain sat hunched. He snarled at Ruk’s approach.

Ruk crouched beside him. “What’s up old boy?” Carefully, he stroked the soft fur behind the hound’s ear, rubbed his nose.

The hound stunk of sourness and old urine. The moment another hound approached, he nipped at it, seemingly out of spite.

“Hey, hey, what’s all that about?” Ruk scratched the hound’s belly.

The hound gave a low whine, dropped and rolled over. “You feeling lonely?” Ruk asked. The hound grunted appreciatively. He ruffled the hound’s fur and made himself comfortable beside him. He wondered if the poor thing had ever felt the raw
pleasure of running freely, or of hunting in packs and eating until his belly felt fit to
burst.

The night wore on. Ruk ate the rest of his bread while the hounds sniffed
about at a respectful distance. The temperature dropped to near freezing. Rain angled
in through the doorway. Whining, the hounds shunned all notions of respect and
crowded against Ruk at the back of the kennel.

Ruk wished he could light up a cigar, but did not want to upset the dogs.
Instead, he thought about Solly and hoped the servants’ quarters would at least keep
her drier.

Day broke with a shout and clatter of chains and food bowls. Ruk lifted his
head from the warm belly of a sleeping hound. The other dogs had already made their
way outside. The sound of tearing meat and the hoarse protest of throats swallowing
bones unchewed drifted into the kennel. The sleeping hound stirred, leapt up and
strained on its chain to join the melee.

As much as Ruk considered these creatures to be kindred spirits, he could not
bide their lust for food. Even wild hounds paused to check if their meal was tainted or
not. But these hounds were starving, Ruk reminded himself. He wondered how he
could turn it to his advantage.

With feed time over, Ruk’s belly rumbled a hollow protest. He rubbed it to no
effect. Damn his forced childhood. It made him hungrier than he’d known possible.

A handler emptied buckets of water over the stony slabs bordering the
kennels. Ruk cringed in the corner expecting to be drenched, but the handler left the
inside of the kennel untouched. Then the black male rushed out and bared his teeth,
but was jolted to a cruel stop upon reaching the end of his chain. The handler kicked
the hound’s ribs. Yelping, the hound dove for the safety of the kennel.

“Hey, Fingle!” a male voice shouted. It came from somewhere behind the
kennels. “You’re supposed to be looking after the hounds, not riling them up.”

Fingle muttered under his breath. “You stick to guarding and I’ll damn well
treat the curs how I see fit.” He emptied one more bucket towards the kennel, and
then stormed away, muttering.

Ruk stroked the hound’s head. “I think I’ve found my next meal ticket,” he
whispered.

The hound whined, settled beside him. “Next time,” Ruk crooned. He worked
on the hound’s collar, loosening it. “Now you need only pull.” The hound stared at him, gimlet eyes not quite blank, but not quite comprehending either.

Around midmorning, some of the hounds were taken away and replaced with a new set. A change of shift, Ruk supposed. He kept hold of the black hound, exhorting him to remain at the back of the kennel. When Fingle’s legs come into view beyond the doorway, he gave the hound an encouraging shove on the rump. “Now,” he whispered.

The hound charged. He crossed in front of the handler and earned a swift kick in the ribs. Cringing, the hound shimmied backwards, away from the kennel, pulling the chain taut. His collar slipped over his ears, clunked to the ground.

Ruk held his breath. The hound shook his head, bewildered by unexpected freedom. The handler backed away, eyes widening as disbelief bled into fear.

Ruk made a low noise in his throat, midway between a cough and a growl. “Hunt,” he muttered. “Get him.”

With a yowling bark, understanding tautened into a snarl as the hound bared its teeth. It leapt onto the handler’s shoulders, bringing him down into a thrashing, screaming heap. Ruk crawled stiffly out of the kennel. He stood up and hesitated at the edge of the fight.

Timing was everything. Interfere too soon and no one would see. Too late and his efforts would be pointless.

Then, when timing seemed against him, several sentries approached along the path from the gatehouse. Ruk held up his hands. “Hold it,” he ordered. The hound froze. The handler lay sprawled beneath bloodied paws, his eyes glazed.

“Steady,” Ruk said gently.

He took hold of the hound by the scruff of the neck. “Steady, steady,” he crooned.

Spectators gathered in a tentative circle: maids, stable hands, gardeners, a cook. Ruk was torn between making a show of his skill and getting the job done quickly before the hound finished what he had clearly intended.

“Steady, steady,” Ruk crooned. He tightened his grip on the hound’s neck and pulled it away from the handler. “You’ve made your point. Time to back off.”

Instantly the hound quietened. He sat obediently on his haunches, his muzzle raised towards Ruk. “The handler’s swoon seems more out fright than anything,” Ruk observed. “His bleeding’s not severe. Skin deep from the looks of it.”
“Who are you?” one of the sentries asked. “Where’d you come from?”

“Fingle’s me da,” Ruk said. “Though he won’t own up to it. Me ma sent me here yesterday, saying he’d look after me. But he wasn’t happy about it, so he made me spend the night in the kennel.”

The sentry eyed him up and down. “You’re old enough to look after yourself.”

Ruk screwed up his face. “Doing what? Thieving?”

“Why’d the hound attack him?” another sentry asked.

“Me da kicked it one time too many. He kicked it last night as well. Then he sent me into the kennel. He was hoping the hounds would finish me off, but they didn’t.” He gave his best triumphant grin. “I have a way with hounds, you see. Me ma used ’em to keep us warm at night.”

There was all round sniggering at that. Ruk looked into the crowd where a gathering of maids whispered amongst themselves. Solly stood with them, dressed in black, looking primly subservient. Ruk’s heart banged against his ribs when her gaze met his.

“Anyone else seen Fingle mistreat the hounds?” the sentry asked.

“Just a moment ago,” someone said.

“Yesterday,” someone else added.

“He’s always kicking them,” a maid said. “It was only right they’d kick him back.”

Ruk hooked his foot around the fallen chain. He undid the collar with his free hand and refastened it around the hound’s neck. The hound’s tail remained subserviently low, wagging with wary anticipation.

Fingle stirred. He sat up, put his hands to his throat, eyes widening as if he were surprised that it was still intact. He looked towards Ruk. “You!” He spat. “You were in the kennel. You undid the hound’s collar so it could maul me.”

The sentry stepped between them. “That’s no way to treat your own get.”

Fingle looked at him goggle-eyed. “Mine? Never seen him in me life before.”

“That’s what me ma said you’d say,” Ruk interrupted. He kept his voice whiney, hurt.

The crowd sniggered.

“He’s lying,” Fingle spat.

“I don’t care whose get the boy is,” the sentry snapped. “It seems to me he
knows more about controlling hounds than you ever did. Remove yourself from this property at once. If not, I’ll arrange for the hounds to do it for you.”

Fingle opened and closed his mouth. When he merely stared ahead gaping, the guard helped him along with a kick to the rump.

“The hound will have to be destroyed,” the first sentry said. He pulled out a knife. “Hold it still.”

Ruk stiffened. “Sir, the hound could have killed him, but he didn’t. He was only warning him.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s tasted the blood of a handler. Can’t risk it going for a sentry as well.”

Ruk wanted to rail against the injustice of it, but then he, too, would be escorted away.

“Easy, boy,” he crooned. The hound sat obediently next to him, looking up, its round eyes full of trust.

The guard slit the hound’s throat with a single, efficient swipe. The hound jerked, struggled and went limp. Ruk eased him to the ground. He knelt beside him, stroked the fur along the length of his back. He knew the hound’s memories would be dissipating, but with the locket blocking his magic, he could only grit his teeth as they slipped through his senses untasted, unpreserved.

Damn Saint Theobald. Damn the demon that forced him to wear the locket. Now the hound would be lost forever. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t how shifters were supposed to see death.

Stupid, damn tears pricked his eyes – childish tears.

The guard wiped his knife on the hound’s back. “You’ve proved your skill, twice now,” he said. “I need a handler who can control these animals without resorting to cruelty. Do you think you’re up to it?”

Ruk drew himself to his feet and lifted his chin. “Of course.”

“Without thieving?”

“It’s not my way.”

“In that case your da’s job is yours. Earned fair and square.” He pointed past the kennels to the back of the stables. “You can take his room as well.”

Ruk glanced over Solly.

She glanced back, but he couldn’t tell if the tightness about her lips was the beginnings of a smile or of thinly veiled disapproval.
Chapter 21

Christina sat straight-backed at the dining table, her pale green bodice laced remarkably tight, no doubt allowing not an ounce of goodwill to escape from her. She poured herself a cup of tea, her heavily painted mouth curled into what Arvin judged to be a genuine smile. “Sir Mathias has refused to see anyone since the robbery,” she said. “Someone has struck him where it hurts most.”

Arvin took a sip of soup. As a child he’d always enjoyed hearing snippets of his stepfather’s misfortunes from her. She’d been Arvin’s rebellious aunt – the woman who’d laughed at Sir Mathias instead of fearing him. But now she’d shown her true colours, he could barely keep himself from curling his lip in disgust. He would no longer consider her his aunt.

Christina’s smile glimmered deceptively benign in the finger-like gaslight pouring from the ceiling. “Meanwhile, your little friend, Miss Weatherton, is not doing well with her training. Three days since we started, and she’s no closer to reining in her heart-magic. Unless she makes an effort, her time in the heart-chair will not work out as well as she would like.”

“She looks like she hasn’t slept in days,” Arvin said matter-of-factly. “I fear you’re working her too hard. Why not let her alone for the afternoon?”

Christina lowered her teacup. “You’re blaming me for her weariness? This morning a servant informed me that you spent the night with her in the boatshed.”

Arvin allowed himself to seem taken aback. He wondered which servant had seen him leave last night, and had then covered for him. Right now, it didn’t matter. Playing along was his best option.

“Miss Weatherton’s forward for her ilk, I must say,” Christina continued. “Surprisingly adaptable. But really Arvin. Did you think I’d stoop to listening at your door?”

Arvin took another sip of soup and shot Christina his best dandyish grin.

“The point is,” Christina continued. “She needs to gather her strength. It’s her magic you should be aiming for. Not her favours.”

“Maybe you could arrange for her to see her father,” Arvin said absently. “There’s nothing like a little incentive to keep the magic flowing.”
Christina lowered her teacup. “She’ll see him in due course.”

“Is he alive?”

“Do you take me for a fool, dear Arvin? Of course he’s alive. Rest assured, I’ll not do anything to risk him.” She inclined her head. “However if anything should happen to me, I’ve left strict instructions for him to be killed at once. If the girl fulfils her bargain, both she and her father will default into your hands.” She shrugged. “If you still wish to keep her, that is.”

Arvin doubted Christina would live up to that promise. He ate the remainder of his lunch in surly silence. If anyone knew where Ju’s father was, he supposed it would be his driver, Tristan. He still could not tell whose side the man was on. The thought rankled.

He put down his spoon, pushed away his unfinished soup, stood to leave.

Christina dabbed her lips with a napkin. “You may have Miss Weatherton until tomorrow morning. Do whatever it takes to keep her on side.” She arched her eyebrows suggestively. “Try not to grow bored of her too soon.”

Arvin reined in his temper, started for the door.

“Oh, Arvin,” she added. “The maid tells me that your mother has not yet stirred. Do not forget, that when Sir Mathias is dealt with, Tinder will have nothing to tie her here any more. It’s what we both want, is it not?”

With his back turned, Arvin clenched his fists against the temptation of making his fingers spark. He suspected Christina knew as well as he did that Sir Mathias was only part of what Rill feared. She must have kept it from him all these years because, until now, it had suited her to keep Tinder under lock and key.

Ju’s magic welled up inside him, stronger than anything he’d felt before. If only he knew how to wield it all at once without killing himself. He’d let Christina feel its sting. He’d let her feel all of it.

#

Alone at last in his studio, Arvin opened the cigar box that held the harvester he’d brought back from his stepfather’s workshop. He lifted it out, pressed its switch and kept his fingers wrapped firmly about its thorax. The wings, designed by Ju, were the only beautiful part of it. It was an utter crime that Sir Mathias had used them for such a dreadful purpose.

Neck prickling, Arvin wondered how close the harvester would have to be to a source of heart-magic to sense it. A pace? A mile? More? How did it know? What
dreadful man-made technology or magic or combination of both could home in on magic with the sole intention of stealing it?

He shuddered. Ideally, he’d not use it within reach of Ju or his mother; but when the need presented, he feared he’d not have a choice.

“May the Fates play out well,” he said, turning it off again. “Pray for the gold.” He put the harvester back in the box, locked it in the drawer and washed his hands as if to remove all traces of its taint before visiting Ju.

#

He knocked on Ju’s door, but she did not answer. “It’s me,” he called out softly. “My aunt will not be requiring you until tomorrow.”

Still no answer. He contemplated letting himself in, but then the handle turned from inside and the door swung open to reveal a maid he had not seen before. She curtseyed stiffly. “Forgive me Sir. But Miss Weatherton called for tea and Beth was at lunch, so I answered.”

She was a pretty woman with intelligent green eyes that seemed wasted in servitude. “And you are?” Arvin snapped.

“Solly Flood, Sir. Mrs Morthock’s new maid.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Arvin said, vaguely aware of his chief servant mentioning her earlier. “Thank you for your concern. In future, please do not leave my mother unattended. She’ll wake up confused and will require settling at once.” He paused. The maid was staring at him, her eyes defiant. He could not work out if she was afraid of him or merely sizing him up. “I trust you have experience in these things,” he added.

“Yes, indeed,” Solly said. She slipped past him and hurried along the hallway to Tinder’s room. He watched her unlock the door, her fingers deft and unflustered. She turned, curtseyed, eyes lowered; but the set of her shoulders suggested she was by no means intimidated.

He let her go. If she were a threat, Rill would deal with her in the same way she’d dealt with the other maid, Libby.

He knocked on Ju’s door again. She did not answer so he let himself in, closing the door softly behind him. He found her sitting by the window in an armchair, her face pale and drawn, her grey eyes wary. Last night she’d seemed to have regained some of her former strength – even in the carriage on the way home – but this morning she seemed thin and fragile, despite the defiant tilt of her chin.
“Have you found my father yet?” she asked, brushing a strand of pale hair back from her forehead.

Arvin shook his head. “Not for the want of trying. But I can’t push too hard. I do not want to arouse suspicions.”

She looked at him and blinked. “How do you know your aunt hasn’t killed him?”

“Give me time to find him first,” Arvin offered.

“Only four days until she sends me to the heart-chairs. I can rein my magic in a little, but I fear nowhere near as efficiently as I need to.”

“If your skin-magic is still low, then I suppose that would not help matters.”

“My skin-magic is not the problem.”

Arvin winced. “I can’t help you there, I’m afraid. If I could, I would.”

“I’m tired.” Ju closed her eyes, leaned her head back in her chair.

Arvin fought down a stab of disappointment. He’d not expected her to welcome him, and wasn’t sure why he’d wasted time seeing her. He could feel Rill, a slight blur at the back of his mind, sleeping, waiting for the right moment to impose herself on him again. He realized he should be using his freedom to get things done instead of merely talking about them.

“I’ll leave you then,” he said firmly. “Rest will do you good. I’ll stop by later, and we can dine here if you prefer.”

She looked up at him, her eyes accusing. “Your driver. He saw us leave the estate last night. He told Beth that your aunt came looking for you. So he covered for you by telling her we spent the night—”

“Yes, I know,” Arvin said. “In the boatshed.”

She looked into the fire, her face unreadable. He supposed she was angry about that, but couldn’t see it was for her own good. There seemed no point in wasting time explaining, so he let himself out, but did not lock the door.

#

Arvin felt like a truant sneaking out of his own house. It wouldn’t do to arouse suspicion, so he assumed his best bored expression and put on his walking boots and hat.

He wandered aimlessly to the kennels, and was pleased to see the curmudgeonly Fingle had been replaced with a callow youth who did not look at all the part of a dog handler. Yet there was an air of calm about him, and the dogs
appeared happier.

At the stables, he contemplated the chains immobilizing his carriage. Not that they would keep him from using it now he had Ju’s heart-magic at his disposal. But the flash would certainly spook the horses; and of course, that could be a good thing if he needed to escape in a hurry.

He made his way towards the river. Before he reached it, he heard footsteps behind. Thinking them to belong to a sentry, he ignored them. If he wants to stop me, then let him work for his living, he thought. He picked up his pace.

“Sir…Arvin…we need to talk,” the pursuer called out. It was Tristan.

Arvin stopped at the boathouse. He picked up a pebble and skimmed it over the water like Tristan and he had often done as children.

Tristan caught up to him, picked up a pebble and skimmed it. Its reach fell an inch short of Arvin’s.

“Ah, Tristan,” Arvin said wryly. “As canny as always about finding me where I’m not supposed to be. Was it you who lied for me?” He waited with his arms folded, heart-magic tingling at his fingertips.

Tristan proffered an open cigar box. “I saw you leave last night. I didn’t think you’d be back. Thought you’d need a head start.”

Arvin waved away the cigars without taking one. “Yet there’s still a traitor in our midst.”

Tristan’s eyes blazed, the same pale blue as Ju’s. His hair refused as usual to lay flat, bristling over his scalp like the pelt of an angry, ginger cat. “It was Fingle who told your aunt about the carriage being prepared,” he said testily. “He guessed you were planning to take everyone and leave. Your aunt sent him here a month ago. Fingle and the maid Libby. They were both informers. I didn’t know that then, but Fingle found his marching orders unpalatable. His tongue loosened up conveniently.”

Tristan proffered the cigars again. There was a glitter of silver amongst them. “Take it,” he said. “Fingle couldn’t see any use for it anymore.”

It was a key.

“I’m guessing you’ll still need the carriage?” Tristan ventured. “I’ve kept it ready. The horses can be hooked up at any moment.”

For all Arvin knew his aunt was testing him. He gave a noncommittal nod, pocketed the key and took a cigar. He waited for Tristan to light it for him, then took a long, appreciative puff. “Thank you. What else do you know about Fingle?”
Tristan lit a cigar for himself and sucked on it briefly. “Seen him around since. Down at The Wharfing Palace. He’s bitter about your aunt. Won’t admit it was his own fault for being dismissed.”

“His kind never does. Any chance he might be there now?”
Tristan shrugged. “If he’s not, someone’s bound to know where to find him.”
“Much obliged,” Arvin said. “Shall we meet upriver?”
Tristan tipped his hat. Arvin watched him leave.

Skimming pebbles as he walked, Arvin followed the river, until Tristan met him with the hansom a few blocks down. Not that Arvin cared if his aunt saw them meet, but he was in no mood for the inconvenience of having to conjure yet another alibi.

“How’s the young Missy?” Tristan asked when Arvin climbed up onto the driver’s ledge next to him.

“Recovered, but unless her father can be found, she’s destined for a heart-chair.” He looked askance at Tristan.

“You’re going to let that happen?” Tristan asked, looking genuinely shocked.
Arvin scoffed. “I’m afraid that the way things stand, there’s little I can do.”

“Poor girl. I do not believe Fate has planned that for her willingly.” Tristan paused. In a low voice he added, “She was in a bad way that night you brought her home. Later when your aunt turned up, I wanted to get word to you, but the woman had her eye out for me. Had to bide my time, or I would’ve been out on my ear like Fingle.”

Arvin nodded a tacit thanks. As much as he wanted to trust Tristan, he was yet to see whose side the man was on. “If you’re not with me,” he said, making his fingers spark. “My aunt won’t be the first to regret it.”

Tristan frowned. “It’s good to see you too.” He paused; and then added an emphatic, “Sir.”

#

The Wharfing Palace turned out to be an old wooden establishment, respectably painted on the outside, but in dire need of pest control on the inside where it counted most. Not merely to rid it of cockroaches and rats, Arvin thought, enduring the shifty glances of its ragged patrons. Clearly they had never visited a bathhouse or entrusted their clothes to a decent laundry.

Tristan enquired after Fingle. He learned that the man had taken a room
upstairs. Arvin flipped the innkeeper a silver coin, which the man pocketed before regarding Arvin from behind rusted-rimmed glasses. He rubbed his chin, took out a book from beneath the counter. Making a show of running his finger down the guest list, he said, “Mr Fingle left th’smorning. Didn’t say where he was heading.”

Arvin flipped him another coin. The innkeeper pocketed it, snapped the book closed. “Ask her over there,” he said pointing with his chin through the door to where a serving maid snoozed at a table for two.

“Her name is?” Tristan asked.

The innkeeper lifted his chin as if the question were beyond his understanding. “Milly Fletcher,” he said at last. “But mind you don’t startle her.”

Tristan took off his hat. He approached Milly carefully. He squatted beside her and spoke softly into her ear. Milly lowered her booted feet from the chair opposite. She rubbed her eyes on her apron, adjusted her wilted, cotton cap. “Fingle, you say?”


Milly scoffed. “Oh him.” She glanced at Arvin, tossed her head. “What’s it worth. Fingle never tipped me, you know.”

“A meal,” Tristan said. “If you’re hungry.”

“That won’t do.”

Arvin rolled his eyes. He took out a silver coin and pressed it discreetly into her hand.

“My word,” she said. “Fingle the dingle surely has upset one too many.” She leaned in close to Tristan, put a shabbily clad arm about his shoulders and whispered. Tristan thanked her and stood up. “You’re worth your weight,” he said. She grinned. “And you’re about as useful as a demon’s arse scratcher.”

#

They found Fingle exactly where Milly had said he’d be: pushing a rag and bone cart between the tenements on the east side of Border’s Bend Bridge. Fingle recognized them at once and stood for a moment dumbfounded before letting go of the cart and fleeing into an alley. Tristan caught up with him, tripped him and sent him flying. Fingle was as quick as a ferret, but not quick enough to stop Tristan from leaping on top of him and pinning him with a none-too-gentle arm lock.

“How does it feel from this end?” Tristan asked placidly.
Fingle grunted. “What ya talking about?”
“You tell me.”
Fingle kicked out with both legs, but stilled when Tristan wrenched his arm higher.
“Just doin’ me job. Like the good woman paid me to,” Fingle grumbled.
Arvin squatted beside them. “What exactly did your job entail? I’m not talking about mistreating hounds.”
Fingle screwed up his scrawny face and spat.
“It was you who locked down the carriage,” Tristan said. “Was it also you who drove the hansom the night Christina Grindle took it out to The Edge?”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Fingle insisted.
Tristan wrenched Fingle’s arm higher up his back. Fingle screamed.
“Oh but you do know,” Tristan said. “I know Edge dirt in my horse’s hooves when I see it. If you were any sort of horseman, you’d have cleaned it off. So tell me what business did you have there?”
“I don’t know.”
“This could go on till midnight,” Arvin said. “Let him go.”
Tristan looked up, his eyes questioning.
“Let him go,” Arvin demanded. “He’s not going to tell us anything through brute force alone.”
Tristan shrugged, leaned back on his haunches. Fingle drew himself to his feet, backed away.
“Tell, us,” Tristan said firmly, pulling out a pistol. He flicked the trigger lock, took aim.
“Put it away,” Arvin said. When Tristan grudgingly complied, Arvin added, “What was Christina Grindle doing at the Edge?”
“Demon’s arse, I’ll tell you.” Fingle turned and ran.
Arvin lifted his hand and sent out a spurt of heart-magic. It hit Fingle between the shoulder blades, setting alight to his coat, sending him face down onto the cobbles. Shrieking, he swivelled onto his back and quashed the flames.
“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” Arvin asked, sending him another jolt. It hit Fingle’s knees. He bucked, yelped and swatted his singed trousers. People began filtering into the alley, no doubt curious about the noise. Arvin motioned for them to keep away, hitting the cobbles in front of them with a spurt of heart magic for
Fingle whimpered. Arvin knelt beside him, put his hand on his shoulder. “Tell me what you know, and I’ll stop.” He sent him another swift jolt. Fingle yelped, jerked against the cobbles. His eyes rolled up, the whites gleaming.

Arvin shook him back to his senses.

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you,” Fingle moaned.

“Tell me what?” Arvin readied himself to send another jolt. “Let the dogs see you now,” he added. “Let them see you tied down, unable to dodge their master’s kick.”

“We went to the Edge,” Fingle stammered. “Miss Grindle in the hansom with me, and the guards in the prison cart.”

“They took everyone from the tenement block to prison?”

Fingle closed his eyes, swallowed. He looked like he was going to faint again.

Arvin slapped him about the face. “Tell me,” he shouted.

“They took them to prison and tested them.” Fingle drew in a deep breath.

“They let all but one go. None of them had heart-magic.”

Arvin raised his hand again, made his fingers spark. “What happened next?”

Fingle flinched. “She kept one man. A heavy fellow, couldn’t walk straight. Smelled blotto.”

“And then?”

“took him to the debtors’ prison.”

“Which one?”

“Hamley Court.”

“Are you certain?” Tristan asked.

Fingle nodded.

With Arvin and Tristan supporting him from either side, he allowed them to walk him calmly to the hansom. Once inside, he submitted without argument as Arvin bound him with the spare set of reins and stuffed his mouth with a leather glove before tying it into place. Arvin left him curled up on the floor, then joined Tristan on the driver’s ledge.

“The man stinks like a cesspit,” Arvin said.

Tristan eyed him with blatant disapproval. “To Hamley Court, sir?”

“You have a problem?”

“I’ve no bone about you using heart-magic. But the look on your face made
me think you were enjoying it.”

Arvin snorted. “Think what you like, Tristan, unless you prefer my aunt’s tactics.”

“Just saying, sir. I know it had to be done, but well, I suppose I’m not keen on seeing it from you.”

“This won’t be the end of it, but if you bear with me, you won’t have to watch.”

#

At Hamley Court, they were met by the head gatekeeper – an upright worker wearing an over-starched uniform and an impeccably tailored beard. He confirmed at once that John Weatherton was a prisoner. “Between you, me and the Fate flags,” he said. “Weatherton settled his debts decades before. The papers Miss Grindle showed me were tampered with.” He shrugged. “Who am I to argue with a mage who seals her words with heart-magic?”

Arvin drew him aside. “Are you open to a bargain?” he asked in a low voice. He inclined his head towards the waiting hansom. “I’ll provide you with the corpse of a man who was known to beat his wife and hounds with unrelenting cruelty. In exchange, you provide me with the decent and law-abiding Mr Weatherton. If the burial is carried out within the hour, there’ll be no repercussions from Miss Grindle. If she visits, tell her he died for the want of a bottle of gin.”

The gatekeeper looked taken aback. Before he could protest, Arvin reached into his waistcoat and drew out his wallet. “Five gold coins should more than cover costs,” he said, handing them to him.

Without so much as hesitating, the gatekeeper pocketed the money and looked to the hansom. “The other man is certified dead, I presume?”

“By my own hand.”

“Well sir, let me say it’ll be a pleasure to see an innocent man set free. Bring your horse and vehicle inside and let the exchange be done.”

Arvin motioned for Tristan to follow the gatekeeper’s directions. Then, with all the pride that is a mage’s due, he climbed into the hansom. Ignoring the pleading in the trussed-up Fingle’s eyes, he checked that the curtains were fully closed. When the hansom rolled forward, he said, “Kind Fate knows this is my aunt’s doing.” He laid a hand over Fingle’s skinny chest, not at all satisfied to feel the man tremble.

Closing his eyes, Arvin used his free hand to trace a Fate circle over Fingle’s
forehead. He sealed it with lethal burst of heart-magic.

A little later, the hansom rolled to a stop. The exchange took place at the far end of the prison yard, amid scowling disapproval from Tristan and hollow-eyed terror from John Weatherton. Once it was done, Tristan took the hansom back to Upper Slik. He dropped Arvin off by the river, beneath a street lamp, a mile from the house. The sun had already set. Arvin welcomed the cover of darkness, where his veneer of magehood would not attract unwanted attention.

He emptied his wallet and handed Tristan eight gold coins. “I want you to take Mr Weatherton out of the city,” he said. “Go to the monastery of True Fate. The monks will shelter you both for as long as you pay them. Ju, Tinder and I will accompany you as soon as we’re able.”

“Ju?” Weatherton asked, his eyes suddenly alert, his plump, pasty face showing more life than Arvin had thought possible in a man who had clearly believed his end was imminent. “This is Ju’s doing?”

Arvin gave him an amicable slap on the back. “You could say so. After a fashion.”

Weatherton grinned. “I knew she’d keep you lot on their toes. She’s a strong girl, my Ju. I knew she’d do it.”

Weatherton’s joy was a welcome respite. Arvin allowed him a smile.

“Your face is familiar,” Weatherton said. “I can’t quite place you.”

Arvin waved his hand dismissively. “We’ll talk about it later. At the monastery.”

He turned to leave. Weatherton called him back and reached a shaky hand into his inner coat pocket. He drew out a trinket. “It was her mother’s,” he said. “She’ll know what it means.”

Arvin accepted it – a marcasite broach in the shape of a daisy – a cheap, tawdry thing, but it was hers, so he dropped it carefully in his waistcoat pocket and started away.

Chapter 22

Ju paced back and forth between the hearth and her dayroom window, fists clenched, legs itching to climb out. If only she could run and keep running until the city and its
loathsome mages were far behind her. If only she had not believed that Arvin would keep his promise and find her papa. How foolish of her to have thought that he would be seriously planning to help her. A mage of all people! What could she ever be to him? A source of heart-magic? A nursemaid for his mother?

How terribly she missed Forley – poor, dear, lost Forley…

Eyes prickling, she snuffed out the candles and stared into the hearth, watching its heart-magic glimmer. Courtesy of Christina Grindle, she reminded herself. How benign it seemed. How benevolently pleasing. She spat into its centre; then lit up its edges with heart-magic – as much as she could spare without burning herself. In an instant Christina’s flame flared and swallowed Ju’s up.

She was still staring at the fire when the knock sounded. She swung around, finger-light glowing, expecting Arvin; but it was Tinder’s new maid, Solly. “We haven’t long,” she said, her voice as confidant and controlled as her finger-light. “Arvin Grindle hasn’t yet returned home, so I’ll say what needs to be said now.”

Ju waited, eyebrows raised.

“Are you happy here?” Solly asked.

Such an odd thing to say. “Happy? With my father kidnapped to ensure that I bend to Christina Grindle’s will?”

Solly furrowed her brow. “So that’s what keeps you. I wish I could send someone out to find him, but our resources are rather compromised at present. However, you must know, you’re in terrible danger if you stay.”

Ju bit back a cynical reply, but clearly the woman meant well, so she said, “I’ve been in danger all my life.”

“I can take you to safety. You can be taught how to protect yourself. How to fight.”

Ju stared at her. A Groundists agent? But the woman seemed too placid, the curves of her face too gentle and her voice much too delicate. Even so, there was strength in the set of her jaw, and a reassuring directness in the greenness of her eyes. “Who are you?” Ju asked.

“A friend.”

“Do you realise that I’m quite capable of leaving any time I choose. If Miss Grindle caught me, I could overcome her, even if I half-killed myself doing it.” She paused. “Tell me, Solly, do you have a father?”

Solly flinched visibly. “Yes, I do. He was a mage and my mother was his
servant. You can imagine where that left me.”

“Not in a heart-chair, by the looks of you.”

Solly held her gaze. “Indeed in a heart-chair. Within an inch of my life, over and over.”

The hairs on the back of Ju’s neck stood up. Her legs grew suddenly weak. She crossed the room and sat by the hearth. “But in the end your father must have freed you.”

“No,” Solly said bitterly. “My father sent me there. Groundists freed me.”

Ju shuddered. “I want to walk out this very minute. Fate help me I do! But if I desert Papa now, even Groundists can’t save him.”

“What has Miss Grindle promised you if you stay?”

Ju sighed and told Solly of Christina’s plan – of how she would allow herself to be strapped into a heart-chair to feed mages until at last Grindle arrived. Then she would give him her heart-magic, all of it, all at once. Speaking it aloud, she realized how utterly foolish it was to so much as contemplate going through with it.

“You’ll not survive,” Solly said. “If your magic is strong enough for that, she’ll never let you go.” She paused, wet her lips and added. “Your father is a good man, I take it?”

“He’s ill and broken-hearted. But yes, he’s good.”

“Then ask yourself, would he willingly condemn you to a dying moment that repeats itself day in and day out? Even if you survived, could he live with himself knowing that your magic would be ruined, and part of your soul ruined with it?” She paused, her gaze suddenly distant. “I’m told I shall not make old bones. My body will outlast my soul, and when that happens, I’ll be empty and mindless.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Your magic is rare and dangerous. We need you.”

Ju folded her arms and frowned. Everyone needed her – Christina, Arvin, Rill, the Groundists, the shifter…

“Rill needs me as well.” Ju tapped her head. “Sometimes I hear her in here. Screaming. Arvin hears her too.”

Solly swallowed. “Yes, I feared as much. We suspect the child is a shifter.”

Ju nodded, feeling only mildly reassured that Solly was not as clueless as her placidness suggested.

“A friend of mine,” Solly began. “A good friend… He cares about you. He
can get us out.”

“Who?”

“Another shifter. You’re part of his memories. I’d wager he’d be willing to
die for you.”

Ju’s heart tumbled. “Sweet, sweet Fate, you mean Forley, don’t you?” She
swallowed. How could she bring herself to look at him again, knowing that he was
not really Forley? How could she bring herself to speak to him, knowing that he
remembered everything that Forley had ever known? But the shifter, she knew, could
wield her magic. If anyone could help her, Solly was right. It was he.

Voice shaking, Ju said, “I refused Forley’s help once, and it killed him.” She
looked into the hearth where Christina’s heart-magic was already waning – fire but
not fire, enough to warm the skin, but never the heart. She looked up at Solly. “What
must I do?”

“Tonight,” Solly began. She paused. The sound of footsteps approached along
the hallway. Finger-light washed in from the gap beneath the door.

“Arvin.” Ju hissed. She could not possibly let him know what she and Solly
were planning. “I’ll tell him I called you,” she whispered. “I’ll tell him I’m unwell.”

The door opened. Ju froze. Christina Grindle, swathed in a gown of blue shot
silk, brushed past her and flounced into the room.

“Arvin,” Christina began haughtily. Her eyes narrowed. She pursed her
heavily painted lips. “If Arvin is not here, then where have you sent him?”

“I’m not Arvin’s keeper,” Ju blurted.

“No, you are not. But I’m curious. Why are you sneaking about with his
mother’s maid?” She looked down her nose at Solly. “And an insubordinate one at
that. Have you forgotten your manners?”

Solly curtseyed, but the pride in her stance was by no means subservient.

“I’ll not tolerate disobedience in any form.” Christina glared at Ju. “Have you
forgotten our bargain? Do you not care for your father’s wellbeing?”

Ju clenched her fists. “How do I know he’s safe? I’ve only your word, and no
reason to trust it.”

Christina huffed. “Do not answer me back, girl.” She lunged, caught hold of
Solly’s wrist and sent out a flash of heart-magic.

Solly yelped. She struggled to pull away; but Christina held on. “Be still or
I’ll send you another one.” She looked to Ju. “So much as think about hurting me,
and I’ll burn every inch of her.”

The air reeked of burned flesh.

“Fight her,” Solly said to Ju. “She can’t match you.”

Christina sent out another jolt, lighting up Solly’s arm in bright rings of red. Solly juddered and sank to her knees. Her sleeve smoked, caught alight.

Holding Ju’s gaze, Christina calmly took up an embroidered cushion and used it to swat the flames. Screaming, Solly shimmied away.

“So do you want to see her burnt up like Cyril Claver?” Christina sneered. She grabbed Solly’s shoulder. “Unlike you, I have self-control. I can do it limb by limb.” Her hand sparked.

Solly twitched and jerked. Her face screwed up with pain. “Fight her,” she mouthed.

At that moment, Christina had her back to the door. Clearly, she did not see Arvin step inside behind her, holding up the cigar box from Grindle’s workshop. Blue eyes impassive, face tense with concentration, he eased the harvester out and unfolded its wings with all the stealth of a guard unsheathing a sword.

“Will you have me burn her again?” Christina snarled.

“Please, don’t,” Ju stammered. “I’ll… I’ll do as you say.”

A lock of hair fell over Arvin’s glasses. Ignoring it, he inched forward. Ju shuddered, knowing at once what he intended to do. It was an evil thing, but what Christina planned was more so.

Christina’s lip curled. “Fear me you should,” she said. “If the maid dies, your father will follow.”

Silently, Arvin took the harvester into one hand and pressed its switch with the other. Its wings whirred. Christina swung around, too late as Arvin rammed it against her throat.

With a sharp cry, Christina staggered backwards. She fell onto her rump. The harvester gripped the sides of her neck with all six claws. Its mouth snapped hard against her throat.

“Get it off me,” Christina screamed. She scrabbled at it, heart-magic streaming out from her fingers making the skin about her throat sizzle, pop, blister.

“It’s what you deserve,” Arvin said calmly. “It’s what you would have done to her.”

Christina slumped, fell backwards. The harvester settled into a steady feeding
rhythm, its body rocking like a suckling infant, its thorax swelling, glowing dimly with heart-magic.

“Her soul is much more bearable in the open,” Arvin said. “It’s what we should have done in the first place, isn’t it Rill?”

Ju stood frozen between horror and disbelief as Christina’s body bucked and heaved. A tentacle of grey smoke rose out from the centre of her chest. Impossibly, it expanded and coalesced into a vague human shape. The room filled with the stench of rotting flesh.

“Demon!” Solly shrieked, struggling to her feet. Her burnt arm dangled awkwardly.

Arvin made a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. He aimed his fingers at Christina and hit her with a bolt of heart-magic. Her body shuddered. Her chest glowed hotly. There were no flames.

The smoke yowled, a raw animal sound that reverberated about the room.

“Stand next to me, Ju,” Solly hissed. ‘Now!’ She reached under her bodice with her uninjured hand, brought out a locket and held it up.

The smoke hovered, wraithlike above Christina’s twitching body. Its outlines hardened into a semblance of flesh and blood. Its face was like Arvin’s face, only older with black, fathomless eyes that radiated pure insanity.

Ju backed away, gagging on the stench of rot. The window! She’d left it open.

“You!” the mist shrieked, pointing to Solly. “You think your piece of bone can help you this time! But where is your shifter now? Why isn’t he helping you?”

Solly held up the locket. The demon lunged. It wound about Solly’s arms, its rotting hands stretching into tendrils. Solly screamed, dropped the locket. She crumpled at the demon’s feet. Without thinking, Ju kicked out at it, but its flesh passed through her foot, as insubstantial as mist. Wisps of it writhed about her skin, filling her with pure agony.

Then suddenly it seemed a beautiful thing – all the love in the world crammed inside her, for her and her alone. All she need do was cherish it, let it guide her. The world…

Voices echoed in her head.

…the world and all its injustices would be ours for the taking. Ours to mould and consume and take and take and…
Something inside her howled – Rill sending her waves of terror like pure fire.

*Ignore it,* the demon whispered.

*Ignore it, ignore it, ignore it,* Rill countered.

“Leave me alone,” Ju screamed. “All of you.”

Rill withdrew.

The demon froze.

Christina lay motionless on the carpet, her chest blackened about a gaping hole where the demon had risen out of it. The harvester remained at her throat, its abdomen pulsing grotesquely as it fed.

Rill whispered in Ju’s head. *Arvin was right. Christina deserved it. She would have done the same to her, to Solly…*

Ju tore herself from the demon’s thrall. “Solly!” she gasped.

Solly was still curled up at the demon’s feet, blood oozing from her arms where the demon had taken hold of her. Arvin was slumped on the floor beside her.

Demon tendrils tightened about Ju’s chest, piercing her flesh, flowing through her veins, a cruel, unbearable ecstasy expanding. *Such power,* it said. *Unbeatable, irresistible, ours…*

Ju flinched, pushed the words aside. Power? It was always about power.

Rill howled again, sending waves of pain stabbing through Ju’s skull.

“Leave me alone,” Ju shouted. “All of you, just leave me alone.”

Her anger exploded in a cascade of heart-magic, blinding her, filling her with agony so profound that she feared her bones would crumble. The demon screeched, wrenched itself away from her. For a moment its body seemed all flesh and no mist, its skin blistering, blackening, receding. Beneath it, where muscles and bones should have been, a multitude of eyes stared back at her – dark, fathomless eyes that jittered and folded in on themselves like empty husks, shrivelling.

The eyes opened again, blinked. Then, like so many darkened clouds, the demon’s face reformed over them, no longer anything resembling Arvin’s face, but a cruel, twisted animal thing, its muzzle snapping, teeth glistening, its breath reeking of death.

Ju sent out new bolt of heart-magic. She screamed as the skin about her fingers sizzled and smoked. The demon froze, wreathed white in a halo of heart-magic. For a moment it hovered unmoving. Then it sank to the floor. Its flesh became bones, which in turn became clouds of eddying dust.
Ju dared to believe she’d destroyed it; but then the dust reformed into mist again, its tendrils questing, searching…

Arvin stirred. He scurried about the floor for his glasses, found them, put them on. He pulled himself upright and faced the demon, his face screwing up, puzzled.

“My son,” the demon said. Its human shape was dissipating, sparkling with remnants of Ju’s heart-magic. Yet its voice seemed as controlled and cultured as any mage’s. “Join with us.”

Yelping, Arvin shimmied away from it, swiping at it with his hands. “You’re not my father,” he shouted. “I will not—” He sent out a bolt of heart magic.

The mist shuddered, dissipated, reformed. “Your magic is hers, but in your hands it’s weak. As it will always be.”

Ju gritted her teeth. She forced her fingers to spark, flare, burn. A bolt of magic shot out, hit the demon, but this time it barely seemed to notice. The demon shot up, hovered in front of her. “Destroy me and you’ll destroy him too.” It dived towards Arvin.

Ju followed it with her hand, heart-magic shooting from her fingers, flaring at the edges of the demon’s misty outlines. Her skin sizzled, burned. She could barely hear herself screaming beneath the demon’s high-pitched yowl. But its mist did not fade nor falter. Instead, it contracted into a fist-sized ball, veering away from her, burying itself into the centre of Arvin’s chest.

Arvin reeled backwards. His head made a sickening thump against the floor. His glasses skidded along the carpet.

The room fell silent. Arvin drew in a deep, shuddering breath. He sat up again, looked to Ju, bewildered.

Staring, Ju backed away.

“It’s in me,” he said. His eyes looked crazed, but his voice grew level and calm. He flinched, drew in a deep breath. “It wants me to… it wants…” He let out an agonized scream and slumped. “I won’t do its bidding. I won’t succumb like my aunt—” He screamed again, screwed up his eyes.

Ju stared at him, her hands raised to strike, but clueless as to how to help him without killing him first.

“Go,” Arvin said. “Rill’s waking. Take Tinder to the carriage. I… I can beat this thing. But if it takes your magic first, I cannot. Leave… please, leave.”
“Tell me what I can do,” Ju demanded.

Arvin shuddered. “Go,” he said tonelessly. “Please, for Fate’s sake, go."

A hand suddenly took hold of her elbow from behind. Startled, Ju swung around, expecting Solly, but instead found Tinder dressed in a flowing, sapphire gown, her hair hanging damp and wild about her shoulders. “Come,” Tinder said, pulling Ju away. “Come, come, come.”

“Do as she says” Arvin pleaded. “Rill will tell me where to find you. But only when it’s safe.”

“How can it ever be safe with a demon inside you?”

Arvin gave a harsh laugh. “It’s barely a demon. Not since you burned it. It’s using me as a shield, but it can’t wield me.” He paused, winced. “It can sense you, Ju. It wants me to take your magic so it can be whole again. Go while I have the strength to defy it.”

“Come,” Tinder said, tugging Ju’s elbow.

“What will you do?” Ju asked Arvin.

Arvin clamped his jaw tight.

At that moment, the harvester at Christina’s neck pulled free and fluttered upwards. Arvin lunged for it, caught hold of its thorax but it wriggled free and dove through the partly-opened window. Arvin swore, banged his hand on the windowsill in a show of temper. He spun around to face Ju.

“Go,” he said. He reached into his pocket and drew out a key and trinket. Throwing them at Ju’s feet, he said, “Take them. He’s on his way to safety. I told him you would meet him there.”

Ju, stared at him, confused.

“Look at it.” Arvin demanded.

Ju looked. Her heart leapt. The trinket was tiny, a dull thing like the daisy—

It was her mother’s!

“Papa?” You found him?” She stooped, tried to pick it up. Her blistered hands slid painfully over it.

Arvin winced, scooped up both the daisy and key. He handed them to Tinder. He did not wait for a reply, but threw the window open fully and climbed out.

Ju shrugged out of Tinder’s grip, lurched to the window. “Wait,” she called out. But he was already halfway down the wall, half obscured in darkness. Then Solly was standing beside her, arms bleeding, her right eye swollen half closed, the side of
her face puffy and bruised. She put her least injured arm about Ju’s waist. “Come on,” she said, pulling her towards the door. “Let’s find your Papa.”

Ju blinked. Everything seemed out of focus. She let Solly lead her down the stairs. Then Tinder was with them, tugging Ju from the other side, hurrying her along. Outside, the grounds were silent, deserted.

“This way,” Solly urged, pulling her away from the mansion. They ran towards the kennels where a dog handler – a boy – stood gaping in lamplight as they approached. The dogs looked ready to spring, but the boy stayed them with a twist of his hand.

“Solly, your face!” he snapped. His eyes grew hard as surprise erupted into outrage. “Your arm! Who did this?” He looked as if he would throw himself in her arms, but Solly backed away from him. “Who?” he demanded.

“A demon,” Solly said, matter of factly. “It was in Christina Grindle. Ju weakened it with her magic, but now it’s in Arvin. He says he can fight it, but who knows for how long.”

The boy looked impressed; then frowned. “Someone’s taken the hansom. The carriage is chained to the floor. We need a key or—” He paused, looked Ju up and down, his gaze halting at her blistered hands. “Oh,” he said, clearly taken aback. “I suppose heart-magic is out of the question. Fortunately locks can be picked.”

“Tinder has the key,” Ju said.

The boy stared at her. There was something familiar about him. He looked pale enough to be an Edger; and just as skinny from the way his coat hung on him like a horse blanket.

“I don’t think it’s wise to use the carriage,” Solly interrupted. “If Arvin’s demon takes over him, he’ll follow that first.”

The boy grinned. “It doesn’t matter, I have a better way.” He cast his gaze about the grounds. The dogs were quiet in their kennels, and the guards out of sight. “Follow me,” he hissed.

He took them to the stables and lit an oil lamp, making sure there was no one inside before leading them in. “Hurry,” he said. He led them past piles of hay and the surprised gaze of a brindled mare. At the stable’s far end, he pushed open a crooked door and ushered the women inside. Tinder lit up her fingers to reveal a cramped windowless room. It was a hovel even by Edge standards – smelling of stale tobacco smoke – and with a ragged mattress and filthy blankets. It looked like a trap.
Ju hesitated at the door. “Who are you?” she asked.

The boy shot her an annoyed look. Again, Ju saw something oddly familiar about him. Not so much in the sharp curves of his face, but his eyes…

She’d not seen anyone with such pale eyes before. Yet the way he looked at her—

“He’s with me,” Solly said. Despite her battering, she spoke firmly and held herself confidently, in control. “We can trust him.”

The boy shushed them. “Less prattle or someone’ll hear you.”

Prattle? That’s what a Cornican would say. But this runt of a boy, was too pale to be Cornican. “Who are you?” Ju asked again.

The boy gave a twisted smile. “Ruk’s the name.” Then in a low voice, he added, “We can leave by the river later. For now you must keep out of sight.” He gestured into the hovel. “No one will expect to find you here. Not even a demon.”

Ju didn’t like the idea, but he was right. If they were to escape, it would need to be later.

Ruk hung the oil lamp from a hook at the centre of the hovel’s ceiling and turned the flame down low. “I’m going to sort out the dogs. They’ll protect us when we leave. I’ll be back soon. Then we’ll wait it out together until I work out what the guards are up to. We’ll make a dash for the river as soon as we can.” He closed the door.

The hovel fell into semi-darkness, lit up only by the wan glow of the lantern.

Ju cast her gaze from Solly to Tinder and back to Solly again. She looked at her hands. In the dimness, her fingers were swollen, like fistfuls of jelly. “I don’t suppose either of you could show me how to heal myself?” she asked.

“I’m sorry.” Solly shook her head and winced. “If I could I would have healed myself before we got here.”

Tinder was staring blankly ahead, rocking from foot to foot. “The demon,” she said brokenly. “It was Eln. Arvin’s father. Or part of it was.” She stroked her belly as if to quieten Rill. “It’s what we feared all along. That Eln would come back. Now he has.” She looked to Ju, her eyes haunted. “He…it…they…will find us.”

She lowered herself awkwardly onto the mattress. She began to weep, first softly, and then in wracking, silent gasps. “Arvin,” she whispered. “Rill allowed Eln to take Arvin. Why? Why? Why?”

Ju lowered herself beside her. “Perhaps Rill had no choice. Perhaps she knew
that Arvin could keep the demon away from us.” But even as Ju said it, she knew it wasn’t true. She could still feel Rill’s fear. It was curled up tightly now, a knot of pain. Grief, she realized. Rill had not meant to let the demon take anyone. She’d been powerless to stop it.

Rill’s grief howled in agreement, echoing faintly as if from a distance. Ju stared into the gloom ahead. In the past few weeks, two men had tried to help her. Now one was dead, and the other as good as lost.

Tinder lifted her head. Her hair hung about her shoulders, knotted and wild, at odds with the luxury of her gown. Snot and tears ran down her face. “Arvin would not have sent you to the heart-chairs. Not for Christina Grindle. Not for anyone.”

The air was turning colder. Solly lowered herself onto the mattress next to Ju. She draped a blanket over Tinder’s shoulders; then took another one and draped it over her own and Ju’s. Solly’s swollen eye was completely closed. Specks of blood clung to her lashes. “It’s as bleak as a prison in here,” she said. “If anyone but Ruk had sent me, I would have refused to stay.

Tinder looked to Solly, her eyes damp and glistening. “You’ll not end your days in prison,” she said flatly. “I promise you.”

Solly winced. A bead of blood welled up from the corner of her swollen eye. “How do you know?”

“Rill’s seen your death, but she’ll not show it to me.”

Solly shivered. “It is best she does not.” Staring ahead, she huddled into the blankets.

Chapter 23

Ju could not tell if she’d dozed or not. When she opened her eyes, the air in the hovel had grown colder. Moonlight shone through gaps in the outer wattle and daub wall. Wind gusted about the eaves. The roof shook.

Ju could barely feel her hands. They were a weeping mess, stuck to the blanket.


Ju heard it too – the click-click of dog claws passing through the stables. She could not hear footsteps, but imagined their handler walking beside them.
The door swung open with a creak. Ruk came in, carrying a large carpetbag. Two broad-muzzled hounds followed and sat in a corner at his command.

“The household’s in shock,” Ruk said, grinning. He dropped the carpetbag and closed the door behind him. “No one has courage enough to go upstairs because they believe Christina Grindle has been turned to stone and Tinder’s still with her. The guards saw Arvin leave through the window. They’d heard the demon, so they let him go. Now they’re leaving. The cook’s packed her bags. The others are packing theirs too.” He opened the carpetbag, brought out a small bundle. He unwrapped it to reveal an assortment of pies and sweet pastries. “Even better news is, the kitchen’s deserted. Eat what you can.” He pulled out a flagon of water. “Can’t say where our next meal will come from.”

Solly glanced at the food and grimaced. Ju contemplated her blistered and oozing hands.

“Demon’s freaking arse,” Ruk said. “I forgot about that.” He reached a skinny hand beneath his shirt and took out a locket. “This thing’s turning me into an imbecile. I’ve had enough.” He jerked it away from his neck, breaking the chain.

“No, you shouldn’t,” Solly said, horrified. “What if the demon returns with others?”

“There’s only one demon,” Ruk said. “Grown from the souls of a hundred shifters turned insane.”

“What do you mean?” Ju asked.

Ruk eyed her as if she were stupid. “When shifters go mad, they’re compelled to seek each other out and become a single thing – a fusion of demons – combining what usable power they have left. Their aim is to grow larger and larger until all shifters, all humans – everything that has ever lived – becomes one.”

“You’re saying every demon that exists today is currently in Arvin?”

“Only the ones that have joined them,” Ruk said. “If there are any left that are still alone – sleeping perhaps or simply lost inside humans – I cannot say. Let’s hope that if there are, they do not choose now to show themselves.”

“Arvin’s demon will return,” Tinder interrupted. “But Ruk most certainly should not wear the bone. Can you not see what it does to him? He still shrinks, little by little every hour. In the months to come, he’ll be too small to exist. He’ll turn to stone. Like Rill. Trapped. That’s how the magic protects him from demons. In the same way it protects Rill. It’s stone-making magic.”
“If that’s so,” Ruk said, frowning. “Damned if I’ll let myself become as helpless as she is.” He tossed the locket into the corner with the dogs.

“You can’t,” Solly said, horrified. “How will you protect yourself without it?”

Ju frowned. What was this talk of shrinking? Why were they listening to Tinder? “Solly has a point,” she said. “If the bone protects you, then maybe you should keep it.”

Ruk sighed. “We’re working together, aren’t we? Solly’s helping me. Ju’s helping Tinder. I’m helping you.” He looked to Ju. “How much heart-magic can you spare? I can wield it almost as well as you might yourself if you were trained. I can heal you both before we leave.”

“You?” Ju asked. “How can you wield my magic?”

“Ju,” Solly said softly. “Last time he used it, he destroyed a powerhouse.”

For a moment Ju did not understand what Solly was talking about. How could he have? Unless…unless…

Sweet Fates alive! She looked at him again. The pale eyes, blonde hair, slight frame. He looked like no one she’d met before. But the way he spoke. The way he used the word, “prattle.” That was Cornican talk…

“You’re the shifter,” she said. Now it made sense. When he’d taken her magic in the alley, he’d warned her to stay away from the powerhouse. That must have been why. He’d used her magic to destroy it.

She searched his face, heart pounding, relieved he no longer looked like Forley. Yet at the same time, she wished he did. He stared back at her, his eyes ice pale.

“I never meant to hurt you.” His voice was ridiculously boyish, but his words carried the weight of a man much older. “I promise, I won’t hurt you now.”

“Why are you no longer Forley?” A stupid question, Ju knew, but the words were out before she could stop herself.

“The locket. It turned me into a shrunken shadow of him. Your magic will turn me back, I’m afraid. If it grieves you to see me like that, I apologise. Right now, I can’t become anyone else, because the very act of shifting will alert Arvin’s demon as to our whereabouts.”

Ju looked to Solly. Solly looked away. She used her good hand to pull at a stalk of hay poking out from the mattress. In the dim glow of lamplight her swollen eye looked as livid as a split plum.
Ju looked back to Ruk. He was staring at her, his eyes pale yet at the same time hard, judging her no doubt.

“You’ll heal both Solly and I?” Ju asked.

“Of course.”

“Very well. When you take my magic, you will not push me against the wall like you did the last time.”

He gave an impish, boyish smile that looked nothing at all like Forley’s. “Not unless you try to flee,” he said wryly. He squatted beside her. “However, there’s one thing I ask in return.”

Ju’s heart sank. Of course. Nothing came without a price. “And that is?”

“Without the locket, I’ll be vulnerable. If the demon should find us, I refuse to succumb to insanity.”

Ju nodded hesitantly, afraid he would ask the impossible. “What do you want me to do?”

“Protect me. If the demon should try to take me, burn it like you burned it for Arvin.”

Ju let out a sigh of relief. This, she would have done for anyone. “Of course.” She looked down at her hands. Some of the blisters had burst. A flap of shrivelled skin hung from her knuckles.

Ruk knelt in front of her. He put his skinny hands on her shoulders and ran them down to her elbows. “I’ll take as much magic as I dare,” he told her. “Enough to reverse the effects of the bone, enough to heal both you and Solly. On top of that, I’ll take more than enough to fight with.”

Ju’s arms grew cold beneath his hands. Soon they ached, became icy. Heart-magic shifted inside her, not burning as it had the first time, but trickling in warm trails along her bones, growing cold as it reached her skin.

A deep peacefulness took hold of her. In the wan glow of the oil lamp, the hovel seemed warm, its rough walls comforting, protecting. She wished she could curl up on the mattress and sleep until it was done. Instead she kept her gaze on Ruk’s face, while he kept his on hers.

His eyes began to darken. Then his hair too, lengthening and thickening from wispy blond into Forley’s ropey strands. His arms began to bend at the elbows – growing she realised. He let go of her to loosen his belt. When he took hold of her again, she needed to look up to meet his gaze.
How easy it would be to fool herself into believing he was Forley. How easy it would be to despise him for it. But did it matter if a diamond was not really a diamond if it sparkled? Or that gold was not really gold if it did not tarnish?

“How much of Forley is in you?” she asked. He was about answer, when she shook her head. “No, don’t tell me. It’s best I don’t know.”

She looked away. She should not forget that Forley was gone. The shifter was nothing more than a memory of him – an echo brought to life at the moment of his death.

Her throat ached. She tried to swallow against it, but the ache expanded into a lump. It was as if she were suddenly trapped, suffocating in her own grief.

“Think about your hands,” Ruk said, moving his fingers gently down her forearms. His voice was deeper already, Forley’s voice without the Cornican accent. “I need to hold them. To heal them. Tell me if it hurts.”

Ju gritted her teeth, nodded. Ruk sent her a brief surge of well-wishing. Her grief faded. She felt peaceful again, weary. Her hands began to tingle. Warm light haloed about them, like the healing light the mage had used on the woman in the carriage accident. “You heal differently from Arvin,” she said. “He did not use light.”

Ruk rolled his eyes. “Arvin! What does he know about healing? Hasn’t got an ounce of heart-magic to save himself. Half-shifter, I’d wager. He probably doesn’t know.”

“Oh, he knows,” Ju assured him.

Ruk blinked. “What’s he taught you of magic? I’m guessing from your burns, he didn’t tell you that if you want to use heart-magic to fight, you must learn the art of healing first. You cannot protect yourself from your own magic. You can only heal yourself the instant it burns you. If you learn to do it quickly enough, you’ll not feel it.”

“It’s that easy?” Ju ask incredulously.

Ruk gave a cynical chuckle. “For me, yes. For you, it takes years of practice. A lifetime perhaps. Mages learn in the womb, long before birth. It’s an inherited skill, as much as a given one.”

“There,” he said, pulling away from her. “It’s done.”

Ju looked down at her hands, still wreathed in Ruk’s healing light. The blisters had already faded. Her new skin looked pink and smooth as if stitched into place like patchwork.
“Rest, while I see to Solly,” Ruk said. “Afterwards we’ll eat. Then we’ll go.”

He stood, fully Forley again. His coat no longer hung like a blanket. The clothes beneath looked tight enough to burst. Feeling suddenly abandoned, Ju fought the urge to reach up to him, draw him down to her and put her arms about his neck.

She looked away, huddled into the blanket and listened to the wind, gusting about the eaves.

Tinder shifted on the mattress beside her. “Ju is not like the Mages,” she said flatly. “Rill is not like other shifters. The two will learn to use their heart-magic together. When it’s time. They’ll learn.” Her face seemed serene, her hair a little less wild, her eyes almost sane.

Ju did not know what to say. Ruk stared, mouth open.

“And Arvin,” Tinder continued. “It’s not his fault he does not have magic, any more than it’s Ju’s fault that she does. He’s a child of my womb. I knew from the moment he quickened he would not be a mage. I taught him as much as I could. I showed him how to take my magic. How to not hurt others in the taking.”

She stroked her belly and gazed ahead, her forehead wrinkling, eyes glistening. “Rill sees battle. She cannot see how it will end. It all depends on so much and so little.” She sniffed, wiped her eyes. “She’s only a baby. For eighteen years, she’s lived as a baby. She sees too much…too much through Arvin’s eyes, too much through my eyes. She hears the demon. It terrifies her. What will happen to her? What will happen to us?”

Tinder hunched into the corner. Opposite, the dogs sat obediently sniffing the air, waiting.

“I feel her too,” Ruk said, wincing. His eyes widened.

Startled, Ju could see no reason for him to be suddenly frightened. The dogs lay dozing, their heads resting on their paws. Outside, the wind had eased and the air grew quiet.

Ruk winced again. He stared at Tinder, wrinkled his brow. “It’s Rill! I feel her,” he said. He tapped the side of his head. “I feel her in here. She’s the Fear. It’s she who called me into the city, led me to Forley. Rill! She brought me here. Why?”

Tinder shook her head slowly. “She called all shifters, but only you heard. Then you stopped listening.”

“That’s not true.” Ruk winced again. His face looked as fierce as Forley’s used to look whenever he set eyes on Grindle. “I answered as best I could, but she
didn’t hear me. Besides, I’m here, aren’t I? I could have slept for decades more, but Rill wouldn’t let me.” His eyes grew harder. “Enough of this. Tell Rill to leave me be. Her Fear torments me. I cannot think.”

“I’ll try,” Tinder said. “But she doesn’t listen to me either.”

“Tell her to stop or Solly and I will walk away now.”

Tinder stroked her belly, rocked herself back and forth. She began to hum, a simple lilting melody.

“That’s better,” Ruk said, his face relaxing. “I’m helping her. She doesn’t need to shout.” He looked to Solly, nodded.

He turned down the oil lamp. The room fell into semi-darkness. Ju took the blanket she’d used to support her hands and wedged it between her back and the wall. She leaned into it, closed her eyes and let the weariness from Ruk’s healing wash over her. She almost dozed, but opened her eyes when one of the dogs whined.

She looked over to Forley – Ruk – and saw him holding Solly, not by the hands as he had held her, but with the two of them kneeling front to front, his arms wrapped about her and his forehead pressed against her hers. He moved his face slightly to the side and began to kiss Solly’s ruined eye, gently tracing the line of her lashes. Healing light arced between his lips and her skin.

Ju squeezed her eyes shut. Although her mind knew all too well that Ruk wore Forley’s face and drew on his memories, her heart still clenched painfully, knowing it wasn’t Forley.

“Let them be,” Tinder whispered close to Ju’s ear. “The girl’s dying. Not from her wounds, but from something much deeper and impossible to stop. Ruk can save her for the time being. No amount of healing will save her later.”

“What do you mean?” Ju asked, shivering.

Tinder rocked herself back and forth. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the daisy locket Arvin had given her earlier. “This is yours,” she said. “Take it.” She dropped it into Ju’s outstretched hand.

Softly, Tinder began to hum again – a lullaby that Ju’s mother used to sing. Ju closed her eyes, but could not picture her mother’s face, only Rosie’s as it had been in the powerhouse, eyes blank, staring ahead, soulless.

She shivered, suddenly chilled except for her hand, which still glowed warmly with Ruk’s magic. Healing takes years of practice, he’d said. Mages learned in the womb, long before birth – an inherited skill, as much as a given one…
She clenched her fists. She did not have years. She needed to protect herself now, before she found herself in a heart-chair. Before she burned herself up. She tried to think what else she’d felt when Ruk had healed her – what had made his magic different from the simple act of well-wishing. When he’d healed her, she’d been too busy reminding herself he wasn’t Forley – too busy caught up with her grief.

There’ll be time for grieving later, she told herself crossly. Carefully she put her mother’s marcasite daisy about her neck and tucked it beneath her bodice. She closed her eyes, tried to doze.

A long time later, the room brightened with finger-light. Solly stood up, fully healed, her usual brisk self again. Ruk took some clothes from the carpetbag, moved into a shadowed corner and changed into a fashionable shirt, jacket and trousers. Arvin’s clothes.

Which meant, Ju realized with a pang of irritation, Ruk must have known he would need them. He must have planned to take her magic and restore himself all along.

Ruk shrugged into his old coat and reached for the bag again. There was an odd movement at his jacket pocket. “What’s that?” Ju asked. Whatever it was, it seemed alive, yet not really there.

“What?” Ruk asked.

“Your pocket? There’s something strange.”

Ruk frowned for a moment, then grinned. “You mean the ward-die? What do you see?”

Ju tried to focus on it. It disappeared when she looked directly at it. When she looked away, she caught a glimpse of cogs, gears and wheels turning around it with clockwork precision. She could almost hear them, grinding inside her head. “Not so much see,” she said. “More like… feel. Like machinery.”

Ruk pulled it out of his pocket. It was indeed a die as he’d said. But it was haloed in a shimmer of clockwork. “That’s exactly what it is. A magnetic field. Most people can’t see it.”

“Can I hold it?” Ju asked.

Ruk shrugged. He tossed it to her. She caught it and almost dropped it. When she closed her fingers about it, she felt the cogs turning beneath her skin. At her fingertips, her skin-magic turned to match them.

“Play with it,” Ruk said. “Maybe if you learn its patterns, you might learn
something about magic while you’re doing it.”

Turning away, Ruk pulled three more coats out of the bag. He tossed one each to Ju, Tinder and Solly. Ju recognised hers as the one Arvin had worn when he’d presented himself at her tenement, inviting her to work for him. It still smelled of him, that clean, wealthy smell that she’d always been wary of, but now found disturbingly comforting.

Solly unwrapped the food: pies and sweet pastries. She passed them around, put the flagon of water on the floor.

“Where do we go from here?” Ruk asked.

“The monastery,” Tinder said adamantly. “It’s where Arvin and Rill planned to take us. It’s where Arvin has sent Ju’s Papa.”

“Then perhaps we should go somewhere else,” Solly suggested. “It’ll be the first place the demon will look for us.”

Tinder sniffed. “It’ll find us before then. When it’s over, we’ll go to the monastery.”

The room fell silent. As much as Ju wanted to see Papa again, she knew Solly was right. If they met up with him too soon, they’d risk taking the demon with them.

“My friend, George Clapton, is expecting us,” Solly said. She looked to Ruk. “It’s what we planned. Henry will have left a message for us at the horology shop. It will outline the safest routes to take, where best to stay, and where not to stay.” She paused, frowned. “If he hasn’t been caught, that is.”

“If Arvin’s demon pursues us, it won’t think to look there,” Ruk conceded.

“What if Mr Clapton’s gone?” Ju asked.

Solly and Ruk exchanged glances. “Then we rest,” Solly said. “Then we’ll leave at nightfall. There are ways out of the city best taken under the cover of darkness.”

“We’ve probably got six to seven hours till daybreak,” Ruk said. “We’d best be at Clapton’s by then.”

They ate what they could. When they were done, Ruk gave what was left to the dogs.

Ju helped Tinder to her feet while both Solly and Ruk kept their distance.

“Rill won’t hurt you,” Tinder said. “Not you.”

Outside, the grounds were deserted. Ruk led the way, taking them towards the river, keeping to the shadows. “I’m going to leave the dogs behind,” Ruk said. “They
belong here.”

Ju could hear snuffling and panting beyond the shadows. Her neck pricked. Behind her, the house stood in darkness, alone, unguarded. She picked up her pace, grateful to be rid of it.

They found wooden rowboats stacked in the boat shed as Ruk had promised. With Ju and Solly’s help, Ruk lifted out two and dragged them to the shoreline. Tinder climbed into the first and sat on the narrow planked seat in its stern. “Ju travels with me,” she said firmly.

Shrugging, Ju looked to Solly.

“We’ll keep the boats together, then,” Ruk said. “I’ll follow you.”

Ju helped Ruk push the boat into the water. She leapt in at the last moment and for a few frantic seconds the boat rocked out of control. Tinder yelped, tried to stand up. “Keep still,” Ju hissed. “I doubt I can swim to save myself, let alone you as well.”

Tinder stilled. She began sing the same low lullaby she’d sang in Ruk’s hovel. Softly, she rocked herself back and forth, rubbed her belly.

Grateful to be leaving at last, Ju rowed to the river’s centre, where the boats would less likely be seen. At first, the oars took in water with each stroke, but she soon worked out the exact angle to hold them to prevent it; but not before her boots were sodden. The city on either side seemed a world away, its silence broken only by the rhythmic dipping of oars, the staccato call of curlews and the grinding of horse carts and steam carriages rattling over the cobbles beyond. Above them, stars appeared and disappeared behind clouds scudding eerily in moonlight.

The tide was low: still coming in. Ju laboured against it, afraid she was barely making headway. Gradually, the pointed roofs and grey-walled mansions of Upper and Lower Slik gave way to the flat, mishmash of commercial buildings, then towering factory walls. Night-dark waters stretched out like an endless ribbon of oil. Cold nibbled at Ju’s ears, clouding her breath in front of her.

A distant clock struck two. A passing barge churned the waters, rocking the boat in its wake. Ju let go of the oars, massaged the small of her back. “Give me your hand,” Ruk said, pulling his boat alongside hers. “Take some strength.”

Ju reached out tentatively. Their fingers touched. He sent her a deep surge of well-wishing. At once, her muscles felt better. He’s not Forley, she reminded herself. But his magic soothed her nevertheless.
They rowed for an hour, rested a while, rowed for another. The jagged lines of factory roofs glistened palely in the pink tinge of sunrise. The tide had already turned, carrying the boats seaward. The air remained still, punctuated by the churning of barges and the clangour of steamboats arriving from upriver.

Ju let go of her oars and stretched her aching muscles.

“We should go in there,” Solly said, as Ruk pulled his boat in line with Ju’s. She pointed to a row of rickety wharves where farmers’ boats were arriving to unload, their engines straining, sending out clouds of smoke. “It’s only a few blocks to George’s.”

“My gut feeling is to keep going,” Ruk said. “We’ve got power enough to look out for ourselves.” He paused, grimaced. “Forley, unfortunately, would choose to stay.”

“We should do both,” Tinder moaned. “We should go. We should stay. Rill cannot see which.”

Tinder struggled to stand up. The boat rocked, almost tipped.

Ju twisted around, brushed Tinder’s knee and sent her a surge of well-wishing. Tinder stared back at Ju, eyes wide, her face suddenly looked too much like Arvin’s, shaded in darkness and full of horror. She looked up, scanned the sky. “They’re coming. They’re coming for us… they’re coming for us, now.”

“Fates alive,” Ruk said, ramming his hands over his ears. “Silence that child before its fear sends me as insane as she is.”

Ju felt it too, a distant terror, nigglng behind her eyes.

Tinder moaned, her voice low and terrified. “It’s coming, it’s coming…”

The air began jitter and buzz. Ju looked up, but saw only clouds growing deep pink with sunrise.

“Over there,” Solly said, urgently, pointing upriver. “Look.”

Ju swung around. A pale, grey cloud moved swiftly towards them, following the line of river like a swarm of low-flying birds. “Harvesters,” she said, her voice rising.

She picked up her oars, began to row towards the wharf. Ruk rowed frantically beside her.

“They’re here, they’re here, they’re here, they’re here…” Tinder cried, rocking herself back and forth, stroking her belly.

Rill’s fear calmed a little, decreasing to an agitated hum.
Up ahead, the farmers must have sensed the danger as well. They disappeared into their boats, taking cover inside. By the time Ju reached the wharves the swarm was passing low beneath the lines of rooftops. Light from the newly risen sun glinted from their wingtips. Their harsh jitter echoed, blocking out all sound from the city, whining with the shrill clangour of a factory turned insane.

Ju took Tinder’s arm. “Quick. We need to find cover.”

Tinder grudgingly stood up. The boat wobbled. She sat down again and folded her arms over her belly. “Rill does not like where you’re taking us. It’s not safe.”

“You think it’s safe here?” Ju asked curtly.

Tinder shook her head. “Soon it will be safe. Soon, but not yet.”

Ruk and Solly had already made it onto the jetty. “Tell Rill to keep her Fear to herself,” Ruk said gruffly. His face was taut and his eyes haunted. “Or I’ll leave you behind.” He winced.

Tinder let out a deep moan. Reluctantly, she stood.

Ruk’s face relaxed. “That’s better.”

Ju pulled Tinder onto the wharf. At the last moment, she struggled and almost fell. There came a rasp of wings fluttering from behind. Ju swung around in time to see a harvester flying directly towards her, its hideous mouth gaping, claws outstretched.

Heart-magic surged to her fingertips. She held up her hands, willing them to spark. But the surge was sluggish. She yelped as a beam of yellow light shot out from the harvester’s eyes, aiming itself directly at her throat.

In the heartbeat that it took for the harvester to reach her, time slowed, uncoiling like a watch spring. Through the corner of her eye, she saw Ruk lunge towards her.

“Do it,” he hissed, lacing his fingers about hers.

Her hand grew warm with healing magic. He was protecting her, she realized, keeping her from burning herself with her own power, taking away her reason to fear it.

Heart-magic surged out of her fingers, a painless stream of heat and light. It met the harvester mid-air and halted it. Its eyes flickered. It dropped to her feet.

“Kill it,” Tinder shrieked.

Letting go of Ruk’s hand, Ju stared down at the wharf, watching the harvester
flutter and jitter like a stunned moth. She lifted her hand to finish it off, but then stopped. I mustn’t burn the wharves, she thought absurdly. People will see.

“Don’t let her dither,” Tinder hissed at Ruk. “Kill it yourself if she won’t.”

“She’s got to learn,” Ruk snapped. “Now’s as good a time as any.”

Tinder yowled. She pushed Ruk aside and took hold of Ju’s arm. “Kill it like this,” she said. She stomped on the harvester, crushing it beneath her heel. Its metal carcass burst at the seams, ringing like a brass bell. At the last moment, the ring took on a curious dull sound, like stones rolling. The smell of wet moss expanded in the air.

Tinder lifted her foot. She made a small satisfied grunt in the back of her throat.

The harvester and a small circle of wharf beneath it hardened into stone.

Ju’s arm ached. It felt suddenly heavy as if an invisible hand were pulling it down. Knowing at once what had happened, she could not look at it. She did not need to because she remembered how grey and mottled Grindle’s arm had looked on the shelf in the workshop.

Solly gasped behind her. Ruk cursed. Tinder backed away.

“Rill’s sorry,” Tinder muttered. “She did not want to hurt you.” She let out a deep wail. “Oh, Rill, not Ju, not Ju, please not Ju.”

Ju clutched her arm. She felt with the fingers of her uninjured hand along its length. Her hand, wrist and lower half of her forearm were as hard as granite. The upper edge had already begun to separate from the flesh. She gripped her elbow, carefully supporting her arm so it would not pull way.

I mustn’t lose it, she told herself. I’ve got to keep hold of it. I can’t let it fall.

Chapter 24

Rill screamed directly into Arvin’s mind, a shrill escalation of fear. You should not be here, should not be here, should not be, should not...

Arvin shook his head, trying to think. Should not be where? He pushed at his glasses and focused on the man standing in front of him: the stern lines of his face, his thinning hair, rolled up shirt-sleeves, two mechanical arms – one polished and
silvery, the other brassy and dull.

Confused, Arvin took a step backwards.

He’d meant to flee the city as far from Tinder and Ju as he could. So what was he doing in the factory? Why was he facing Sir Mathias? He looked around. He was in a room he’d not seen before with walls of bare-faced brick. Replicas of the automatons that Sir Mathias had displayed at the exhibition stood stiffly in conspiratorial silence.

Arvin remembered running from his own house. The sentries at the gatehouse had stared at him blankly, having the good sense to not interfere. He’d fled through Upper Slik, heading for the Central Railway.

In the end, how far had he actually gotten? When had he turned back to the factory?

Now we’ve hurt Ju, Rill screamed. Her voice seemed distant, but the intensity of its fear was no less distracting. You’re betraying us. Now we’ve hurt her, hurt her, hurt her...

Arvin pushed at his glasses. “How have we hurt Ju?” he asked aloud.

Sir Mathias frowned. “Who speaks to you? Who is Ju?”

Arvin blinked. He needed to pull himself together. His head was too full of Rill and too full of demon. He could not tell which one of the two had brought him here. If they didn’t shut up, he’d end up telling Sir Mathias too much.

“Who speaks to you?” Sir Mathias demanded.

Arvin shrugged.

Sir Mathias rubbed his chin with the pointed tip of a brass finger. “Is it Rill? Do you still hear her terror? I thought you would have learned to block her out by now. It’s a small wonder you’re not as insane as she is.”

A chill ran up and down Arvin’s spine. He shook his head. Sir Mathias was being uncommonly perceptive.

“I feel her too, sometimes,” Sir Mathias said, sighing. “I refuse to let her under my skin.”

Arvin rubbed his temples, forcing himself to think clearly. Surely it wasn’t Rill his stepfather felt? Rill may well despise the man, but she’d always feared him far too much to want to contact him.

He rubbed his temples again. At least Rill’s babble was beginning to wane. Wherever she was, Tinder must now be soothing her, singing to her, sending her to
sleep. Usually he could hear her doing it, but Rill was so distant now, he could only guess. The demon had quietened as well, but he could still feel it, a presence infesting the back of his mind, listening, whispering incoherently.

“What are you waiting for?” Arvin asked. He bit his tongue. Damn. He’d meant to think the words for the demon’s sake; not speak them aloud to Sir Mathias.

Sir Mathias gave a puzzled smile. “Such a change of heart, so quickly,” he said. “You’ve never been this keen before.” He gestured to a fretted wood and iron door. “Come inside. Something extraordinary has happened.”

Arvin clenched his fists. He allowed himself a brief surge of Ju’s heart-magic, not nearly enough to spark, but enough to reassure himself that it was still there, ready to call on when needed, the moment Sir Mathias turned his back.

He unclenched his fists, reined the magic in. Timing was everything. He could not risk having Sir Mathias fight back.

“After you,” Sir Mathias said. He held the door open, gestured for Arvin to step inside.

The door did not lead into a room, but opened instead into what looked and felt like an oversized, polished wardrobe. It was, Arvin realized with dismay, an elevator. His shifterness recoiled at the prospect. It would be worse than riding in a steam carriage, worse than standing in the workshop with conveyer belts rattling above him. He fought down an urge to protest, but realized that the sooner he caught Sir Mathias off guard, the easier it would be to destroy him.

Steeling himself, he followed Sir Mathias inside.

Sir Mathias lit up his fingers with skin-magic, pulled the elevator door closed. “It’s possible to run these things on magic,” he said. “But I prefer to control them manually. Can’t leave oneself too distracted.” He shot Arvin a pointed glance, then yanked on a series of knobs and turned a brass wheel. Steam hissed from somewhere beneath the mosaic tiled flooring. The elevator jolted and began to rise.

Arvin gritted his teeth. The elevator was little more than a cage. Now as it rose inexorably upwards, he felt trapped, completely at the mercy of its cables and pulleys.

“You’ll be surprised, if not a little disturbed at this morning’s developments,” Sir Mathias said.

The elevator continued to rise. Through a small window in its door, Arvin counted each floor as they passed…
...eight, nine, ten...

His head spun. He fought back a surge of nausea.

“These automatons…” Sir Mathias began.

A sudden burst of demon laughter rippled in Arvin’s head, mocking him. He almost shouted at it to stop, but caught himself and clamped his jaw shut.

The elevator slowed to a creaky halt. Level fifteen. Sir Mathias wrenched the door open. Arvin stepped out, gratefully taking in a lungful of air. He wiped his forehead, found it clammy and wet.

The demon quietened.

For a moment, the window in the vast ceiling above him made him forget where he was. Wan light from an overcast sky washed over plastered walls and polished wooden floors. Ahead of him, a contingent of automatons in the drab shifts and trousers of workers stood lined up in rows, their rubbery faces shining.

“The perfect factory,” Sir Mathias said. “Machines that create machines.”

“Of what nature?” Arvin asked.

Sir Mathias gave a self-satisfied smile. “The ultimate nature.” He clasped his metal hands in front of him. “Bear with me. We’re two of a kind. We have the same enemies.” He gestured for Arvin to proceed. “After you.”

Arvin made his way forward, past the automatons to long sweeping tables strewn with machine parts, wires, cables, and finally, row upon row of partially assembled harvesters. He stared in horror at the delicate planes of their wings, remembering that the hands that designed them – Ju’s hands – had done so for the sake of beauty and not for the dreadful purpose that Sir Mathias had inflicted on them.

“In the months to come,” Sir Mathias said, “This workshop will no longer require human supervision. It will grow of its own accord. Our enemies will be forced to serve us.”

“Enemies? How?”

Sir Mathias scoffed. “Have you not guessed already? Did you not hear what happened to my ground floor workshop? The break in? The destruction?”

Fearing he’d be accused, Arvin stiffened. Heart-magic welled at his fingertips. “I knew all along she couldn’t be trusted,” Sir Mathias said. “But I thought she’d be more subtle about her first move.”

Arvin wrinkled his brow. “She?”
Sir Mathias looked at him quizzically. “My sister, of course. Christina.”

Arvin suppressed a sigh of relief. For moment he’d feared that Sir Mathias knew that he and Ju were responsible. “Christina broke into your workshop?” he asked incredulously.

“Sir Mathias nodded. “She never could accept that I’d earned my inheritance fair and square. She destroyed a number of my early model harvesters. She broke into my personal collection, but fortunately my most valuable assets are up here, protected.” He gestured ahead. “Come see.”

They passed beyond the tables to a smaller, gas-lit room filled from wall to wall with automatons. Their rubber faces stared ahead, featureless, pale ovals topped by hairless scalps. All wore the rich garbs of mages, some in gowns and others in shirts and breeches.

“Think of them as an alternative to prison,” Sir Mathias said. “For those who dare to despise us.” He paused, looked at Arvin solemnly. “In the past we’ve destroyed our enemies with knives, with magic and guns, turning them to dust without so much as a thought as to how we could use them. Such a waste of heart-magic, do you not think? Why has no one thought to harvest it instead?”

“But you have, sir,” Arvin said, despite himself. “You invented the heart-chairs.”

Sir Mathias sneered. “What need will I have for heart-chairs when my enemies are eliminated?”

“Surely if you destroy all mages and all workers it will mean the death of heart-magic itself.”

“So it will,” Sir Mathias said smugly.

*So it will*, the demon in Arvin’s head echoed.

Sir Mathias began to unbutton the front of one of the female automaton’s bodices, revealing an exposed harvester-shaped hollow between its breasts. He reached beneath his waistcoat, brought out a harvester and folded its wings neatly about its thorax. “This one returned to me during the night. It’s an old model, one I no longer use. My guess is Christina stole it when she broke in. She must have turned it on and unwittingly unleashed it on herself.”

Arvin allowed himself a flicker of triumph, relieved that Sir Mathias still did not suspect that he, the powerless stepson, had done the unleashing. At the same time, he forced down a surge of anger knowing that Sir Mathias did not think him capable
of it.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Sir Mathias continued. “Christina herself gave me the wing design. She did so to distract me, without stopping to weigh its potential.”

Arvin cast his gaze about the room. At a guess he could see at least a hundred completed automatons. “Your enemies,” he ventured. “How many are there?”

Sir Mathias flicked his brass hand dismissively. “How many workers with heart-magic? How many mages? There’s no way of telling until the harvesting is complete.”

Arvin stared at him, horror rising like demon stench in his throat. “All of them? Sparing no one?”

Sir Mathias smiled. “Do not fear for yourself, my son. You’re safe, remember? Harvesters have no reason to feed on the likes of us.” He regarded the automaton, then held the harvester against its exposed chest. Gently, he pushed it into the awaiting hollow, easing it from side to side until it clicked into place.

At last, Arvin thought. Now!

He lifted his hand, pointed to the exact centre of Sir Mathias’s back. Ju’s heart-magic surged to his fingertips. “It’s a beautiful thing,” Arvin said.

Before Sir Mathias could turn around again, Arvin let the heart-magic flow, as much as he dared without burning himself, more than he’d used on the guards or on Fingle or on Christina when he’d unleashed the demon.

The flow reached his fingers. For an instant it surged against their tips, ecstatic, intoxicating. Then, as if suddenly betraying him, the flow halted, reversed, turned back.

Pain shot down his arm. He yelped, reeled backwards. His legs folded. He struggled to keep his balance, his heart constricting into a painful lump.

Heart-magic rushed backwards and upwards like fire directly to his head.

He yelped again, bracing himself for a new onslaught of agony; but it did not come. Instead, the demon stirred in the back of his mind.

Arvin’s heart beat a painful, frantic rhythm. He tried to pull the magic back, tried to stop it from flowing. He wanted to push the demon away, but its grip grew too powerful, too deeply embedded in him, squeezing, squeezing…

…feeding.

Arvin groaned. It occurred to him that this is what the demon had been waiting for all along: for Arvin to release Ju’s magic, make it flow so the demon
could take it and heal itself.

*Yes, you’ve healed us, the demon whispered. Now you’re ours.*

Arvin shook his head in wild refusal. The demon’s voice did not sound at all like the voice of insanity. It was clear and precise, each word a fine caress through his consciousness, soothing him. After a long moment, he saw no reason to fight it. At last, it was part of him.

No, better than that…

He was part of it.

Finally, his vision cleared enough for him to see Sir Mathias swivel on his heel to face him. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright. “Eln? Is that you?”

“It is, my friend,” Arvin heard himself say. The words had formed on his tongue by their own accord. He had not been able to stop them and nor had he known what they would be. He gagged on the smell of demon, a foul, rotting stench that slid up from his gullet, soaking his tongue.

“Why did you leave me? Why are you wielding our son?” Sir Mathias asked.

“Your sister’s body proved unstable,” Arvin – the demon – said.

Sir Mathias’s face fell. “My sister? You chose her over me?”

“We didn’t choose her. We wanted to see how willingly she’d join us.”

Sir Mathias thought for a moment, his eyes misty. “Did she? Did she want you?”

“She did. But in the end, she wanted more than we could give.”

Sir Mathias gave a twisted smile. “As you knew she would?”

“We knew,” the demon answered. “But we’re pleased to see you again. Even if it is through the eyes of our son. Even if he does despise you.”

“Despise me, you say?” Amusement flickered across Sir Mathias’s face. He frowned.

“Until now, of course,” the demon amended.

“You can wield him as well as you wielded Christina? As well as you wielded me?”

“Not so easily, we’re afraid. His shifterness fights us. But with time, he’ll bend.”

“Come back to me,” Sir Mathias pleaded. “Wield me. We have unfinished business.”

“That we have,” the demon agreed.
Every nerve in Arvin’s body screamed for him to reach into his head and tear out the parasite that now had hold of him. Instead, his left hand raised itself by the demon’s volition. It pushed at his glasses. Arvin struggled to take control, to back away, to run, to force his way through the lines of automatons – anything to not have to see the self-satisfied smile playing across his stepfather’s lips.

Sir Mathias stepped away from the automatons, brushed his titanium and brass hands against his trouser legs. The automaton’s featureless face began to shift and mould itself into a woman’s face, its curves and planes sharpening into an exact replica of Christina Grindle’s. The same green eyes, heavily painted lips and chestnut brown hair.

“That reminds me,” Sir Mathias said to Arvin. “When her soul is fully seated I must ask her if it was her idea or yours to destroy my collection. What good did it do to allow her to see the unfortunate circumstances behind my ruined arm?”

“Dear friend, we’re greatly insulted,” the demon said smoothly. “It was not we who sullied your collection, but your adopted son – our son – Arvin.”

Sir Mathias’s jaw dropped, but only for a moment. “So, there’s life in the lad yet.” He let out a deep laugh, a real laugh of the kind that Arvin had not heard him succumb to before.

Demon stench rose in Arvin’s throat. He could feel the demon burrowing into his brain, pushing him here, pulling him there, forcing him to succumb. You’re not my father, he wanted to say. You might have been once, but now…

The demon twisted. You’re right, it whispered. Part of me used to be your father, but now we’re more than that. Soon, when the harvesters have eaten their fill, when the world’s heart-magic is safely imprisoned, when mages can no longer fight us, the world will be ours, and you and I will be greater still. We’ll seek the remainder of our kind. Those beyond the hills, beyond the mountains, beyond the seas. We’ll live as one – a single ecstatic one.

For a moment, Arvin believed them. The ecstasy of union would be a noble thing, surely. He’d be with Tinder, with Rill and Ju and there’d be nothing to fight against any more – nothing to flee.

Ah Ju, the demon whispered. Such strength, such power. Too much for a single harvester. For Ju, we’ll need many.

Where once Arvin might have felt panic, he could now sense little more than a vague emptiness. You must not take Ju, he thought. Not if you can use her.
*We cannot use her,* the demons cried. *She cannot give us her magic willingly.*

Arvin’s pulse quickened at the prospect of a bargain. He’d be willing to do anything to keep her from being harvested. She will not give it to you; but she’ll give it to me, he thought.

The demon paused as if the idea had not occurred to it, as if taking its time weighing up its losses and gains. *Then we shall allow you to take it willingly,* it trilled.

What will you give me if I take you to her?

*We’ll give you everything,* the demons crowed. *Everything and nothing and one and all.*

The demon released its grip. At once Arvin realised that the demon would use Ju as badly as Sir Mathias would have. What have I done? he thought wildly. Sweet Fate Ju, what have I done?

Sir Mathias looked up. “I hear them. They’ve returned from their night’s feeding.” He hurried to a window, threw it open. The air hummed, rising to the frenetic buzz of an approaching swarm.

A cold chill gripped Arvin’s spine. He wanted to ram his hands over his ears. The demon forced him to keep his arms at his sides, respectfully waiting until the harvesters flew into the workshop in a thin stream, first one, then two, then a dozen at a time, their bodies moving in perfect synchrony, darting between the waiting automatons like fish darting in a stream.

Sir Mathias shot Arvin a look of triumph. “Tonight I’ll send out more,” he said. “The night after that more again. Then there’ll be no mages left to laugh at us. We will laugh at them.”

Laughter rippled in Arvin’s head, mocking, sneering. *See how sweetly your stepfather looks at us. The fool believes we love him because once we wanted him. Now we’ll see him fall.*

A profound happiness wound itself about Arvin’s heart, leapt into his mind. He recognised it at once for what it was: utter, utter madness. He did not want it. Nor did he feel he could give it up. If the demon had allowed him, he would have laughed aloud at the pure ecstasy of it. Instead, he stood back quietly and watched Sir Mathias insert the newly returned harvesters one by one into the awaiting automatons.

His soul, he realized, was captured just as thoroughly as theirs. It always had been. First by Rill and now by demons. He wasn’t at all amused by the revelation, but
clearly the demons were. Laughter issued from his mouth, irrational, reeking.

Sir Mathias looked at him, impatiently. “With time, you’ll get used to it,” he said. “Try not to fight them. Console yourself with what they can do.”

Chapter 25

‘Demon’s stinking arse,’ Ruk cursed under his breath.

The sign on the door to Clapton’s Horology said, “Open at 7”; but it was already midmorning and the door remained locked. Broken glass from an upstairs window littered the pavement. The road was uncommonly quiet.

Briskly, Solly took out a key from her bodice. “Quick.” She let herself in to the jingling of the doorbell. “We don’t want people thinking we’re opening up for the day.”

Tinder and Ju stumbled in after her. Before following, Ruk lifted his face to see a patch of blue between parting clouds. Days before he might have welcomed it, but now he yearned for the cover of fog. He couldn’t see any harvesters, but ducked quickly inside anyway before they returned.

He was greeted with the indignant squawk of a crow from upstairs.

“I fear everyone’s gone, except the crow,” Solly said. “If George had any say in it, he wouldn’t have left it on its own.” She grimaced. “Something’s happened. If the choice were mine, I’d keep moving, take cover elsewhere; but we’ve got to see to Ju’s arm first.”

“I don’t think anything can be done for it now,” Ju said, clutching her arm at a sickening angle against her chest. Her face was white. “It feels like a dead thing. It’s no longer mine.”

Afraid for her, Ruk stepped into the shop, steeling himself against the interminable ticking of Clapton’s clocks. “You’re right, stone-making is not a sickness. As far as I know, it can’t be healed.”

“It can be reversed,” Tinder said firmly. She paused by the shop counter. Ju paused too, keeping her distance a few steps behind, no doubt unwilling to get too close in case Rill’s stone-magic struck her again. “Ju’s magic is strong,” Tinder added. “She can heal herself.”

“I cannot,” Ju snapped. “Do you not think I’ve tried already? I’ve thought of
nothing else since it happened.”

Her gaze met Ruk’s. He tensed, struggling to keep his Forley emotions deep and out of reach. He did not want the man’s left-over concern for Ju unsettling him.

“I cannot bear this,” Ju said. She shifted her arm to a different angle, caught her breath and shifted it back. Solly had wrapped it in a makeshift bandage that was now soaked in blood. “If you can rid me of it and heal the stump, I’d be grateful.”

Tinder started towards her, reached for her elbow. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m truly, truly sorry.”

“No.” Ju jerked away. “Don’t.”

Solly stepped between them. “Let’s go upstairs first.”

“Don’t get too close.” Ruk pulled Solly away from Tinder. “What’s to stop her from turning you to stone as well.”

Tinder’s face fell. “Rill won’t hurt them. I promise, I won’t let her.”

“That remains to be seen,” Ruk said testily. “I’m not about to take any chances.”

Some of the clocks began to strike, fifteen minutes past the hour. When they quietened, the ticking and rattling seemed louder.

Tinder winced. “Rill does not like them. They torment. They go on and on and on.” She tossed her hair wildly behind her, crossed the floor to the display shelves and ran her hands from clock to clock, humming tunelessly.

The air smelled wet of freshly turned earth. The ticking of the clocks slowed. Their surfaces of wood, bronze and glass faded to grey. One by one the clocks quietened, hardened to stone.

“Look at the floor,” Solly said pointing to the line of stone footprints from clock to clock where Tinder had trodden. “Why do your shoes not change? And your clothes?”

Tinder gave a small, self-satisfied smile. She turned her attention back to the clocks.

“Can’t say I blame her for silencing them,” Ruk mused. He stared at his hand, opened and closed his fist. Heart-magic sparked at his fingertips. “I can’t think how Rill does it.”

Suddenly he realized that Ju was no longer there. He guessed she’d already taken herself upstairs. Afraid of what she might do, he sprinted two steps at a time after her.
He found her in a sitting room, standing by the unlit hearth.

“I don’t want Tinder near me,” she said. “I’m lucky it was only my arm she
turned. Last week it was a chambermaid. Who’ll it be next?”

“She’s not our biggest concern, right now,” Ruk said. “Her stone-making may
well help us.”

“If it doesn’t kill us first.”

“Stone-making’s a weapon as much as heart-magic is,” Ruk said. “They may
be opposites. If you learn to heal yourself the instant either of them touches you,
you’ll be safe.”

Ju snorted. “What should I do in the meantime? Hold your hand whenever she
comes near me? I don’t want to be protected. I want to protect myself.”

Ruk shrugged. At that moment Ju seemed as much a child as Rill was. She
could not see beyond the here and now. “Listen,” he began. “It’s no coincidence
we’re all here together like this. Rill called to me, woke me up from where I slept
beneath the city. Tell me, how did she get to you?” He paused. Ju seemed not to hear
him. She simply sat staring at her ruined arm, so he added. “I don’t understand how
you ended up in Arvin’s mansion. Unless you weren’t entirely honest with Forley
about not welcoming his advances.”

She looked up at him, her jaw tense, eyes hard.

He sensed he was overstepping propriety, but there was no time to be
circumspect. He dove straight in. “Forley remembers you being wary of Arvin. You
believed he suspected you of heart-magic. You used to avoid him because he was a
mage. But the idea of you consorting with him willingly is as preposterous as the idea
of me consorting with a demon.”

“Consorting?” Ju spat. “I was held prisoner beneath his roof, and now you
accuse me of consorting?”

He heard a footfall behind him and swung around to see Tinder standing by
the birdbath with Solly behind her.

“Rill found Ju,” Tinder told him. Her eyes were wide and blue, innocent
almost as if they were Rill’s eyes and not hers. “Ju was in trouble, so she led Arvin to
er so he could bring her home and look after her.” She stroked her belly. “Rill first
saw Ju through Arvin’s eyes. She heard him speak to her at the workshop. He’s half
shifter, you see. He sensed her heart-magic. So much of it. More than anyone else.
From that day on, Rill knew that Ju could help us. Rill followed her thoughts with her
mind, just as she follows Arvin’s.”

Ju looked from Ruk to Tinder, her mouth in a thin, tight line. “Where’s Arvin now?” she asked.

Tinder shook her head slowly. “He’s lost. He wants us; but he’s lost.”

A gust of wind sent the curtains flapping at an open window beyond the doorway that led to the adjoining kitchen. Solly hurried to it and wrenched the window closed, drew its shutters. The crow squawked, leapt about its cage.

Ruk stared at it. “We’re each and every one of us lost.”

There was dried corn in a bowl by the cage. He tossed in a handful through the bars. The crow pounced and snapped it up. Ruk felt his own gut rumble, reminding him that he, too, had not eaten since the night before.

At the far end of the room, the dining table was set up for breakfast – bread, partially wrapped in a tea towel, pots of butter and jam, a teapot waiting to be filled.

Solly unwrapped the bread. She sniffed it. “It’s yesterday’s. George’s wife must have expected to be here this morning.” Her hands trembled ever so slightly. “The glass on the pavement...” she added. “The window above it. It was their bedroom. I checked it a moment ago, but the door’s locked.”

“We’ll open it later,” Ruk said. “Let’s see to Ju first. In case we need to leave in a hurry.”

“Yes, of course,” Solly stammered. “We must be sensible. I’ll boil some water. Make tea. We should eat.” She started for the kitchen in her usual brisk manner; but Ruk could see her fear in the set of her jaw and the stiffness of her walk.

He turned his attention to Ju. She looked up at him, her face determined.

Ruk supposed she wasn’t lying, but then it struck him, that there was no reason for him to care if she did. Except, of course, for the inescapable fact that the man was a mage. “Forley spent many a night drinking with Arvin,” he said curtly. “And Forley never trusted a word he said.”

For a moment, the strain on Ju’s face looked as if it would dissolve into tears. She lifted her chin. “I’m well aware of that. Now, if there’s anything you can do for my arm, please do so, so we can move on.”

Relieved she’d given him a way out, he directed his attention to her arm. He knelt beside her. “I can only stop the bleeding and heal the wound.”

Ju did not so much as flinch. “One day, I’ll design myself a new arm. It’ll be
better than Grindle’s. I’ll fashion it from titanium so it can stand up to the heat of heart-magic.” She gave a brief twisted smile. “Maybe a mechanical arm will not be so bad for me after all. When I wield my magic, my new arm won’t burn as readily as flesh. I’ll not need years to learn how to protect myself.”

Ruk was struck by her presence of mind. He knew he should say something, but couldn’t think where to start. He wasn’t about to risk searching Forley’s memories for help; so carefully, he took hold of her bandaged arm, supporting it so as not to damage it further.

“Try to preserve as much bone and sinew as you can,” she said matter-of-factly. “I do not wish to fashion myself a new elbow as well as a wrist.”

Again, he was stuck by how quickly she’d accepted her plight. Even so, he knew enough about humans to know that words were not always an indication of their emotions. He sent her a surge of skin-magic to calm her.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. “It’s strange how I can still feel my fingers. They’re kind of numb. When I try to bend them, I feel them curling; but of course they’re not. If my eyes didn’t show me they were stone, I could almost believe they were flesh again.”

“Hush,” Ruk said, frowning. “Let me finish.”

She sighed, leaned back in the chair while he unwrapped the bandage. Her stone forearm had partially separated from her flesh. Yet it felt warm as if her body fought to keep hold of it. He pressed both hands over the wounds to stem the flow of blood. “Try to feel what I’m doing,” he said. “Try to see my healing working inside you.” He tapped his forehead. “In here.”

Healing magic surged to his fingers. He pressed it into the edges of her arm, forcing it heal through the strength of his own will.

“I can feel it,” Ju said, “but I cannot see anything except the back of my eyelids.”

“Try not to concentrate too hard. Let instinct guide you.”

“Christina Grindle tried to teach me about instinct. Little good that did. All my life, my instinct has been to suppress my magic. Searching it out in the company of others has never been an option.”

“Forget what she told you,” Ruk insisted. “Rely only on yourself. You have it within you. Now trust yourself to use it.”

Her body stiffened. He thought she would pull away. Then she relaxed and he
realized she was afraid. He sent her a surge of well-wishing.

She frowned. He feared she was going to accuse him of not being Forley.

“You’re right,” she said, closing her eyes. “It’s all about trust isn’t it? It’s been so long since I’ve been able to trust anyone. I’ve forgotten how.”

When the healing was done, Ruk took the stone forearm away and was pleased to see the remaining stump was well rounded and not at all unsightly.

“I can still feel my hands,” Ju said. “But they’re no longer numb.” The muscles in her forearms twitched a little. “Now it feels as if I’m clenching my fist.” She looked at the stump, but kept her face impassive. “I suppose with time I’ll feel phantom pains. Is that not how it happens to amputees?”

Ruk couldn’t say. It wasn’t something that shifters experienced.

She held up her arm, regarded the stump. “It should support a mechanical arm nicely. I’ll need heart-magic to secure the connections between nerves, sinews and wires. I trust that when the time comes, you can help me?” She paused, swallowed. “In the meantime you may take as much of my heart-magic as you want.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Ruk said. Even so, before drawing away, he took a good measure of her magic.

She held his gaze. “I think I saw some of that healing magic of yours. Just a little of it when you were nearly done. It was like one of those tiny stars that you can only see at the edge of your vision when you look away from it.”

“Try to conjure the vision again. Try to copy it.”

She nodded but did not look at all confident. “What would Forley have done if he were me? Would he have known where to start in the designing of arms? Would he have thought it a blessing or a blasphemy to use his tinkering skills like that?”

The last thing Ruk needed was to search through Forley’s memories with Ju in front of him. But he understood her need to know, so he looked deep, keeping to the facts and avoiding the emotions. “Forley would never have given up helping you,” he said at last. “He would have made wings for you, if you’d asked him.

Ju’s mouth trembled. She drew herself up. “Wings,” she mused. “Yes, he taught me a lot about those. Maybe, when this is over, I’ll use my original design to fashion myself wings as well as an arm. Imagine how wonderful it would be to fly to wherever I choose, to be above the clouds.”

“It’s indeed a beautiful existence,” Ruk said wistfully. He almost told her how it had been for him in past lives as eagles, owls, sparrows, bats, but remembered that
humans saw animal existence as inferior regardless of its purity. Instead, he said, “If you could give that to humans, perhaps they...”

The crow screeched. Momentarily startled, Ruk looked up and saw Tinder feeding it corn. It hovered at the edge of its open cage door, uncertain.

“The poor thing’s trapped like Rill,” Tinder said. “Yearning for freedom, afraid to take the first step.”

“Stop feeding it and it’ll come out when it’s hungry,” Ruk told her.

Just then, there came the sound of frantic hammering from somewhere upstairs.

Tinder looked up, blinked. “Why did Solly not bring us tea? She promised. She said we should eat.”

Ruk looked into the kitchen. The coal stove was lit and the pot boiling vigorously. He had not seen Solly leave.

“I’ll make the tea,” Ju said in a low voice behind him. “I’m not so afraid of Tinder, now. Your magic’s calmed me, I suppose.”

“I suppose,” Ruk said tonelessly. He strode to the hallway and barely noticed Tinder staring at him, rubbing her belly.

“So?r?” he called out anxiously.

The door to Clapton’s bedroom was closed. Ruk tried the handle and found it unlocked. He opened it a crack, expecting the room to be empty.

At first he saw only the unshuttered, broken window that looked out over the road, its curtains flapping. He shivered at the room’s cold emptiness, which was at odds with the man and woman lying on their backs on the large four-poster bed, the blankets tangled about their arms and legs.

Ruk took a step forward. The man was Clapton, he realized. White-faced, and unmoving.

Even in death, his face seemed as morose and impatient as always.

Barely able to breath himself, Ruk, took another step forward. The bodies’ throats were criss-crossed with lacerations and crusted with dried blood. But the wounds themselves were bloodless. The couple’s eyes stared up sightlessly, emptier than death. In the air around them, not a trace of their memories lingered.

Sickened, Ruk backed away. He snapped the door closed, melting its lock as if by doing so he could block out the memory of what he’d just seen.

Then Ju was behind him. “Harvesters?” she asked flatly. “Killed them?”
Ruk pointed with his chin to the stairs and the garret room beyond them. “I imagine Solly’s been here already.” He wanted to go to her, but was afraid to move. “The Claptons were close friends with her.”

At this moment, her grief would be terrible. He did not want to see it.

“You can’t just leave her like that,” Ju said softly. “She needs someone, and presumably not me.” She paused, clearly waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, she added, “I’ll look after Tinder. Rill told her you found the Claptons like this. She’s doing her best to calm her. Can you hear Rill?”

Ruk frowned. His mind remained silent, his own.

“If you can’t hear Rill?” Ju asked again. “Can you feel her Fear?”

“No-”

The crow burst out from the dining room. It flew haphazardly down the stairs, banging against the wall on its way down. “We should be following it,” Ruk said, wryly.

“As soon as we can, ” Ju said. “I’ll be the first to leave.”

She did not wait for him to answer, but instead turned back to the dining room and made as if to close the door with her ruined arm. She paused, looked at the stump, puzzled. Then she swore softly, her grey eyes filled with trepidation.

Upstairs, the hammering grew more and more frantic. Solly was boarding up the window, Ruk supposed. He swallowed dryly and made his way up to her.

The garret door was open. He could see Solly standing on the bed, which she must have dragged to the window. She was hammering the final nails into wide planks that she’d pressed against the window frame. When she was done, she dropped the hammer onto the bed and stood with her hands against the wall, taking in long deep breaths. Her entire body trembled.

She turned around and looked startled.

“How long have you been watching me?” she asked.

“Only a moment.”

“Is Ju healed? Is Tinder settled?”

“They’re fine. Even Rill’s quiet.” He tapped the side of his head. “Can’t hear a peep out of her.”

“We should go as soon as we can. But we need to rest first. Ju needs it. Tinder needs it.” She sunk to her knees on the bed. “Fate knows, I need it too.”

“We’ll wait till dark.”
“Yes,” She nodded. “Of course, that would be sensible.” She didn’t move, but kept her lips clamped in a tight line that he first mistook for anger, until realizing her cheeks were wet. “I can’t stop thinking about what’s happened to their souls,” she said at last. “Are they still inside harvesters? Can they feel? Do they know what’s happened? Do they suffer like I suffered in the heart-chair, teetering on the brink of death, day in day out, until life became so horrible that I wanted nothing more than to end it?”

Ruk shook his head. He imagined that the Claptons’ souls were indeed suffering, but he was not about to tell Solly. She seemed beaten, like she had when the harvester had attacked her on the roof on Wishton Lane. Back then, he’d caught her. How could he catch her now, even though Forley’s sensibilities screamed at him to try? He had no idea where to start.

Struggling for the right words, he said, “Whatever Clapton and his wife are now, their souls are no longer the souls they used to be.”

Solly bit her lip. “I do not know if that’s a comfort or a curse.”

“It’s neither.”

She lowered herself onto the bed, took off her boots and leaned back into the pillow. “I’m so, so tired, but I cannot sleep knowing they’re downstairs, lying there like that.”

“George died fighting for what he believed in,” Ruk said.

“He died waiting for us.”

“He knew it would catch up with him one day.”

“How many of us are left now?” she said grimly. “Did Henry make it out? Did the others? For all we know, we’re all the only Groundists left. How can we survive on our own?”

Ruk bristled. She looked and sounded nothing like the Solly he’d met in the church. Maybe it was her exhaustion speaking. He doubted she’d slept at all since arriving at the Grindle mansion. Then it struck him that maybe she really was dying as she’d claimed. That her time in prison had taken more out of her than she’d cared to admit.

He sat next to her on the bed and sent her a deep surge of well-wishing. “You know,” he began. “I could easily give up right now and turn myself back into shifter mist. Now that I know what Rill is, I could learn how to block her out. I could escape, take myself as far away as I can possibly get. But I don’t. Do you know why?”
Solly shook her head. “Because that morning when we first met outside the church when the demon attacked me, you didn’t have to chase it away. You didn’t have to shelter me at Wishton Lane, either. Especially after I tasted your magic.”

Solly regarded him, her brow wrinkling in the way that made Ruk want to reach out and smooth it. “When I first realized you were a shifter, I could only think of demons.” She paused, swallowed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to judge you. I know you’re not wicked like that. What I meant was, that sometimes you seem to understand humans even better than humans do themselves.”

Ruk wanted to laugh, but stopped himself in case Solly thought he was mocking her. If it seemed like he understood humans, he could not fathom how.

“That was supposed to be a compliment,” Solly said.

Ruk shrugged. “Humans are too puzzling to truly understand.”

“That’s part of what it is to be human.” Solly closed her eyes and sighed. “We barely understand what we are ourselves.”

Ruk watched her for the pure pleasure of being able to do so without her asking him why. He wanted to trace his finger over the gentle curves of her face, make her smile so he could see her cheeks dimple. At the same time, part of him – his Forley part – worried and wondered about Ju. He tried to push the thoughts aside, seeing them as an intrusion, convincing himself that his need to protect Ju was nothing more than an echo of the dying sentiments he’d inherited from Forley.

He clenched his fists. He may well look and think like Forley, but in essence he was Ruk. He could not afford to give in to his human side even if it meant discarding it.

So what was he doing watching over Solly?
She caught her breath, shuddered and opened her eyes.

“Are you all right?” Ruk asked without thinking.

“Overtired, I suppose. I dreamed I fell.” She grimaced and added, “Which is probably closer to the truth than I care to admit.”

“Falling is only a problem if there’s no one to catch you,” Ruk said.

“Who’s going to catch you?”

“Last time I fell?” Ruk asked. “It was you I recall.”

She gave a twitch of a smile. “That seems a world away. Who knows what Fate planned to bring you to the church like that?”
“Fate had nothing to do with it. It was demons. If you hadn’t been there, I’d now be one of them.”

Suddenly, he realized he was doing it again – allowing himself to get close to her.

Solly held out her hand. “Lie next to me. Just for a minute.”

Ruk froze.

“I’m tired of being alone,” she added. “I’m cold. I believe you are too.”

“Loneliness is human condition. It’s not something I succumb to.”

She looked at him haughtily. He feared he’d insulted her, so he added, “At least not in shifter form.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have.”

He groped for the right words, couldn’t find them. Besides, she was right. He was cold. And lonely too, he supposed, though he didn’t want to admit it, even to himself. Not knowing how to tell her, he moved closer to her. She shifted aside a little to make room for him.

He swung up his legs, leaned back on the pillow. She snuggled into him, put her arm across his chest. She seemed even more fragile than before. But in days past he’d been a child, he reminded himself. Now he was looking at her through adult eyes.

“I think I learned something from being a child,” he said. “Although I despised every moment of it, I do believe the experience taught me to value the here and now instead of yearning for what used to be.”

“You mean you like being human more than you like being animal?” she asked.

“Perhaps. Maybe. Right now, I can’t say.”

She gave a flicker of a smile and closed her eyes.

He looked around the room, at the gaudy papered walls, the waxed floorboards, the threadbare quilt. It all seemed so tame, so human, so safe. Yet downstairs, less than a stone’s throw away, George and Ivy Clapton lay dead in their beds, killed hideously by machines. Even animals did not inflict such atrocities on their own kind.

Beside him, Solly relaxed, drifted into sleep, leaving him part disappointed and part relieved. Afraid to disturb her, he stared at the ceiling.

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He started at the sound of steam carriages rumbling past, and then a distant clock tower striking two. Opening his eyes, he was surprised to see Solly propped up on her elbow, smiling down at him.

“What?” he asked.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “I went to check on Ju and Tinder; but Ju had lit the hearth and now they’re both asleep in their chairs. I couldn’t bring myself to disturb them.” She sat up, reached over to the bedside table picked up a plate of bread and jam. “I made breakfast. Although I suspect we should more accurately call it lunch.”

They ate in companionable and pleasurable silence, which Ruk was reluctant to break, knowing that their conversation would quickly turn back to either the Claptons or Arvin, Tinder or Ju. Suddenly, out of the blue, Solly asked, “Have you ever loved a human before?”

Ruk’s chuckle came out much more harshly than he intended. “Of course. Many. Though in hindsight, I regret each and every one of them.”

“What?”

He stretched out on the bed again, turned onto his back. “At first, I loved them as a human would, but in the end I couldn’t bear the grief of losing them, so I became them.”

Solly lowered herself beside him. She furrowed her brow. “You killed them?”

Ashamed, Ruk looked away. “Before I grew accustomed to being human, I didn’t love in the sense that you understand it. It’s part of what drove my kind insane. Not so much human emotion, but the inability to understand it.”

“Oh,” Solly said distantly.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Ruk added. “Shifters love, but our love’s different. Before humans arrived, we’d only ever taken on animal shape. We loved only the dying. We showed our love by absorbing their memories and becoming them, ensuring that part of them would live on inside us. It’s a love that cannot be destroyed. Human love, on the other hand, is always under threat. If one partner dies, the other is consumed by grief. I felt it once, and never want to feel it again.”

“That’s how humans feel,” Solly said. “But grief heals. With time—”

“No, you don’t understand,” Ruk interrupted. “You can’t.”

She looked at him, hurt.

“To stop myself from feeling grief again…” Ruk paused, suddenly afraid. But
she deserved to know who he truly was, so he forced himself to continue. “To protect myself, I’d destroy my lover first…” He waited for Solly to call him murderer, thief, imposter. When she merely kept looking at him, her eyes radiating the same hurt that he felt – the same hurt that was driving him to confess to her – he added. “I destroyed them by absorbing their memories in the shifter way, destroying them before their loss destroyed me.”

Solly gave a long shuddering sigh. “That’s a terrible way to love.” She raised herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. “It would send a human insane.”

He kept his gaze on hers, torn between wanting to wrench away from her and holding her, wondering why she didn’t flee him like so many had before her. “Do you not fear me now for what I’ve done? Or for what I can do?” he asked.

Her green eyes searched his, her breath warm against his face. “It wasn’t you who killed those others, was it? Not the you in this body? Not the you who turned into a child and then turned back again.”

“I pray that it wasn’t,” he said truthfully.

She looked away. “I’m not afraid of dying. I’m not afraid of you becoming me. But I’m terrified of the prospect of losing my soul to a harvester.”

Ruk did not know how to answer this. He knew he could easily love her. Perhaps he already did. He knew also, beyond a doubt, he could never destroy her.

He touched the back of his hand to her cheek. “You’re beautiful,” he said without thinking. “The most beautiful human I’ve known.”

She gave a brief, shy chuckle. “In all your three hundred years?”

“Each and every one them.”

“You should be careful,” she said. “I’ll be lucky if I make three more years, let alone three hundred.”

“Perhaps,” Ruk said thickly. He put his hand over hers, lifted it and pressed it against his cheek.

Her eyes sparkled with playful challenge. “Kiss me,” she said. “Kiss me like you kissed me when you healed me in the stables. I want to know how it feels to kiss you back.”

He gaped at her, afraid to move. She drew him closer and brushed her lips against his.

Intrigued, he opened his mouth and drew her human breath into him, both surprised and afraid of its sweetness. Her kiss was more delicious and more fulfilling
than any memory of any kiss in all his three hundred years. He knew he should pull away. He knew he should tell her that he could not be trusted – that at any moment his lovemaking could turn into terror and he’d not be able to stop himself from taking her life and becoming her to preserve her in the only way he knew how.

She drew back and unbuttoned his shirt.

Transfixied by the fineness of her fingers, he kissed her knuckles, her palms, fingertips, wrists.

She sat up and straddled him, lowered herself onto his hips and rocked softly, pressing herself against him. “Should I stop?” she asked, running her hands along his sides. “Should I ask you to remind me who you are?”

Ruk’s breath quickened. “You should,” he said softly. “But I beg you not to.” It had been too long since he’d wanted anyone to take him this far. His back arched beneath her and he was suddenly no longer afraid of her mortality. As the intensity of her closeness enveloped him, he wanted nothing more than to be with her, around her, in her.

Impatient now, he fumbled with her bodice, abashed at the way his hands shook. Laughing, she covered them with kisses. He laughed back at her when she jokingly cursed her factory-standard bloomers, wriggling out of them with surprising agility.

At last he held her against him, his awkwardness banished, his skin-magic pulsing to the same urgent rhythm of his heartbeat. Hers too, he could feel, with the same wildness, pressing into him, almost becoming him.

He was at as loss as to what to do next. He was tempted to draw on Forley’s memories to help him. But he did not want to be Forley. And nor did he want to be any of the previous lives he’d lived either – not animal, not human and definitely not shifter.

“Kiss me first, so I can kiss you back,” she breathed into his ear. “Like I wanted to in the stables.”

Gently, he rolled onto his side. He pulled her in close to him, wound his legs around hers. He kissed her and marvelled at the softness of her lips, and the sweetness of her body as her movements matched his.

“I’m Ruk,” he said without thinking.

“I’m Solly.” She giggled.

“I mean, right now, I’m all Ruk. The Ruk you know. For you.”
She kissed him again.

He ran his hand along her back, tracing the strips of pale and dark where afternoon light angled in through the gaps in the boards at the window. Her skin felt precious, silken, leaving him breathless.

He had no reliable instincts of his own to draw on, so he let her guide him as he immersed himself in her beauty – not just the perfect curves of her shoulders, or the fragile skin at her throat where her hair fell in soft waves that smelled like the sea and the forest – but in the absolute way her desire matched his, escalating, claiming him, claiming them both.

Crying out, he gave himself up to her – all of her. Solly cried out too, her heart pounding against his, as if entering him, becoming him.

Afterwards she slept with her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder, her hair tousled and damp, spilling over his chest. She seemed too fragile and too young. Tightening his arms about her, he closed his eyes and let his fear of losing her vanish into the room’s dimness.

Chapter 26

Ju’s arm felt exceedingly weightless. At least it didn’t ache like she’d expected it to. When Solly helped her into her coat – Arvin’s coat – the sleeve drooped emptily beneath the elbow. If she did not look at it, her wrist and hand felt as if they were still attached and her fingers still moving, exactly as they should be. If not for the disturbing fact that they no longer tingled with heart-magic, she could have easily forgotten they were gone. She sighed. Having to be helped into her coat was a small concession, but it made her feel quite the child, always being picked up and dusted off whenever she so much as stumbled.

Solly offered Ju a clean, woollen sock. “I found this in the washroom,” she said. “I think you should wear it over your arm to protect it from the cold.”

“Good idea.” Ju took the sock, slipped it over her stump, then rolled up her coat sleeve to stop it from flapping around. Not that her arm felt cold, but covering it up made it easier to bear.

Solly had changed out of her chambermaid’s uniform and was now wearing a loose fitting tunic, woollen leggings and boots. Ju wondered if Solly had perhaps
lived here as well, in the room upstairs where she’d spent the day with Ruk.

Ju bite her lip. She forced down a wave of bitterness. Ruk wasn’t Forley, she reminded herself. It would do her well to not forget it.

Ruk came in from the kitchen, carrying food bundled up in a tablecloth. He spread it out over the table: bread, pickles, cheese, ham, cooked sausages and a bottle of preserved plums. A distant clock struck five. Daylight was rapidly fading. Solly lit the gaslights, suffusing the room with a soft amber glow.

Ju could not believe how hungry she felt. She filled her plate – as did the others.

“Once we’re out of the city,” Solly said. “We have the choice of either looking for other Groundist agents, or continuing on our own.”

“Makes sense to keep to ourselves,” Ruk conceded. “Especially if mages are still focusing on wiping Groundists out.”

“The mages are weak,” Tinder said, softly. “Grindle’s our enemy now. We can’t run. We can only stand up to him.”

“Demon’s arse we will,” Ruk said. “Our best bet is to hide. Get away.”

“What then?” Solly said curtly. “Do we sit and wait for harvesters to find us? Do we let them take us like they took Ivy and George?”

“What else is there?” Ruk snapped.

“The demon,” Tinder said. “Without it, Grindle’s nothing. Arvin’ll be ours again.”

Ruk scoffed. “How do you suppose we face a demon?”

“We fight it?” Ju offered.

“You mean we fight Arvin,” Ruk said.

Ju gave an exasperated sigh. They were talking in circles. Couldn’t they see that none of it mattered? As always, the choice would not be theirs. “Pray for the gold,” she said cynically.

Tinder gave a low, terrified moan. She lunged and caught hold of Ju’s stump. Yelping, Ju expected a rush of stone-magic, but instead felt a warm and satisfying surge of well-wishing. “You won’t hurt Arvin,” Tinder said. Her voice was controlled, determined. “You’ll work alongside him.”

Ju could feel Rill’s presence at the edge of her senses. She tried to focus on it, but it disappeared. She could hear the others imploring Tinder to let go of her. “I’m not hurt,” Ju told them. “It’s Rill. She’s—”
Her vision grew hazy. She looked to Tinder, but instead saw Rill – the older Rill with eyes as intensely blue as Arvin’s, her rosebud lips turned down, afraid.

“Trust,” Rill said. “We’ll save Arvin with our trust. If I could return your arm to you, believe me I would. I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry…”

The image of Rill’s face faded, became Tinder’s. Ju blinked, gathered her wits. “What does Rill want?” she asked.

Tinder shook her head. “She won’t say. Can’t say.”

“Calm her,” Ruk growled, rubbing his brow. “Tell her to keep her fear to herself.”

Ju felt faint. Her stump of an arm ached.

“Come, sit down,” Solly said. She steered Ju to an armchair, helped her lower herself into it. She knelt beside her, took her hand. “Do you want us to fight Grindle? Help Arvin? If so, I’m behind you all the way. If you’re still not strong enough, we’ll wait for as long as we can.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Ju forced herself to breath slowly. The fear she felt was Rill’s fear, she realized. Rill was still trying to contact her.

Solly sent Ju a surge of well-wishing. “I wish we’d found each other earlier. You’re strong. If Henry couldn’t train you, he would have found someone who could. Let’s pray we can still find him. But if we can’t…” She swallowed. “If we can’t, I’ll do whatever I can to help you. I promise.”

Ju managed a smile. Solly seemed too young and fragile, yet at the same time so full of strength. “I should have joined the Groundists a year ago,” Ju said. “If I had, I wouldn’t have designed those horrible wings. The harvesters, they wouldn’t be—”

The doorbell downstairs jingled. It was followed by the bang of the door slamming open. Solly’s eyebrows shot up. “I left that door locked.”

Footsteps clattered up the stairs. Then voices...

“Listen,” a woman said. Her voice was sharp and high as if she were speaking through a gramophone. “They must have brought Tinder Morthock with them, for who else would have turned the clocks to stone like that? Perhaps Solly’s been turned to stone too. That would be a terrible shame wouldn’t it? Solly was such a lovely girl. Her past was so tragic. She deserved better.”

Solly shook her head, her eyes wide. “Surely not,” she whispered.

Heart thudding, remembering the life-like automatons she’d seen at Grindle’s,
Ju sprang to her feet. “I think, surely so.”

Ruk shot to the door, readying himself to strike. Ju placed herself opposite him, her single hand tingling.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” a man’s voice said. His voice was as high as the woman’s and drawing closer. “Solly may well be quite safe. It’s true that shifters do not like clockwork; but Tinder may have turned the clocks merely for the sake of peace and quiet.”

The approaching footsteps stomped and clanged as if from boots of iron. “How can anyone not like clockwork?” the woman asked. “It’s so much cleaner and neater than—” She paused.

The footsteps halted. “I do believe I hear them too,” the man said in a hushed voice. “Their breathing is quite tense, isn’t it?” Then louder, he said, “Is that you, Solly? Don’t be afraid, it’s only us. George and Ivy. We’re back. Isn’t it wonderful? We’re back.”

Tinder shrieked and ducked into the kitchen.

The dining room door swung open, admitting two rubber-skinned automatons wearing mage’s clothes that hung ridiculously over their angular frames. Both automatons moved with human-like efficiency but, unlike the blank-faced automatons at Grindle’s, these two had lips, noses and glassy eyes that stared coldly like dolls’ eyes.

Their features were George’s and Ivy’s.

Ruk raised his hand ready to strike.

“George? Ivy?” Solly asked. “What are you doing?”

“We live here,” the George automaton said morosely. It paused and gave a tense smile that made its rubber cheeks pucker. “Although, as you can see, we’re not exactly as we used to be.” It lifted its hand to its chest. “However, it’s what’s inside that counts, isn’t it? I assure you, my soul is one hundred percent Clapton.”

“As is mine,” the Ivy automaton added. Its voice was low, but squeaky like an over-tight violin string. “You must concede that steel and wire is a vast improvement on flesh and blood. A lot less messy, when you think about it. The best part is, our heart-magic is now being put to good use: feeding us instead of putting us in danger.”

The George automaton gestured to the dining table. “No need for food, anymore. No more cooking, eh Ivy? No washing up, no shopping, no time wasted on any of that.”
“Exactly,” the Ivy automaton agreed. “It can all go. Even the chamber pots.” It paused and contemplated its hands. “Strange. How cold my fingers are. Nothing hurts anymore. Not even my poor ankle from when I tripped in that pothole on the way here.” It frowned. “Nothing hurts; but nothing doesn’t hurt either.” It looked to the George automaton, its forehead puckering. “Is this life or death? I cannot say.”

Ju stood frozen, afraid that the automatons could turn nasty at any moment. She looked to Solly and Ruk who were equally perplexed and equally poised to strike.

The George automaton tapped its chest. “Can you not sense your heart-magic, Ivy? Does it not surge more strongly than it did when we were living? How good is it to know that we are no longer vulnerable?” It gave a stiff smile. “Ah Solly. You’ve returned with the shifter who seems to have grown again. Did he not care for the locket? And it seems you have found the girl, Ju. And Tinder as well, from the state of the clocks downstairs.”

“Oh yes,” the Ivy automaton added. “Dear Solly, I see you’ve found your old warden’s clothes. I’m glad you helped yourself to the food in the kitchen. It’d be a crying shame to waste it.”

“Thank you,” Solly said, warily. “You were attacked by harvesters. What happened after that?”

The George automaton gave a dismissive wave of its rubbery hand. “Don’t concern yourself with unnecessary details. What’s important is we’re safe. It no longer matters that the Groundists have fallen.” Its glassy eyes twitched. “Poor Henry Hawsted,” it added. “He’s probably still running. We must get word to him. I should return to Sir Mathias and tell him to despatch harvesters to retrieve him this very moment.”

“No,” Solly said. “I don’t think Henry would want to be—”

“No one willingly submits to conversion,” the George automaton interrupted. “Any more than anyone willingly submits to a powerhouse. But it’s for the greater good. Henry will understand, eventually. So will you when you’re converted.” It made for the door.

“Wait,” Ruk demanded. “Let’s talk first.”

The George automaton’s rubbery mouth turned down at the edges. “The shifter thinks it can order us around, does it?” It looked to Solly. “I’m surprised you’ve tolerated it for so long. It’s a shame the demon hasn’t taken it yet.”
Smiling a gummy smile, the George automaton lifted its hand and lunged. Knives snapped out from its fingers, aimed at Ruk.

Ju gasped. Her heart-magic shifted.

Ruk let out a sharp yowl. He sent a bolt of heart-magic directly into the automaton’s chest. It juddered backwards, its stylish shirt and waistcoat smouldering, its eyes bulging. Still smiling its gummy smile, it angled its head downwards as if puzzled at the yellow glow spreading out from its chest.

Stiffly it teetered and fell, hitting the ground with a metallic thump.

The Ivy automaton let out a long, breathless shriek. “Demon spawn,” it shouted, pointing at Ruk.

A volley of bullets exploded from its outstretched hand.

Ruk lurched backwards, looking more bewildered than hurt as blood spread out in a dark stain across his chest. He sank to his knees. Solly screamed as he slumped forward, blood pooling at his feet. He clutched his chest and looked at her, his face grey.

Solly reached his side in an instant, arms about him holding him up. “You can’t die,” she said frantically. “Shifters can’t die.”

The air grew damp with the scent of moss. “It shot him,” Tinder said blandly, emerging from the kitchen, her eyes fierce and her face set.

The Ivy automaton swung around, hand raised, aimed at Tinder. But Ju was quicker. She caught the automaton squarely in the back with a bolt of heart-magic; then screamed as her hand blistered and burned. The Ivy automaton’s gown burst into flame. It shuddered, stood teetering for a moment, hands raised above its head, fingers clinking and twitching.

The smell of moss grew heavy, oppressive. The Ivy automaton let out a shriek and froze. It opened its mouth as if to scream, but there was no sound as, suddenly, from the head down, its rubbery skin hardened. Veins of grey webbed out from the centre of its chest to its shoulders. It took a step forward, its body darkening. Then it toppled and hit the ground, its arms and legs shattering, breaking up into pebbles.

Ju knelt at Ruk’s side as he half kneeled and half slumped against Solly. He stared ahead, his eyes as empty as George and Ivy’s had been; no doubt how Forley’s must have looked when he’d been murdered by the sentries.

“Why’s he not healing himself?” she asked. She leaned close to his ear, put her burned hand on his elbow and flinched when pain stabbed deep along her palm.
“If you need more of my magic, take it now.”

“He’s so still, so cold…” Solly stammered between sobs. “Can’t you do anything to help him?” She paused, looked down to Ruk’s knees. “Oh.”

Ruk’s blood where it had pooled on the floor began to shimmer. Its edges blurred into blood-red mist that rose up and coalesced at Ruk’s chest. He inhaled sharply, sucking it in.

“What can I do?” Ju asked. “Tell me how to help.”

Ruk shuddered and took hold of her hand. His grip was like ice, pulling at her heart-magic, jerking it violently out of her. She flinched from the suddenness of it, but kept hold of him, afraid that if she let go he’d not be able to heal himself. She could not bear to see him die. Even if he wasn’t Forley, it would be Forley’s face. Then she’d know exactly how he’d looked on the wharves. She’d relive his dying over and over.

Her hand grew warm. She was about to let go of Ruk when she felt something different about his magic, something she’d not felt before – an utterly alien feeling that bristled strangely. It was almost as if her mind had suddenly sharpened and her heart-magic had focussed to a single point, twisting itself into something tangible, filling her with wellbeing.

She drew a little of it into her, hoping that by doing so, she could see it and understand how it worked. But there was nothing to see.

“You’re taking my shifter magic,” Ruk said hoarsely. “Stop.” He pulled away.

“Please, I just want to look,” she said. She snatched his wrist again. “It’s like heart-magic, but it feels different.”

Ruk regarded her warily.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked.

“Only a little. But I’d like you to stop anyway.”

Remembering how it had felt to have her own magic taken without her consent, Ju felt suddenly ashamed. She let go of his hand; but the magic she’d taken stayed with her, turning inside her, making her own magic turn with it.

The last of the blood-red mist disappeared into Ruk’s chest. Still kneeling at his side, Solly ran her hand over his bullet-shredded shirt. Through the holes in the fabric, Ju could see his wounds closing over, his skin rippling into place like liquid clay.

“Say something,” Solly pleaded to him. “Tell me you’re going to be all right.”
Gently, she pushed his long, ropey hair away from his eyes.

“Of course, I’ll be all right,” he said. “I’m Ruk.”

She smiled back as if sharing a private joke. He put his arm about her shoulders, drew her close. Then he whispered something that Ju could not hear and Solly buried her face into the crook of his neck.

Feeling suddenly like an outsider, Ju stood. He’s not Forley, she reminded herself. Magic tingled at her fingertips, not burning and overpowering like heart-magic, but cool, distinct and graspable.

Ruk regarded her curiously. “What is it?”

“Your magic, I think,” Ju said. “It feels like it belongs to me.”

“See if you can use it, then.”

“Use it for what?”

“Well, the obvious thing would be to finish healing your burnt hand. Or do you want it remain like that forever?”

Ju blinked. Her hand no longer hurt. She’d assumed it had healed already when Ruk took her magic. She held it up. Burnt skin shimmered in a halo of pale, blue light. Through it she could see the contours of her flesh; and beneath that, the intricate patterns sustaining it. Without thinking, she took hold of Ruk’s magic as if it were a paintbrush and smoothed the damaged skin over, pressing it into place.

“It’s working,” Ruk said. His voice was soft and encouraging like Forley’s had been when he’d patiently taught her the rudiments of tinkering.

“Shifter magic feels like heart-magic,” she told him. “Only much more obedient and easier to use.”

The halo about her hand faded, winked out, leaving her hand completely healed. She looked to Ruk, perplexed.

He frowned, his eyes hard.

“Do you know what just happened?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I’m guessing you helped yourself to some of my shifter-magic while I was healing. Maybe it healed you. Or maybe it helped you to wield your own magic so you could heal yourself. Whatever the case, don’t ask me to do it again. The preparation was excruciating.” He winced and clutched his chest.

Tinder made a low sound in the back of her throat. “Rill’s awake. She’ll keep us safe. She promises.” She swayed a little, then gripped the dining table to steady herself. The mossy smell of stone-making magic filled the room.
Ju backed away. “Tinder, don’t. There’s no need.”

“No?” Grey veins of stone spread out from Tinder’s fingertips, snaking their way across the tabletop. The wooden surface hardened, crackled. “Arvin is lost,” Tinder whispered. “The demon now seeks Ju.”

Ruk winced. “I feel Rill. She’s shrieking her Fear at me. In the name of Fate, Tinder, do something about it. Tell her to stop.”

Oddly, Ju could no longer feel it. Not a hint. Not even a vague sensation of fear.

Tinder stroked her belly, began to hum tunelessly.

Ruk relaxed a little. He stood and stepped over the shattered remains of Ivy to nudge the George automaton with his foot. Smoke curled in a thin plume from the corner of its mouth.

“A few days ago,” Ju said, “Arvin took me to Sir Mathias’s workshop. He wanted to see for himself why Sir Mathias was building the harvesters. We were attacked by sentries – automatons like these – but they used truncheons. They didn’t have knives or bullets. Or if they did, they didn’t use them.”

She knelt beside the automaton and tore away its shirt. She pressed her fingers at the edge of what looked like a breastplate. It sprang open with a soft click. Behind it, a harvester nestled in the chest cavity, fitting snugly amid wires and clockwork. If she’d not known their dreadful purpose, she might have thought their arrangement beautiful. She’d not seen such detailed intricacy before; or such tiny connections. “Do you think it’s dead now?” she asked. “Or is George’s soul still trapped inside it?”

Ruk squatted beside her. He held his hand tentatively above the harvester. “It feels different to the one that almost took Solly.” He eased his fingers about the surrounding clockwork and wrenched the harvester free. Its glass wings opened out and hung limp.

“Be careful,” Solly said. “It might—”

“It’s useless,” Ruk said, cupping it in his hands. He lowered it to the floor. “The heart-magic inside it’s been changed – stripped of life. I doubt I could use it for anything more than lighting up my fingers. Or animating machines.” He stood. Lip curling, he lifted his foot and crushed the harvester beneath his heel. It sparked and burst, sending out a shower of cogs, wheels, springs and wires.

“I can feel its memories,” Ruk said. He sniffed the air, frowned. “Escaping.
George’s memories. They were trapped with his soul. I could take them if I wanted. But then I would shift.”

“That’s hideous,” Solly said. “What will become of George now?”

“Death has become of him.”

“And her?” Ju asked pointing to the shattered remains of Ivy.

Ruk shrugged. “Can’t say. Pray to your Fates that she’s not aware of her surroundings like Rill is.”

Solly knelt to pick up a fragment of hand that had broken off from Ivy’s arm. Before touching it, she pulled away and said, “As stone, it looks more human than when it was made from rubber and steel. It’s not really Ivy’s hand, is it? In life, she would never have attacked Ruk. She was George’s wife, but she was no fighter.”

Solly looked from Ju to Ruk to Tinder, her face miserable. “Why’s Grindle doing this?”

“Because he doesn’t have heart-magic,” Tinder said. “Like Arvin, he cannot make his own. His parents disowned him, sent him to the workhouse. Now he despises all mages. This is how he fights them. By stealing their souls. By turning them into machines. This is why Rill turned to stone. He thought he could take her soul and make it his. He tried to strap me into a heart-chair—” She paused, shuddered. “Strange that I only remember it now. After all those years.” She wrapped her arms about herself and rocked back and forth.

Ju shivered. She pulled her coat about herself. “And Rill?” she asked. “Rill remembers as well, doesn’t she? When Arvin found Sir Mathias’s stone arm, Rill remembered how it happened.”

“Enough,” Tinder said miserably. “You know and I know. So that’s enough. We shan’t tell anyone else. Please.” She covered her face in her hands and began to weep.

“The sooner we leave the city, the better,” Ju said. She wanted to comfort Tinder, but the smell of Rill’s stone-making magic still lingered about her. She dared not move any closer.

“Yes,” Solly agreed. Her voice sounded confident, yet when she drew herself to her feet, Ju saw she was shaking.

“Are you all right?” Ju asked. “Maybe we should wait a while.”

Solly shook her head. “I’ll be fine.” Ruk took her hand, and she added, “It’s this house…too much has happened…too many deaths. Too many.” For a moment,
her lips trembled, but then she lifted her chin. “We shouldn’t linger,” she said briskly. “We should stay away from known Groundist meeting points. If the automatons were privy to George and Ivy’s memories, then they – and perhaps Grindle – would know everything we’ve planned.”

“We should head inland, away from the monastery to the mountains” Ruk said. “I can take you through the forests, under cover.”

No one could offer an alternative, so Ruk nodded. “We should leave now.”

Without waiting for an answer, he gathered up the rest of the food, rolled it in a blanket and tied it to his back. Then the four of them made their way downstairs and outside. The night was cold, fogless. A half moon broke through scudding clouds. As Solly was about to pull the door closed, the crow shot out at the last moment and made itself comfortable on her shoulder. Ruk scoffed and tried to brush it away; but the bird stood its ground, even after Ruk put his arm about Solly’s waist.

“Leave it,” Solly said. “It’s all we have left of George.”

“It’s shameful to force it to remain helpless,” Ruk countered. He stroked its feathers. Ju supposed he was well-wishing it. “Go on then,” Ruk said, pulling his hand away. “Follow us if you must, but do it under your own steam.”

The crow stretched its wings, squawked. Then, with all the confidence of the wild spirit it was born to be, it fluttered its wings.

Solly frowned as the crow skirted the eaves and circled overhead. She lifted her hand as if to call the crow back. “It’s for the best, I suppose,” Solly said, turning away, her shoulders hunched as she started along the path. When Ruk caught up with her, she slipped her hand into his.

Ju wrapped her arms about her chest to ward off the cold. For a moment she forgot her hand was missing. She could still feel her fingers curling up as if they were there. She could also feel Ruk’s die in her pocket – the one he had given her in the hovel. Its magnetic field seemed stronger now, and familiar. The magic she’d stolen from Ruk lit it up in her mind’s eye, tracing its patterns. It glowed warmly, an alien presence clinging to her heart-magic, rendering it visible like so many unnatural colours turning.

As she kept pace with the others, she practised taking hold of it with her skin magic, exploring it, turning it over and over in her mind, memorising it and focusing it, wondering what she could get it to do. But soon, Ruk’s magic began to fade, winking out as if she’d used it all up. The patterns of her own magic winked out as
She tried to visualize it again, but it was like groping in the dark, knowing that its invisible presence meant something, but unable to see what.

Chapter 27

“There’s something extraordinarily satisfying about seeing my creations perpetuate themselves,” Sir Mathias said.

He led Arvin to a workroom where automatons with rubbery faces assembled harvesters with disturbing efficiency. Not one of them spoke. Their tinkering sounded rhythmical, synchronized as if by mutual agreement. “At this rate,” Sir Mathias added, “We could have every mage in Forsham converted within the month.”

The demon shifted at the edge of Arvin’s consciousness. *When that happens,* it whispered, *we’ll no longer yearn to be them, no longer yearn...*

Arvin wanted to clench his teeth in defiance; but the demons made him smile instead. An idiot’s smile, Arvin suspected, as his legs unwillingly propelled him forward in Sir Mathias’s wake to the adjoining room.

Here, automatons were assembling more automatons amid the clink of screwdrivers and the whirr of gears.

“No battle has ever been fought so cleanly,” Sir Mathias said. “There’ll be minimal bloodshed. Life will be enhanced for winners and losers alike.”

*Not for him,* the demon crowed.

Despite losing control of his actions, Arvin’s emotions were no less insufferable. His disgust at his stepfather’s plans swelled in the back of his throat and there was nothing he could do to ease it. The realization that his real father, Eln, made up part of the demon sickened him. Its plan to destroy everything filled him with the kind of anger that, if left unvented, could turn him insane.

No, he would not succumb to that. He’d wait and watch and when his magic waned – for surely it must – he’d regain control of himself. Then it would be he who wielded the demon.

*My son,* Eln crooned. *Our plan is not to destroy. Our plan is to become. Sir Mathias will become us and we’ll become him and he’ll become you, and you’ll become Ju, and...*
Arvin’s mind screamed a silent protest. Insanity! It can’t be beaten, can’t be endured.

Sir Mathias continued on to the elevator. Arvin’s gut churned as the demons forced him to enter it. The door slammed shut and the floor lurched into a nauseating descent. “Do not fight the demon if you can help it,” Sir Mathias went on. “Life will be too unbearable if you do. Besides, you should feel privileged it chose you.”

He speaks from experience, the demon whispered. We found him in the workhouse. A poor, discarded boy, a mage’s son without an ounce of magic to save himself. He wanted us, so we entered him because we were curious as to why. The demon twittered. In his mind’s eye, Arvin could see Sir Mathias as a child, storming away from the workhouse, one hand thrust defiantly in his coat pocket, the other misshapen and hanging limply. “I hate you all,” Sir Mathias yelled into the city. “Every last one of you.”

See his poor, twisted arm? The demon sighed. Resistant to healing, no matter how much heart-magic his parents poured into it.

Despite himself, Arvin’s curiosity was piqued. You helped him construct his mechanical arms?

No. He did that. All on his own. Even without us he would have made a master tinkerer. He understood that as well as we did. So he would not accept us until we offered him more.

What did you offer?

The one thing he didn’t have.

Heart-magic?

The demon answered with amused silence.

But how? How could you have entered a mage without heart-magic? How did you feed?

You’ll see, the demon tittered. He’s taking us there now.

The elevator lurched to a halt. The demon must have felt Arvin’s aversion to it because it took hold of his fear and drew it out, expanding it. Would you like to be locked inside? Would you like to be sent up and down, and up and down, for all eternity?

Ignoring the demon, Arvin focussed on Sir Mathias’s pitted brass fingers working the levers. He scarcely noticed the elevator doors open. He barely felt himself follow Sir Mathias into the workshop – could only watch in horror as he was
taken outside into a waiting motor carriage.

“I suspect the demon has not yet informed you as to where we’re going,” Sir Mathias said. “It has a sadistic sense of humour, you see. It likes to keep you guessing in the hope you’ll guess wrong.” He paused, gloating, aware no doubt of Arvin’s misery. “When it first entered me, I thought it would kill me. Instead it gave me everything. Do you understand? Everything.” He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “For Fate’s sake, Arvin, relax. Part of it’s your father. Your real father. He chose you because you’re his.”

Arvin’s mind reeled with nausea. The demon crowed.

Outside, the night’s silence was broken by the clunk and clatter of iron wheels over gravel. To Arvin’s horror, the arriving carriage was driverless and smokeless. He stepped inside to be assailed with a sense of despair emanating from its interior and through the coldness of its leather seat.

*It’s the soul that animates it, the demons said. Captured from a worker. Now it pours all of its hatred into resenting your presence.*

Sweat trickled down the back of Arvin’s neck. The carriage rolled forward, the interminable clatter of its pistons and flywheels jarring him to the bone. He imagined himself screaming inwardly at the demon…

You’re not my father. You might have been once, but you deserted my mother. You attacked my sister. You sent us to Sir Mathias.

*We offered Tinder ecstasy,* the demon whispered. *But she chose to reject us—chose insanity instead.*

She’s not insane. Rill is, Arvin countered.

The demon twisted through his consciousness, invisible tendrils clenching, pumping, squeezing. *Ah Rill,* it crooned. *She fears us because she doesn’t know us. But you’ll show her won’t you? You’ll show her we love her. You’ll take us to Ju. She’ll give us her magic willingly. We’ll be too strong for Sir Mathias, too strong for Rill, too strong for them all.*

Arvin could not so much as turn his head. Through the corner of his eye he could look through the window at the passing streets outside. He tried to focus on the towering buildings of the factory district, concentrating on the ragged lines of their brickwork to clear his mind, to block the out demon in the same way he used to block out Rill.

But soon it seemed, even his mind was no longer his. He felt himself shudder
as the demon twisted inside him, its tendrils running the length and breath of his spine. His heart beat to their rhythm. Caught up in utter mindlessness, his magic sang.

It wasn’t until the carriage drew to an abrupt, rattling halt that Arvin regained his senses enough to take note of where it had taken him.

Sir Mathias pulled a lever, opening the carriage door, letting in an aura of fear, sharp and overpowering. The demon forced Arvin to step out. For a long moment it let him stand, catching his breath. The stench from open sewers made him wish he could retch. Instead, he could only imagine himself cowering at the familiar stark walls looming over him.

The demon crowed. *Our son not only fears elevators and carriages, but prisons as well.* The demon conjured an image in Arvin’s mind’s eye. He saw himself as a lad on the day Sir Mathias had dragged him kicking and screaming into the receiving room. Even now, the walls terrified him, as if in entering them, he too would be consumed.

*Poor little half-shifter can’t see the value of our creation,* the demon whispered. *He does not embrace it like Sir Mathias did. He’d rather buy his heart-magic like a human would buy a whore.*

Creation? Arvin thought bitterly. You created the heart-chairs? Through Sir Mathias?

*When a demon seeks refuge in hosts who cannot make their own heart-magic, what else should we do? Starve?*

#

The receiving room attendant was young and plain, a chambermaid in formal black. She ushered Sir Mathias and Arvin into a tastefully decorated chamber separated from the main prison by thick, iron walls. Gaslights fashioned in the style of finger-lights hung from a low ceiling, bathing the room in a soft, yellow glow.

If Arvin had control of his movements, he would have choked with disgust. Someone had clearly made an effort to disguise the room’s true purpose. The inner walls were lined with velvet, muffling the rattling of the surrounding iron. The receiving chairs were upholstered with burgundy leather, arranged in a polite circle.

*Take the second chair,* the demon said, forcing Arvin to sit. *Let Sir Mathias believe we respect him.*

Arvin’s mouth stretched into a fawning smile as the attendant fastened the electrodes. Blushing, the attendant moved on to Sir Mathias, leaving Arvin to wonder
why the prisoners were no longer in the same room. He recalled being brought here years ago as a child. He could still see the prisoners in his mind’s eye, terrified, chained to extraction chairs at the room’s centre.

*Now, they keep them in the room beneath,* the demon explained. *Their chairs are hidden because mages do not like to be disturbed by the sight of their donors dying and being brought back to life in front of them. What they do not see, cannot haunt them; which is why humans are so malleable. They’re experts at self-deception. Thieves by nature, murderers by decree.*

The electrodes grew warm. The flow of magic began, a trickle that seemed weak and bland compared to the magic he’d taken from Ju. Then the flow strengthened and Arvin prepared himself for an onslaught of despair; for surely heart-magic stolen from mistreated donors could only be infused with suffering.

*Suffering is in the eyes of the beholder,* the demon whispered. *In our veins it’s something different. Something...*  
The room dimmed, lurched, fell away. Thinking he was falling, Arvin tried to scream. The demon forced him to turn his head so he could see Sir Mathias sitting next to him, his face upraised, eyes wide, teeth clamped down on his lower lip.  
Fates alive, Arvin thought. It’s not suffering we feel in the heart-chairs it’s—...ecstasy, the demon echoed.  
*Stop, stop, stop,* Arvin wanted to scream. *I do not want...* But the demon forced him to throw back his head and give in to the pure pleasure of the heart-magic flowing unhindered, surging, filling him, immersing him in great, ravenous draughts.  
When it was done – when the demon’s whispering returned, rippling through Arvin’s consciousness like a caress – he could not bring himself to so much as anticipate that the magic would stop. It was too delicious, too utterly overpowering – the most beautiful thing he had felt.  
All too soon, it slowed to a steady trickle, ceased. The gaslights above brightened. The demon forced Arvin to look ahead to see Sir Mathias stir and wipe a strand of drool from the side of his mouth.  
*See how pathetic he is,* the demon whispered. *His human qualities are not enough. Unlike you, he does not have the best of both worlds. He believes your mixture of shifterness and humanness makes you weak. He doesn’t suspect that, together, we’ll be stronger than he can ever be.*  
Sir Mathias opened his eyes, blinked and looked about, perplexed. The fingers
of his titanium hand sparked. “It’s addictive, isn’t it?” he said thickly. “Heart-magic: both a joy and a misery. When its sources are harvested and converted, it will be fully contained. We’ll no longer need it. It’ll no longer distract us.”

Arvin felt strangely hollow despite the power bristling through his veins. He no longer cared that the demon controlled him. He barely noticed it taking him out of the receiving room, back into the carriage and through the dark, silent streets to Upper Slik.

#

The automaton at the gates to Sir Mathias’s mansion greeted them with screechy deference. “Housekeeping’s running as regular as clockwork.” Its humanlike face puckered at the edges, not quite smiling. “The kitchen hands are ready to run, as smooth as well-oiled pistons. The chambermaids are somewhat frayed at the edges, but with a bit of starch, they’re sure to shape up with the requisite stiff upper lips.” It tittered to itself as if its attempt at humour was its own doing and not some poorly written instruction.

It occurred to Arvin that the automaton’s face was familiar. It reminded him of a rival factory owner, a man by the name of Ronald Diamond.

Bemused, the demon allowed Arvin a moment to study the automaton’s face. Despite the rubbery skin that gave it a doll-like tackiness, its chin receded a little and the cheekbones were rounded and low. Its mop of brown hair was brushed into a mound about its head and parted at the centre.

Yes, indeed Ronald Diamond, Arvin thought with detached curiosity.

_It’s Sir Mathias’s little game_, the demon explained. _He allows the stolen soul to imprint itself on the automaton’s blank features. Its written instructions allow it the semblance of autonomy, while at the same time forcing it to do his bidding._

He’s made them into slaves, Arvin thought.

The demon’s presence expanded, amused, proud. _He’s blessed them._

In the entrance hall, Sir Mathias was greeted by an automaton whose sharp, rubbery face resembled yet another rival. It ushered them into a drawing room where a chambermaid stood primly with her back turned, pouring tea. She lowered the teapot and swivelled on her heel, proffering two cups in her perfectly steady hands.

Yet another automaton, Arvin thought dimly. Then he looked to its face, at its heavily painted lips, its kohl-rimmed eyes and haughty tilt of its neck. Sweet Purgatory, it was his aunt, Christina Grindle.
Would he ever be free of her?

The thing pursed its lips. “You always were the squeamish one,” it said. Despite the grating, high-pitched timbre of its voice, it still spoke with its original owner’s huskiness, enunciating each word slowly like a true mage.

Arvin tried to recoil, but the demon held him upright. It forced him to accept the cup and nod his thanks. The Christina automaton graced him with a rubbery smile, its cheeks puckering at odd angles. “Oh Arvin, surely you do not regret how you felled me with Miss Weatherton’s heart-magic. I dare say it’s your most spectacular achievement yet.” It grimaced, an oddly comical gesture. “Most likely your only achievement.”

Sir Mathias looked on with his eyebrows raised. “Tell me about this woman—this Miss Weatherton.”

Arvin broke out in a cold sweat. The demon took hold of his tongue, wielded it. “Her name is Ju. Surely you remember her,” it forced him to say. “The young tinkerer girl in Repair Shop 18. You demoted her. Sent her to the broom lad for retraining.”


The demon’s tendrils shifted, probing Arvin’s mind for memories of Ju. “Your harvesters will not be able to take her magic,” the demon forced him to say. “She’s too strong. But Arvin can. She’d give it to him. He’d use her magic to give you Rill.”

Sir Mathias pursed his lips in a curious Christina-like gesture. “Rill? Where is she now? Can you feel her?”

The demon probed Arvin’s mind again, forcing him to show it his last memory of Tinder, of how he had left her with Ju, of how he’d told her to flee as far away from the city as the carriage could take her.

“Rill’s with Ju,” Arvin heard himself say. “Rill, Ju and Tinder, they’re together.”

“Where?” Arvin fought to clamp his lips shut, but his answer rang out as if uttered beyond him. “She’s fleeing the city. Show us you have the means to reach her and we’ll take you.”

Sir Mathias contemplated his pitted brass hand. “I have much to settle with
Rill.” He paused, flexed his brass fingers and winced as they squeaked. “What will you do with them – with Ju and Rill?”

“Ju is for us. Rill is for you.”

For a moment, Arvin thought Sir Mathias would refuse, for surely he knew the demon well enough to understand that its loyalties lay only with its own kind. 

*He’s too vain for that,* the demon whispered. *Too vain, too vain, too vain…*”

“Very well,” Sir Mathias said smoothly. “Rill’s magic is strong enough to protect me from Ju. And Ju’s magic will protect you from Rill. It’s only fair that we begin our pact evenly matched. Follow me.” He turned on his heel. The Christina automaton gestured for Arvin to follow.

His legs complied, following Sir Mathias while Christina kept pace behind them.

Sir Mathias took them up a set of winding stairs that led to the mansion’s roof. As they neared the top, Arvin became distinctly aware of a presence awaiting them. Its despair was the same kind of despair he’d felt in the carriage.

*If you hated the elevator so much, what will you think of this?* the demon asked, gloating.

They reached a landing. Sir Mathias opened the door.

I can’t, Arvin thought. You know I can’t do this. Don’t let him force me.

*Oh but we must,* the demon crowed. *It’s the only way to find Rill – to find Ju.*

The door swung open, letting in a burst of cold night air. Sir Mathias strode forward over a horizontal, tiled rooftop. “Hurry,” he urged.

Arvin’s legs carried him in Sir Mathias’s wake. Ahead, he saw a large bollard attached to the roof’s centre. As if of their own accord, his eyes followed the line of the thick chain coiled around it, one end draped over the roof tiles and the other straining skyward.

An airship, like an enormous lofted whale, loomed impatiently above it.

The elevator was nothing compared to this, while the inside of the carriage was not half as frigid.

Souls? Arvin thought. He uses souls to power it?

*Spectacular, isn’t it?* the demon whispered. *Even we could not have imagined such genius. An airship powered on human souls, fuelled by its own heart-magic?* 

A collection of bodiless minds, Arvin though defiantly. A demon! Like you are.
The demon neither agreed nor disagreed. Arvin wondered if his observation was closer to the truth than the demon cared to admit.

“Hurry,” Sir Mathias called out.

Above him, a hatch in the airship’s wooden gondola opened, revealing an automaton lowering a rope ladder. Its end landed on the roof at Sir Mathias’s feet. As the demons forced Arvin to follow Sir Mathias up, Arvin’s fear for Ju receded. His hands grew slick with sweat, slipping against the rungs. His gut churned a nauseous protest. I can’t do this, I can’t, he thought.

Then let us do it for you, the demon soothed. Poor little half-shifter has suffered enough.

Arvin’s mind grew heavy, the ladder suddenly distant. The demons forced him step by terrifying step upwards. The mansion receded beneath him. Cold night air pummelled his face. His ears rang and suddenly he could hear a voice – Rill’s terrified voice – calling him, begging him to stop.

I’m sorry, he thought. I’m so, so sorry. I can’t do this. I can’t.

His hands grew numb.

Sleep, the demon whispered. While we take you to Rill.

His eyes grew heavy. He could no longer see any harm in what he was doing. What did it matter if he allowed himself to be swallowed by up by the formless and uncaring nothingness the demon now offered him? He wouldn’t know, wouldn’t see, wouldn’t care. He shivered inwardly as blankness closed about him. It felt good. So wonderfully good that he no longer cared to fight it.

“Sir Mathias,” he heard himself saying. “I have a suggestion. Before we seek Ju, there’s someone else we must visit first. Someone who’ll convince her to trust us.”

Chapter 28

Rill’s scream rose to a wild crescendo, resonating through Ju bones like heart-magic burning. Ju staggered and fell. Her vision went dark. For a long agonized moment, she could see Rill’s face – her baby face – contorted in a howl of terror, fists clenched, legs rigid and back arched.

“For Fate’s sake calm that child of yours,” Ruk growled at Tinder.
Ju forced her eyes open to see Ruk crouched at Solly’s feet, hands rammed over his ears, head shaking, ropey hair flying about his shoulders.

“She’s not a child,” Tinder moaned. “She’s a woman trapped. For eighteen years, she’s been—”

Tinder’s knees folded. She fell heavily onto her rump. She wrapped her arms about her belly and rocked herself back and forth. “Shh shh shh. We won’t let them hurt us. I promise we won’t.”

Gradually, Rill’s screaming eased. Ruk stood up, frowning. “What was that about?”

“Shh shh shh,” Tinder whispered, rocking.

The wet-earth smell of stone-making magic filled the air. Ju lurched away, as did Solly and Ruk. The grass at Tinder’s knees began to crackle and darken into a widening circle of stone stalks about her.

“Tinder, make her stop,” Ju pleaded.

“She can’t help it,” Tinder shrieked. “It’s Arvin. He’s caught, caught, caught…”

The growing circle of stone stilled. Tinder folded her arms over her mound of a belly. She ran her hand over the brittle stems in front of her, flinching as they snapped at her touch. She shook her head. “This is not what Rill wants. Arvin doesn’t want it either. But Eln, their father…” She began to rock again. “He’s forcing them. Oh Eln, my love, my beautiful, beautiful Eln. I knew what you’d become, but I still loved you. I shouldn’t have…”

“Who’s Eln?” Ruk asked.

“Arvin’s father,” Solly said. “Tinder’s shifter lover. He turned demon before Rill was born.”

Ruk’s eyes turned hard.

“It was a long time ago,” Solly added.

“He must have loved Tinder very much. If he chose demonhood over becoming her.”

Ju did not understand what Ruk was talking about, but clearly Solly did. She threaded her arm in his, and whispered to him. His gaze grew distant, haunted.

The smell of moss grew faint. Tinder put her face in her hands and began to weep. “Eln could have become me if he wanted to. If I’d known it would have come to this, I would have let him.”
“Demon’s arse, you should have,” Ruk spat. “Killing you wouldn’t have stopped him from turning demon. It would only have delayed it.”

Tinder took a deep shuddering breath. “It’s cruel. Too, too cruel.”

“We should rest,” Solly said. “Tinder must be exhausted. She’s needs her strength to calm Rill.”

It had taken them a good five hours to get from Clapton’s in Lower Slik to the market wharves, where they had taken a ferry upriver and eastwards to the turn off to the Five Finger Mountains. Even Solly had been tempted to make straight for the monastery, but all agreed it made better sense to head in the opposite direction.

After the ferry dropped them off at the city’s edge, they’d walked north for two more hours towards the forests. Now they paused in an old churchyard, where tombstones stood crookedly like loose teeth. The wooden Fate church behind them seemed more ancient than the land itself. Low in the east, a morning star shone brightly through wisps of blushing cloud.

Tinder pulled herself to her feet and peered up at it. “Listen. They’re coming. Can you hear them?”

Ju frantically scanned the sky, expecting harvesters. In the distance, she could hear the faint thrum of the city stirring, the steady grumble of the foundries; but thankfully not the whining of wings. She squinted, scanned east to west, watching for the tell tale blackness of a swarm.

“Over there,” Solly said, pointing inland.

Towards the southern horizon near the foothills of the Five Finger Mountains, a small, dark oval could be seen drifting towards them. Ju let out a sigh of relief. “It’s just an airship. If it were looking for us, it’d be approaching from within the city not from without.”

“They’ve found us. They know where we are,” Tinder shrieked.

“Shush,” Ruk said irritably. “They’ll hear you from up there.”

Solly and Ju exchanged glances. “Whoever it is, it’s time for us to make shelter anyway,” Solly said. She drew her coat about her and started for the church.

Ju kept her gaze on the airship. It was definitely heading their way. “Is this what Rill senses?” she asked Tinder.

Tinder’s eyes grew wild, her face a pale oval beneath wild, knotted hair. “She won’t show me. She won’t look.” Ju almost reached over to comfort her with a surge of well-wishing, but as she stepped forward, her feet crunched over the stone, grassy
stalks. The smell of moss grew heavy again.

Tinder met her gaze and bit her lip. She let Ju go into the church first.

Inside, the church was deserted and smelled of must. The floorboards were riddled with woodworm. Strings of faded and torn Fate flags crisscrossed the ceiling above them. Motes swirled in pale light, angling through a broken stained-glass window. At the back, towards the altar, someone had pulled up the floor and used it as firewood, which now lay in a charred pile against the wall.

The group sat in a circle a little apart from Tinder and ate the food that Ruk had carried from Clapton’s. Already they could hear the airship approaching, a steady thrum, high above.

“It’s not slowing,” Ruk said. “It’s going to pass.”

Tinder rocked back and forth on her haunches, stroking her belly, her face deep in concentration. “Rill will not look…will not look…will not look.”

Solly said something quiet into Ruk’s ear. He put his arm about her shoulders and laughed uneasily. “Yes, it’s true,” he said. “I could simply turn to mist. But Rill would find me again; and keep finding me until I’ve done what she wants.”

“Has she told you what that is?” Solly asked.

Ruk shook his head. “I fear we’ll be finding out soon.” He pushed his hair back over his forehead in a gesture that was so Forley-like that Ju’s heart ached. Even so, beside Solly’s subdued curls, his ropey hair, bare of trinkets, seemed wild and impossible, hardly like Forley’s at all. “Anyway, that’s not why I’m here anymore,” he added. He leaned close to Solly and kissed her forehead.

Remembering Forley’s kiss, Ju resisted the urge to touch her own forehead. She reached for the chain about her neck and brought out her mother’s daisy locket. Despite knowing it would do little good, she prayed to Fate that Papa was now as safe as Arvin had promised. She closed her fingers about the marcasite petals and tried to feel her mother’s presence.

But felt only cold, lifeless metal.

Strangely, she could still feel Ruk’s die in her pocket, its magnetic field a warm knot against her thigh. She tucked her mother’s locket back beneath her bodice and brought out the die in its place. She closed her eyes and pictured its magnetic field, turning and turning like so many cogs and wheels. When she tried to focus on a single cog, several more would appear in its place in ever widening circles. She flinched with surprise as magic sank into her flesh and flowed along her bones – a
pleasant sensation that filled her with a sense of achievement.
    Her heart-magic shifted to meet it. As did something else.
    Vaguely, she could hear Ruk’s voice. “What are you doing? What are you
    doing?”
    The die grew even warmer against her fingers, and then hot. She let out a
    sharp cry, dropped it and opened her eyes.
    The die lay at her feet, unmoving, lifeless.
    “You took its magnetic field,” Ruk said. He was glaring at her, his eyes harder
    than Forley’s had ever been. “How did you do it?”
    Ju opened and closed her hand. As far as she could tell, she hadn’t done
    anything. Whatever had happened, the die had done it to her.
    “Even I can’t do that,” Ruk said. “Keep practising and who knows what else
    you could steal?”
    A chill ran up and down Ju’s spine. She brushed the die aside. “That’s the last
    thing I need.”
    They settled into an uneasy silence. Tinder continued to rock back and forth,
    stroking her belly, whispering to Rill, “Do not look, do not look, do not look…” Solly
    and Ruk sat together, arms about each other, whispering.
    Ju wondered how Solly and Ruk had found each other. She wished she’d had
    more time to get to know Solly, to find out why she had risked so much to get Ju
    away from the mansion. She wondered if Ruk had asked her to; but that didn’t make
    sense. As far as she could tell, he needed her only for magic. But if that were true, he
    could have taken it from anyone.
    Perhaps then, it was Forley’s memories that drove him…
    But he’s not Forley, she reminded herself sharply. He’s Ruk.
    She closed her eyes and leaned back against the rough, wooden wall, restless
    to move on and reach the forest before whatever terrified Rill reached her.
    Gradually, the heavy thrum of the airship began to fade. Ju’s thoughts
    wandered back to what she might have done to take the die’s magnetic field. She
    tried to picture it in her mind, but there was nothing to see. It was as if she had taken
    it and transformed it into something different. Maybe she’d made it hers, she decided,
    or perhaps she’d used it without realizing and lost it, much like she’d lost the shifter
    magic she’d taken from Ruk.

#
“Listen,” Solly said. “It’s coming back.”

Ju opened her eyes. Her neck ached from dozing off half sitting up. The rumble of the airship had indeed grown louder, its engines whining down. She counted the seconds, hoping the airship would pass. Tinder began rocking again, back and forth, clutching her belly. “He’s found us,” she moaned. “He knows.”

“Grindle or Arvin?” Ruk demanded.

Tinder shot him a terrified glance. “Rill must not look,” she muttered in a low voice. “She must not scream. She must not look.”

Ju fought down a surge of panic, a raw ache that came from outside of her.

From Rill, she realized.

Ruk winced. “Calm her, for Fate’s sake.”

“She’s trying,” Solly snapped. “The last thing she needs is to be blamed.”

Ruk’s eyes grew sullen, hard.

“I’m sorry,” Solly said, “But we’ve got to work together, not against each other.”

“You can’t work with insanity,” Ruk countered.

Solly sniffed, pulled away from him and stood. “It doesn’t help to inflame it either.” Hesitantly, she moved towards Tinder. “Is there anything we can do to make it easier?” she asked.

Ju held her breath. She was suddenly aware of her stump of an arm, and of how quickly Tinder had turned it to stone.

“Solly,” Ruk warned. “Don’t get too close.”

Solly waved her hand dismissively. “Rill’s not insane. She’s terrified. She needs to know we’re with her. She probably senses our fear of her; but there’s nothing she can do. How alone must that be? How can she ever feel safe?”

“It’s your safety that’s at stake,” Ruk growled, “not hers.”

Solly rounded on him, her green eyes flashing. “It’s not about safety at all. It’s about trust. Back at the mansion, Tinder told me about the other maids who’ve looked after her over the years. She told me that Rill only hurt the ones sent to spy on her by Grindle or Christina. She didn’t mean to hurt Ju; but when the harvester attacked, she knew it was coming. She knew what it was for. She’s been waiting for it all her life – waiting for this day. She was too afraid to trust Ju. She didn’t believe that Ju could destroy it.”

“How do you know?” Ruk asked.
“Back at the mansion, when Tinder was waking up, she told me about Rill’s fear. Not in so many words. I recognize that kind of fear myself. I felt it in prison. Although Rill’s stone womb protects her, its no less a prison.”

Ruk fell silent. Tinder began to weep. Ju stroked her stump of an arm, blaming not Rill for her loss, but Grindle.

The harvester had attacked her on wings. Her wings! The ones she’d designed for Forley!

Outside, the rumble of the airship grew louder. The church roof began to hum as light from the stained glass window dimmed and brightened from a shadow passing overhead. Ruk cracked open the door and looked out.

“Demon’s pasty arse,” he spat. “It’s mooring in the graveyard. There’s no smoke, no steam. It must be powered by souls, like the automatons. It must be Grindle’s.”

Heart thudding, Ju drew herself up and made for the door.

“There’s someone coming down the ladder,” Ruk added.

Ju looked out, expecting to see Arvin, knowing that if anyone should find them so easily it would have to be him through his connection with Rill.

But it wasn’t Arvin. It was an older man, portly and slow. He had his back to Ju. His fashionable jacket and breeches marked him as a mage. He began to descend the ladder, his movements wooden as if he were not used to climbing down from such a great height.

Above him, the airship hovered, its riveted hull gleaming silver like an immense, bloated whale.

Ruk lifted his arm. He aimed at the ladder and Ju supposed he meant to jolt it with heart-magic. He paused as the ladder swung a little. The man climbing it faltered, clearly afraid as it swung back and forth.

The ladder lurched and swivelled a half turn. Ju caught a glimpse of the man’s face.

It was Papa’s.

Ruk’s fingers sparked.

“No!” Ju lunged and pushed Ruk’s arm aside just as his heart-magic shot out in a hot ball, barely missing the ladder. It exploded against a row of tombstones, sending up rocks and clods of earth.

“Demon’s arse, Ju, what are you doing?” Ruk growled.
“It’s Papa,” she shouted. Her heart lurched as Papa and the ladder swung wildly in the wake of the blast. Papa gave a frightened cry.

Ruk pushed Ju away, peered out. “How do you know it’s not just another automaton?” He lifted his hand and aimed again.

“It can’t be. Papa doesn’t have heart-magic to power it. His skin-magic alone wouldn’t be enough.”

Ruk blinked, lowered his arm.

The ladder swayed, grew still. “Ju?” Papa called out shakily. “Is that you? There’s no need to be afraid. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Hesitantly, he started down the ladder again.

“It’s him,” Ju said. She started forward.

Ruk pulled her back inside. “Who else is with you?” he called out.

Papa reached the ground. Another man climbed through a hatch beneath the gondola. He started down the ladder. Although he, too, was dressed like a mage, Ju recognized the mop of rust-coloured hair at once. It was Tristan, Arvin’s driver.

“Is Arvin with you?” Ju called out.

“He is,” Tristan called back. “He’ll be down directly.”

“I’m going out,” Ju said to Ruk. “If Arvin’s with them, we’re no safer in here than we are outside.”

“Very well,” Ruk said. “We’ll go together.”

Ruk turned to Solly as if to say something, but Tinder stopped rocking and interrupted. “Please do not hurt him.” Her eyes looked fierce and wild.

“Tinder,” Solly said. “Ruk won’t hurt anyone unless they hurt us first. You want him to protect Rill don’t you?”

Tinder nodded. “She’s sleeping. While I rock her, she’s sleeping.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Solly said to Ruk. “I’ll help Tinder keep her calm. You don’t need her in your head right now.”

Ruk looked as if he would protest, then frowned and nodded. “If she panics, get out. At once. Don’t give her a chance.”

He turned back to the door and took his interminable time stepping out.

Ju brushed past him and reached Papa just as he stepped from the ladder’s final rung.

“Ah, Ju, at last,” Papa said. “I knew you’d be safe.”

“Papa,” Ju breathed. She launched herself into his arms, blinking back tears as
she hugged him close. Despite knowing they were both vulnerable, she felt suddenly safe. He smelled clean, of herbal soap and hair oil, not at all tainted with gin.

“Forley’s with you as well?” he asked, lifting his face to look towards Ruk who was now approaching hesitantly from the church. “He didn’t go to Cornica after all?”

Ju swallowed as an all too familiar ache knotted in the back of her throat. She could not bring herself to explain that Forley had died for her – that the man who resembled him was in fact a shifter.

“What’s the matter,” Papa said, holding her at arms length, meeting her gaze. She smiled, cheered to see his face had lost its former weariness. But now was not the time for explanations. Reluctantly, she let go of him and stepped back, acutely aware that something was very wrong about him being here. The airship loomed above them. Although its shadow felt unnaturally cold, there was something else about it that sent shivers along her spine – a sense of despair coming from outside of her. From the airship itself.

Papa took hold of her elbow, gasping at the sight of her empty coat sleeve. “What’s this?” He rolled the sleeve up, revealing the stump still covered by Solly’s sock. His face fell. “Oh Ju, what happened? Who did this?”

She snatched her arm from his grip. “Tinder,” she said. “The pregnant woman in the church. Don’t go near her. She needs us, and we need her; but her magic is out of control. You mustn’t let her touch you.”

Papa’s eyes widened. “Dear Lord of Fates, how?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“But Ju…”

“The airship,” she interrupted shortly. “It doesn’t run on coal…it’s wrong. Only Sir Mathias would have such a thing. Is he with you?”

Papa shook his head. “No no no, of course not. The young Mr Grindle was forced to borrow the ship from his stepfather, to bring me to you. He sent me down first to tell you that everything’s going to be all right. He’s of his own mind now. The demon’s gone. He’s going to take us all back to the monastery, where we’ll be safe. You see, it was he who rescued me from the debtor’s prison. Now he’s brought me here. Did he give you your mother’s daisy?”

Tristan reached the ground beside them. Ruk eyed him warily.

“It’s true,” Tristan said. “There’s only myself, your Papa and Arvin on
“How so?” Ju asked.

“Simple,” a voice called out.

Ju looked up to see Arvin descending the ladder, his steps oddly confident for a man who’d claimed to despise machines. “I walked into my stepfather’s mansion and took the ship. The vain old fool was so caught up with his harvesters, he didn’t notice.”

Ruk exchanged glances with Ju. The look he gave her was one of Forley’s looks from the repair shop – the one that meant: don’t believe a word of it. Not that she needed him to remind her of that.

Ju drew Papa away from the ladder. She waited for Arvin to reach the ground.

“What happened to the demon?” she asked.

“Oh that,” Arvin said casually. “It ate up my heart-magic and starved. It’s helpless – as good as dead.”

Surely it couldn’t be that easy. Keeping hold of Papa’s hand, Ju backed away. Arvin started towards her, arms held out. “I was worried about you. I—”

“Don’t touch me,” she warned.

Arvin looked crestfallen. “Ju, I promised you I’d not come back until it was safe. I can take you away from here now. You’ll never have to run again.”

Ju looked up at the airship, at its gondola hanging like caged mansion beneath it. “The Arvin I knew hated machines. He would never have used that. Especially if it didn’t run on coal.”

“Ah, but I did it for you Ju. It was the quickest way to get you and your Papa together again.”

Arvin’s eyes seemed sincere enough – blue, intense, shaded. His mussed up hair made him look just as abandoned and just as vulnerable as always.

Unconvinced, Ju looked to Ruk.

Jaw set, Ruk stepped between the two of them.

Arvin’s eyes narrowed. He let out an exasperated sigh. “If I cannot take your magic while you’re living, then so be it.”

He lifted his hand and pointed to the airship. His fingers flared blue at the edges. “Have you ever seen an airship burn?” he asked. “Grindle, the fool, has not thought to activate its defences.”

“You said your heart-magic was gone,” Ju snapped. “You said Grindle wasn’t
with you.”

Ruk lunged. He hit Arvin squarely on the chest with a bolt of heart-magic. Arvin staggered backwards, but quickly righted himself, his shirt smouldering. “Keep doing that,” he said. “It only makes me stronger. You smell like a shifter. Join with us. We’re all you have left.”

Ruk’s eyes darkened. “Demon be damned,” he spat.

“Arvin, please,” Ju said. She backed away but came up short against Papa and Tristan.

“Please what?” Arvin asked mildly. “Please let my stepfather harvest your magic? Please let him turn you into an automaton? Please let him strap you to a heart-chair for the term of your unnatural life? Yes, he’s up there. Waiting in the gondola. Waiting for me to hand Rill to him. I can put an end to him now.”

“Run, Ju,” Tristan hissed, urgently. “Now.”

Run where? If Arvin’s heart-magic didn’t stop them, then the airship – if he set fire to it – would. She supposed even Ruk knew that, for he now he stood with his arms submissively at his sides, as if terrified the demon would claim him at any moment.

“Dear Ju,” Arvin said. “Running will help no one. It never has.”

His hand sparked. He took aim at the airship; and fired.

A ball of heart-magic arched skywards. The wooden gondola shuddered and lurched as flames rapidly engulfed it. For a moment everyone stared, eyes wide, disbelieving. Then Tristan took hold of Ju and Papa both at once.

“He’s insane,” he hissed, pulling them away. “He’ll kill himself and us with him.”

Ju ran between the tombstones with Tristan on one side and Papa stumbling on the other. She glanced over her shoulder to see Arvin holding out both hands. His palms glowed softly now, pale and yellow with healing magic.

“Stay with me,” he called out. “I’ll protect you.”

The airship’s hull shivered, lurched. Smoke billowed, a thick stench of burning wood and oil. Ju’s heart beat a frantic rhythm in time with her magic.

The hydrogen bags would catch at any moment.

“Ju,” Arvin shouted. “You can run all you want, but I can smell your magic from one end of the city to the next.”

Demon’s arse to you, she thought. She wanted to pick up her pace, but Papa
was struggling to keep up already.

“You always were a self-righteous hussy,” Arvin called out. “Look at it this way, it was either Sir Mathias or us. You’ll not—”

Suddenly, a barrage of small explosions filled the air like gunfire. Still running, Ju glanced over her shoulder to see two rows of manholes snapping open along the base of the airship’s hull. Hatchways – dozens.

Rill whimpered in Ju’s mind. No no no no, she cried. Stop them, stop them, stop them...


Ju glanced behind again to see rope ladders spool out from the hatchways. Then men – sentries – pouring out, descending, a seething mass of bodies, accelerating with inhuman efficiency.

Automatons, Ju realized. Powered by souls harvested from the previous two nights. All turned to automatons.

Then a new voice – a man’s – shouting above the din of the burning gondola. “Traitors! Traitors, I’ll burn each and every one of you.”

Ju did not need to look back to know who that voice belonged to. She’d heard Sir Mathias Grindle’s same haughty accusations more than once in the workshop, but never so loud, and never so murderous.


Arvin caught up to Ju, loping easily beside her like a cat teasing its prey. “It’s either us or him. Choose carefully for we won’t give you a second chance.”

Breath rasping in her throat, Ju glanced up at him. His eyes didn’t look like Arvin’s anymore. In the flickering glow of the gondola, they seemed dark and predatory. For an instant she thought she could see the black points of demon eyes, reflected inside them.

No!” she growled. Her fingers sparked and the skin at their tips blistered.

“Go on, then,” Arvin taunted. “Hit me if that’s what you think I deserve. Hit me.”

He lunged, took hold of her arm and jerked her to a stop. Her skin grew cold as her heart-magic welled up to meet his.

No! Rill’s voice rang in her head. He’ll suckle, he’ll drink, he’ll take you, your skin-magic, your heart-magic. Do not give it to him. Do not!
Behind Arvin, Ju could see the airship with the automatons still pouring down the ladders, running towards the church, towards the road, towards her.

Then a scream, a dreadful, shrill crescendo of fear that emanated from deep within her head.

Arvin lurched away and dropped to the ground, his hands over his ears. “Rill no,” he shouted. “Don’t do it.” Behind him, the automatons froze, mid-step.

The air shivered. Ju could no longer smell smoke from the burning gondola. Instead, a clean earthy scent filled her nostrils, wrapping itself about her.

Then another scream. A man’s agonized scream from inside the church. Ju’s heart lurched at the realization it was Forley. No, not Forley...

Ruk! What in Fate’s name had Rill done to Ruk?

The thought had no sooner left her mind, when the weedy turf about her feet turned grey, hardened. She looked back to see veins of stone spreading out from the church, coalescing into a narrow path that snaked along the ground, past her feet, towards the airship.

The air shivered again. Ju’s head rang with the bone-deep shrill of Rill’s screaming and the agonized wailing of Ruk. Blinded and reeling, she staggered, fell.

Abruptly the screaming ceased.

Ju opened her eyes. Everything smelled of moss. The air fell silent, still. Pale dust in the shape of smoke clouds fell about her like rain. Ahead, the airship still hung where she’d last seen it. Its ladders still spilled from its hatchways, its automatons still clung to them; but where before there had been masses of bodies seething groundward, now there was only a crackling stillness. The hull, the burning gondola, and even the flames that wreathed it, no longer flickered. Its ladders, plumped out by sentries, stood like gargantuan legs holding it aloft. Grey, flame-shaped plumes fanned out from hull to stern, their edges and tips needle-sharp, frozen.

“An explosion turned to stone,” Ju whispered.

A soft breeze blew. Rill whimpered in the back of her mind. *Rill did not want, did not want*—

Rill’s words were cut off by a shriek – a shriek that ended as abruptly as it had started.

In the following silence, the airship swayed as if being pushed by an invisible hand. Its stone ladders creaked. Slowly, cracks cobwebbed across the hull’s surface,
spreading, coalescing. The airship teetered. Then all at once, it crumbled, crashed.

Ju rolled herself behind a tombstone. She covered her head with her arms knowing it would offer little protection, but it was all she had. Then Papa and Tristan were beside her, shielding her body with theirs.

The air shook with the rolling, tumbling roar of an avalanche. A gust of wind laden with pale, fine dust rushed past them. Pebbles rained down, battering her like so many hailstones.

Then it ceased, leaving utter, impossible silence.

Ju could not bring herself to move. She was afraid to look, afraid that Papa and Tristan were dead and that Arvin would be battered and crushed, or that Grindle had escaped unscathed enough to trap her in his mechanical hands and drag her to the nearest powerhouse.

Beside her, Papa stirred. Ju eased herself up, ignoring the raw sting of bruises on her legs and arms.

“Papa?” She shook his shoulder gently. “Can you sit up?” The back of his coat was tattered, covered in a layer of dust. Blood oozed from his scalp. “Papa!” she gasped.

He groaned, rolled onto his back and levered himself up on his elbows. His face was clean, unharmed.

Blinking, Ju looked about in awe at the churchyard. The little wooden church had turned completely to stone. The church roof, graveyard and streets beyond were smothered in a layer of jagged pebbles. Dust eddied in a breeze. amongst it all, automatons lay like so many fallen statues chiselled out in the act of running, falling, climbing and dying. Remnants of their limbs lay shattered about them.

“They don’t look like machines anymore, do they?” Tristan said in a shaky voice behind her. “They look human again; or at least more human than they did as automatons.”

Ju swung around to see Tristan pulling himself up. Like Papa, his face seemed mostly unharmed. When he turned a little, she saw that the back of his jacket and breeches were torn, and his rusty hair sticky with blood.

He lifted his hand, explored the wound. “Fate has dealt worse,” he said.

Ju looked around until her gaze settled on Arvin. He was lying face down on a grave a few paces away, pinned by a fallen tombstone, blood oozing out from beneath it. He tried to push himself up, then groaned, collapsed.
“I’ll sort him out,” Tristan said, reaching under his jacket. He pulled out a pistol. “I’ll throttle him if that’s what it takes.”

Arvin lifted his head, looked around, dazed. “Rill?” he asked. “She’s gone. I can’t feel her anymore. She’s gone.”

His eyes were wide with shock, his cheeks wet. Then he threw back his head and let out a high-pitched laugh that clearly had nothing to do with mirth.

Papa put his arm about Ju’s shoulders. Although he was shaking, he seemed stronger than Ju had ever known him to be. “That’s Grindle’s son, isn’t it?” he asked. “He seemed such a nice young man the day he visited. Who would have thought?”

It’s not really Arvin, Ju wanted to say. He’s possessed by a demon. But she didn’t have the energy to explain. She looked around at the desolate grey of the stone-littered churchyard, wondering if Grindle had escaped. She’d never wished anyone dead before; but Arvin had been right about one thing. If she was to walk away in one piece, it was either Grindle or her.

Chapter 29

With the dust settled, the church and graveyard resembled a daguerreotype in a geography book – one of those black and white scenes from a desert landscape where ancient ruins baked beneath an unforgiving sun. Instead of being hot, the air felt wintry cold – the kind of cold that sucked at Ju’s magic.

She wanted to turn her back on it and walk out of the city as she’d originally planned; but Papa was still terribly shaken. She sat with him watching Tristan aim his pistol at Arvin. The two argued in low voices. From what she could gather, it seemed that Tristan had known about Arvin’s demon since they’d left the monastery hours before. He believed that the Fates had decreed that only Ju could rid him of it.

“So you know where I should start?” Ju asked him, perplexed.

“It’s in the Fates,” Tristan said. “Let them lead you and it will happen.”

For a moment Ju wondered if Tristan was as insane as Arvin. Then Tristan added, “Arvin understood your potential even before he rescued you the night you were burned. You’re his only hope. If it were me, I would have done the same.”

At that, Arvin looked over at Ju, his eyes dull. “Help us,” he pleaded.

“Please.”
“He’s worried about Tinder and Rill,” Tristan said. “He wants you to see if they’re hurt. I wouldn’t trust a word he says. I’m afraid it’s not really him.”


“Demon’s arse, if she does she’ll feed her magic to a demon.” Tristan clicked the pistol’s safety lock.

Arvin shrank back against the tombstone, his face crumpling.

“I’ll see what’s happened to Tinder,” Ju said. She was relieved to be free of Rill’s fear, but she was terrified for Ruk and Solly. She’d not seen Ruk since he’d stopped screaming. Convinced he’d been turned to stone, she started towards the church.

Papa pulled himself to his feet and caught up with her.

“Stay here,” Ju said. “With Tristan. You’ll be safer with him.”

“Nonsense,” Papa said. “You think I’m still a drunken sot? You think I’m useless?” Wincing, he swayed on his feet, and steadied himself against a tombstone.

Ju helped Papa make himself comfortable on the ground a little way beyond Tristan. “You must have had a terrible knock on the head. I’ll find help.”

Papa nodded wanly. “Yes, that’s the sensible thing to do. If you need me, you’ll call out, won’t you?”

“I will.” Ju started for the church, her feet crunching over the pebbles.

As she passed through its doorway, she was surprised that the church seemed brighter on the inside than its small, shattered window suggested. And silent too. Silver shafts of light poured in, gleaming against broken floorboards, walls and ceiling, all turned to stone. The Fate flags above her – now circles of grey – crumbled at the edges, falling, bit by bit.

Tinder hunched with her back to a far wall, weeping, her knees drawn up and her hands over her face.

“Where’s Ruk?” Ju asked. “And Solly?”

Tinder looked up, her face haggard, her eyes empty.

“Where are they?”

Tinder pointed to the rear door on the opposite side of the nave. “Ruk told her to run, but there wasn’t time. The ship...it was burning. It was about to explode.”

Trembling, she rubbed her hands over her eyes. “Rill tried not to hurt them; but he didn’t believe. And now...now.” She clutched her belly and wailed.
Ju’s heart plummeted. She looked to the doorway, expecting to see Ruk and Solly turned to stone, hand in hand like statues crafted in the act of fleeing.

The doorway was empty.

“They’re outside,” Tinder said.

Ju hurried to the door, looked out. Ahead of her, Ruk knelt in rubble, hunched over what looked to be a fallen automaton. If it wasn’t for the unmarred blackness of his coat or the shine of his ropey hair Ju would have believed that he was now stone. Except for the rise and fall of his breathing, his body was perfectly and rigidly still.

“Ruk?” Tentatively, Ju moved towards him, dread unfurling inside her.

Ruk shifted a little. Ju let out a strangled gasp. The statue in front of him was not an automaton. It was Solly, fallen and grey, her legs scissored, knees bent in the act of running.

Ju froze. For several heartbeats she couldn’t breath. Thinking she would swoon, she told herself that, if she did, the world would disappear and she would not have to face its horrors again, ever.

Ruk moved aside. Ju’s gaze was immediately drawn to Solly’s face. This part of her had somehow escaped being turned.

“No, no, no,” Ju whispered.

Solly’s eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted, cheeks achingly white. Her hair, usually covered by a headscarf, spilled down in stony waves about her shoulders. For a few heartbeats, Ju could only stare. She’d never seen a face look so serene before. Then, as she drew closer, she saw that Solly’s calmness was a cruel illusion.

Her face was no more than a remnant of flesh affixed to a body of stone.

Ju cried out, shuddered. “Oh Ruk,” she breathed.

Ruk whirled about and glared. “How could Rill understand what she’s done? She’s nothing but a memory filled with emotion. Nothing but unknowing, unliving fear.” His eyes were fiercer than Forley’s had ever been. It was almost as if a demon lurked behind them – as if he was on the brink of becoming one himself.

He lunged.

Ju lurched away, thinking he was going strike her; but then he pulled himself back and the fierceness in his eyes faded, glistened. “If she’d have come away from Tinder when I told her to, she would have escaped. Instead, she insisted on staying, trying to calm Rill. In the end, I had to drag her away. I almost had her through the
door. Rill’s magic caught up to us, and Solly… I could have protected her, but she pulled out of my grip...”

He shuddered. “You must understand. When a shifter loses—” He swallowed, paused. “When a shifter loses a loved one, we honour their memory by becoming them. That way we always have them with us. Our loss is no longer a loss.” He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Or that’s what we tell ourselves, but of course, for humans it’s not the same. It can’t be.” He shuddered. “Look at her. She was only a hair’s breadth behind me when—”

He stared ahead, his face unreadable. At last he said, “Her face is all that’s left. Everything else that was Solly is gone. Or maybe trapped in stone.” His voice broke. “If that’s so, then Fate is nothing. Everything is nothing. Perhaps demonhood is all I have left.”

Knees as weak as jelly, Ju knelt beside Solly. She stroked her cheek, wishing she’d had the chance to know her as a friend. Now it was too late.

For an instant, Solly’s cheek felt warm. Ju jerked her hand away, terrified that Solly would open her eyes and look up at her.

In a flash, Ruk knelt beside her. He snatched Ju’s hand and gripped it hard. “Did you feel them? Memories? Are they in there? Trapped?”

“I don’t know.”

“Try,” he demanded. “If you can use your magic to add strength to the shifter-magic you took from me, you must at least try.”

Ju shook her head. “She’s gone. I can’t.”

“Do it!” He tightened his grip about her wrist.

Ju’s skin grew icy. Suddenly he was no longer the Forley-like Ruk who’d seemed almost human the night before. He was the stranger in the alley, stealing her heart-magic with the same cruelty of an attack. “What do you see?” he hissed.

Ju twisted her hand in his grip. “You’re hurting. I see nothing.”

He held on, forced her hand against Solly’s forehead. “Close your eyes. Can you hear her voice? Can you see her memories of the days she spent with me?”

He wouldn’t give up. Ju realized it would be cruel for her to not try, so she reached out and pressed her hand onto Solly’s cheek. But where before there’d been warmth, there was now only coldness. She shook her head. “I can’t...”

“Remember how you used shifter-magic to see the essence of the ward-die,” he pursued. “You used it along with your own magic. Perhaps it made you different.
“More like a shifter. Now use what you have on her.”

“Your shifter magic’s gone,” Ju said. “I lost it when I looked into the die.”

“Try!” he shouted.

Trembling, Ruk let go of her, his eyes empty, defeated. As much as Ju wanted to, she couldn’t look away. They were Forley’s eyes, pleading with her. She’d ignored his plea once. She could not ignore it again.

“Perhaps if you give me some more of your shifter-magic,” she offered.

“Perhaps I can use it.”

He was still trembling. He kept his gaze on Solly. “Take as much as you want,” he said flatly.

“How?”

He took a knife from the inside of his boot. Before Ju realized what he would do with it, he gritted his teeth and plunged it into his thigh, gouging the flesh in a jagged line to his knee. The cut was deep, but he barely flinched. Blood fountained over his face, soaked his trouser leg. He flung the knife aside. “Do what you did the last time I healed myself. This time I won’t try to stop you.”

Ruk’s blood flowed, shimmered, dissolved into mist. The wound blurred at the edges, began to close. “Do it now,” Ruk demanded.

Ju took his hand. “Start taking my heart-magic. That’s how it happened last time.”

He nodded. Her hand grew cold. Her heart-magic shifted to meet his, making her skin bristle. Then all at once, she could see it: a pale, violet glow along her veins, winding about her magic, filling her with well-being. It felt right, and so unbelievably powerful that she wanted it to take it all.

The flow increased, grew warmer, burned.

“Stop it now,” Ruk snapped.

“I can’t.”

He wrenched his hand away. A golden glow arced through the air between them, joining their hands in a burning rope of magic. Ruk stared at it, his brow furrowing.

“What’s happening?” Ju asked. This magic felt different than before. It wasn’t shifter magic and nor was it heart-magic. She knew she should be afraid, but at the same time she wanted it.

“It’s Rill’s,” Ruk said, flatly. “After she killed Solly, I couldn’t help myself. I
took her magic. All of it.”

Rill’s? He’d drained Rill? Now Ju was taking Rill’s magic from him? Turning herself into a stone-maker?

Horrified, Ju wrenched her hand from Ruk’s. She shimmied away, but Rill’s magic followed her, stretching between their hands.

“I can’t stop it,” Ruk said between ragged breaths. “Rill’s magic is taking my shifter-magic with it. I can’t—”

Ju’s vision paled. The flow grew stronger, wrapping her and Ruk in a glowing aura. Suddenly, she wanted it that way. She wanted it to be hers – all hers. She forgot that Ruk was with her. She forgot about Solly and Tinder and Rill and Arvin. The glow enveloped her until she could not see or feel or hear anyone or anything but herself.

She was the centre of the world. The centre of everything.

The glow began to fade, silvering into mist. “I can’t feel my magic,” Ruk said, shakily. “You’ve taken it all. Please, use it to save what’s left of Solly.” He laid his hand on Solly’s forehead.

Knowing this would be her only chance, Ju placed her hand beside Ruk’s. She ran her fingers down Solly’s face, tracing a path from the cold flesh of her cheek to the rigid curve of her stone neck and shoulders. Memories...

How was she supposed to see or feel them?

At first Solly’s skin felt like little more than a remnant of what Solly used to be. Then, Ju felt something faint stir beneath her fingers, so tiny she could neither see nor grasp it. She thought about the die Ruk had given her, about its electric field. What had she done to absorb it? As far as she could remember, she’d felt nothing more than curiosity.

That was what she needed to feel now, she realized. Curiosity, and a genuine need to touch the memories she was seeking.

She imagined them flowing into her, like heart-magic would if she were taking it. Then all at once, she saw it. No more than a fragment, but a memory nonetheless…

...Solly running, her hand in Ruk’s, wanting it there, wanting it there always, but afraid, so, so afraid for Rill and Tinder, knowing their fear is not merely for themselves, but for everything and everyone. Their only escape, the only way to stop it, to stop the demon, to stop Grindle, is with stone...
Then the icy clutch of it at Solly's heels. Before she can draw breath, before she can escape, it's on her, and in her, and her flesh is hardening and she cannot run and Ruk's fingers slip through hers, and her feet freeze, and her heart seizes and she tries to tell Ruk that she loves him, but—

Ju reeled backwards, feeling it in her bones – the utter agony of becoming stone, the terror of being trapped, the grief of knowing there would be no escape. Then nothingness, not in stone, but in the air around her, dissipating.

“Wherever she is now,” Ju whispered. “She took her memories with her, except this last one. Even Fate knows she would not want that.”

“That’s all there is?” Ruk breathed. He let go of Ju's hand.

Ju nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Ruk let out a low howl. “Leave me,” he snapped. “Leave me alone with her.”

Abruptly, Ju drew herself to her feet. As she did, Rill’s stone-magic welled up inside her. She recalled that a moment ago she’d felt sad; but the magic coursing through her veins diluted it, washed it away. She’d never felt so full of confidence before. She held up her hand, made her fingers spark. Her skin did not blister. The smile that twitched on her lips was involuntary, a reflex caused by the realization that finally, her magic was not her enemy.

“Go!” Ruk shouted. “Get away from me.”

Ju blinked. Her magic had tricked her into forgetting he was there. Like Arvin’s demon, it was trying to take over her. She forced it down, reeling it in like she’d always reeled in her magic, hiding it, pretending it did not exist. Despite its strength, it responded in an instant, settling about her heart, tightening like a serpent poised to strike.

All her life she’d been forced to ignore her magic. Now she had more than any mage or any shifter. More perhaps than even Rill or Ruk put together. No one could steal it from her again. She giggled at the pure pleasure of knowing it.

“Go!” Ruk shouted. “You’re no better than a demon.”

It was then that Ju realized she could no longer hear Rill. Not so much as a whimper.

#

Ju found Tinder in the church where she’d left her, still hunched up against the wall, still stroking her belly, staring ahead blankly. She looked up at Ju and gave a wan smile. Ju knelt beside her. “Is Rill…”
Tinder took hold of Ju’s hand. “Ruk drained her,” she said softly. “She didn’t want him to, but he had so much anger and so much grief she couldn’t fight him. I can’t hear her any more. The fear she had for all those years…At last it’s gone.”

For an instant, Ju could not tell if Rill was alive or dead. She stiffened, afraid Rill might try to take her magic back; but Tinder’s hand remained warm and undemanding as a human hand was meant to be.

“I’m sorry,” Ju said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Tinder looked at her quizzically. “Sorry? Please, don’t be. Here—” She pressed Ju’s hand to her belly. Ju flinched at the feel of Tinder’s flesh. It was warm, but as hard as granite.

“What do you feel?” Tinder asked.

Stone, Ju almost said. Then the tenseness relaxed and Tinder’s belly felt not quite soft again, but not hard either. She looked at Tinder, puzzled.

“It’s a contraction,” Tinder said. “They’re getting closer together. But they’re not too painful. Not yet. I expect they soon will be.”

Heart skittering, Ju almost pulled her hand away. She didn’t need to be a midwife to know that the birthing of a stone baby would kill Tinder. Unless there was a mage to heal her or a surgeon to cut the baby out, there would be nothing that she or anyone could do.

Then she felt something small and hard, pushing up from beneath her hand.

“Did you feel that?” Tinder asked. “Rill kicked.”

“She kicked? How?”

Tinder giggled. “It doesn’t matter how. When Ruk took her magic, she couldn’t stop him. But she knew all along it would happen that way. Just as she knows what will happen to Arvin. The Fates have decreed it, and Rill knows. She won’t tell me yet because she’s afraid of it. So, so afraid.” Tinder licked her lips, inhaled and exhaled slowly. “I thought Ruk would kill us. But he’s so like Eln was before he turned demon. Shifters do not mean to hurt. And nor do demons perhaps. But so much hurts them.” Tinder paused, stroked her belly. “When Ruk left us, Rill kicked. Her magic’s been drained, you see. There’s nothing to keep her in stone anymore. She’s healed.”

Tinder’s belly tensed, harder this time. She flinched, catching her breath. “That one hurt. I expect Rill’s in a hurry now. But who can blame her?”

“How soon?”
Tinder giggled again. “Only Rill knows when, I suppose. Until then, I’ll just have to ride it out as best I can.”

Sweet Fate, a birthing! Ju was a Tinkerer, not a midwife. She wondered if it would make better sense to find someone to help carry Tinder to one of the farmhouses beyond the churchyard, where women would be experienced in such things. “I’m going to get help,” she said, standing. “I’ll only be gone a few minutes.”

Tinder nodded. “I’m not afraid. Neither is Rill anymore. We can do it together. Go look for Arvin. He needs you more than I do.”

At the mention of Arvin, Ju’s heart gave a painful lurch. She doubted there was anything she could do for him now, apart from killing his demon and no doubt killing him as well. Ruk would know what to do – how to help him – but when she checked, both he and Solly were gone.

Steeling herself, Ju made her way out of the church, meaning to check up on Papa. She had barely taken a dozen steps beyond the door when a voice called out from behind, its tones precise and haughty. “Miss Weatherton. You took your sweet time getting here.”

Heart thudding, her single hand raised, heart-magic pulsing at her fingers, Ju swung around to find Sir Mathias Grindle stepping out from behind the woodshed, his clothes and hair singed, coated in a fine layer of dust. He paused a man’s length away from her.

Before she could react, his titanium fingers sparked. “No doubt you’re the stronger one here,” he said. “But are you willing to risk incinerating yourself in the act of proving it?”

“Burns can be healed.” Ju kept her voice as steady as her thudding heart would allow. “But death: that’s something else altogether. Are you willing to risk losing your life to prove it?”

Grindle snorted with sceptical amusement. “Come child, use your commonsense. There’s more than one way to kill an untrained mage.”

At that moment an automaton dressed as a chambermaid caught up with them, limping, oil dripping from the corner of a heavily painted mouth. Its green eyes – Christina Grindle’s eyes – surveyed Ju from beneath a tangle of singed and frizzled hair. It lifted its hand. Its fingertips snapped open, unsheathing gleaming curved knives.

“Christina is taking her time getting used to her new body,” Grindle said. “But
rest assured if anyone is to be injured by her clumsiness, it will be you.”

Ju refused to let her fear show. It occurred to her that Grindle was not at all
the epitome of perfection he strove to be. His eyes were dark ringed and his hair grey
and thinning. His mechanical hands may well have moved with the grace of human
hands, but their crafting was ugly and skeletal. And his voice…

It didn’t sound at all like the voice of power; but was instead threaded with
hatred.

Hatred of her and of her magic.

At that moment she wanted nothing more than to see both Grindle and his
hideous sister burn. The thought had barely left her mind, when heart-magic streamed
from her fingers, surging like a bolt of lightning through the air towards him. At the
same time, Grindle’s magic streaked towards hers. Their twisting streams of flame
met, midair, expanding in an ever-widening arc. At once, Ju’s anger fed into it and
her magic grew stronger, flashing a spectrum of violets and blues.

Grindle’s magic and Ju’s magic coiled together, flared. Ju’s fingertips began
to sting, not from her own magic, but from Grindle’s. The sting became a burn, and
with it the crackle and pop of her fingers, sizzling. She gritted her teeth, strengthened
the flow.

Grindle met her gaze and smirked. “Power is nothing in the hands of the
unworthy.”

A numbing, black crust began to spread down Ju’s arm, charred flesh,
spreading like melting charcoal to her elbow.

“You can burn yourself from head to foot if it pleases you,” Grindle taunted.
“It’s not your magic I want. It’s merely the end of it.”

His words hit her like a slap. Her life meant nothing to him. Only her magic.
Because it was hers and not his, he wanted to eliminate it.

Her anger surged. She gritted her teeth, and let her heart-magic flow. All of it.
All at once.

Abruptly Sir Mathias’s magic paled. He let out a shrill scream, reeled
backwards and fell, his metal arms glowing, melting, dripping into silvery pools at
his feet.

Just then, three sharp shots rang through the air. Ju staggered backwards.
Time slowed. She looked down to see blood oozing from her chest. A bullet, she
realized. Yet, curiously, she did not feel any pain.
Then a scream from a distance. A man’s scream and then another, but she could not say whose.

“Let’s see you heal yourself now,” Christina Grindle taunted. “I do recall you never had the aptitude to learn the basics of it.”

Ju swayed on her feet. An icy numbness spread out from the centre of her chest. She looked over at the Christina automaton and saw that the knives in its fingers had retracted. In their place, loomed the muzzle of a long, slender gun. Another shot rang out. Time slowed again. A bullet emerged from the gun, sped towards her, embedded itself in her thigh.

Time sped up. Ju reeled backwards. Her legs buckled.

“That’s enough,” Grindle said. “Fill her with too many holes and her magic will be wasted before we’ve made use of it.”

Another shot. Ju waited for it to strike her, but instead heard a metallic shriek. She sank to her knees, expecting the inevitable. Then she looked down and gasped. The blood soaking her coat from the previous wounds had dissolved into mist. Her chest ached as if being torn from the inside out. The bullet holes began to close over. Curiously, they hurt more than they had when she’d first been shot. She heard herself groan.

“Since when did you learn to heal yourself like a shifter?” a voice said.

Ju looked up. It was Arvin, his face striped with dust and blood, his coat in tatters. He stood over Grindle with Tristan’s pistol rammed into Grindle’s mouth. “I stunned him,” Arvin added. “I’m tempted to let him wake up and see the gun before I pull the trigger. It seems fitting that he should rue the day he attacked us.”

On the ground beside him, the Christina automaton lay face down in a pool of machine oil, the top of its head blown clean away, revealing a tight wad of plates and wires.

“They say,” Arvin said mildly. “That if you blow out the brains of a mage, his soul will be carried to purgatory with all memory of its sins erased. A fitting end for a perfectionist, do you not think? Finding himself in purgatory without knowing why.”

Grindle groaned. His eyelids fluttered open.

“And yet, when he tried to rid the world of heart-magic,” Arvin continued. “He couldn’t imagine that his defeat lay in something as simple as a bullet.”

Holding Ju’s gaze, face impassive, Arvin pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out. Sickened, Ju looked away. She pulled herself to her feet.
and looked up to see Arvin’s blood-spattered, gore-spattered face leering at her. She wanted to flee, but her legs felt numb as if the shifter-mist from her healed wounds had spread down to them and congealed, pinning her boots to the ground. Her chest ached terribly. As did her arm – her burnt arm that was no longer black, but pink and healed, sheathed in a layer of shifter-mist.

And her stump too! It was glowing pinkly, lengthening.

Then she heard Papa calling to her from the church. “Ju, Ju. Where are you?”

“Tell him,” Arvin growled into her ear. He was beside her now, holding her up, his arms about her body like the arms of a cage, entrapping her. “If you want him to live tell him you’re safe.”

“I’m safe,” Ju called out weakly.

Papa emerged from the church doorway, his chin bruised where someone or something must have struck him.

“She’s safe,” Arvin said evenly. “But if you want me to finish healing her, go back inside. Now.”

Papa took a defiant step forward. He rubbed his chin. “I don’t understand. You give with one hand, and take with oth—”

“Get him away,” Arvin hissed through clenched teeth. “Or next time I hit him, it’ll be with heart-magic and not my fist.”

“Go to Tinder,” Ju said. “To the woman in the church. She’s a mage – Arvin’s mother.”

“Enough,” Arvin interrupted. “Can’t you tell Ju’s hurt. I can’t heal her with you getting in the way. Do as she says.”

Papa met Ju’s gaze. She lifted her chin. “Go,” she said firmly. “He can’t hurt me.”

Papa stood looking at her for a moment, his jaw tense. She feared he’d try to fight.

Then Tinder called out from inside the church. “Mr Weatherton, please. Oh sweet Fate, please.”

Papa looked over his shoulder and back to Arvin. “Your mother and Rill,” he said. “Do not forget them.”

Arvin tensed, but said nothing.

Tristan came out and took Papa’s arm and said something to him in a low voice. Papa nodded and followed Tristan back into the church.
When they were gone, Arvin wiped the gore from his face with the sleeve of his free arm. He gave a cynical chuckle. “Tinder? Rill? Tristan? I’ve forgotten them already.” He gestured to Ju’s healing stump. The forearm had lengthened to the wrist. The outlines of a hand were forming beneath the shifter-mist. “But you, my little enigma...What are we to do with you?”

“What do you want?” Ju asked. “What do you really want?”

“Peace,” Arvin said. “And everything that comes with it. I never wanted to hurt you.” He flung the pistol aside. “You were the only thing in my step-father’s workshop worth fighting for. Now I’ve found something even more valuable. Power. Ecstasy.”

“That’s not what Arvin wanted. Not the Arvin I knew.”

Arvin sneered. “You never knew me at all. I tried to get close to you, but you always pushed me away. You cared only for your misdirected pride. I would have given you everything. Everything.”

Ju felt herself falling. Arvin tightened his hold on her, cradled her in his arms. “I won’t hurt you,” he whispered as he drew her against him. “I promise.”

Ju’s skin where Arvin touched her grew instantly cold. She knew it was the demon taking her magic, but its grip was nothing like she’d expected it to be. It was gentle and coaxing, promising her peace if she wanted, or ecstasy if she preferred. Or even demonhood.

Softly, the magic about her heart uncoiled. Beneath it, a hard knot of ice shifted, making her cry out. She imagined herself chained to a heart-chair, its electrodes sucking at her magic, feeding on her, draining her, taking her to the brink of death over and over.

She looked up into Arvin’s eyes, wishing she could see the Arvin she used to know – the well-meaning dandy, abandoned, trapped. He was a mage without heart-magic, yet he’d never truly wanted it anyway. In many ways, he’d been like her: not wanting to conform, despising what others had foisted on him.

Her heart clenched against its shifting knot of ice. Poor Arvin. He’d longed to be different, but everyone he knew – even Fate itself – had forbidden him.

Ju sighed as he drew both her skin-magic and shifter-magic away from her, a cool, steady stream. His eyes grew dark enough for her to see beyond them to the demon that looked back at her. It was part Arvin, she realized and part something else. Not evil as she’d expected, but hungry. Nothing more and nothing less.
It was eating her up – consuming her from the inside out. She remembered what Arvin had once said about Grindle:

It was either him or her.

Even so, she did not want to hurt Arvin. But the demon…

…was a corrupted thing, not shifter and not living either. She did not want to be part of it, despite its promises.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. She lifted her hands and cupped Arvin’s face. “I’d never hurt you by choice, but it’s not you who’s killing me and I cannot tell if you’re still there. Has the demon taken you, like it took Eln? Did it consume you as it’s consuming me?”

Arvin blinked. His eyes crinkled at the edges. “You’ve made us strong already. Now nothing can hurt us.”

Ju inhaled sharply. She did not want to watch Arvin turn to stone. She closed her eyes. “This is for the demon,” she whispered.

Drawing on her fear, her anger at the demon for trapping Arvin – and her fury at Fate for trapping them both – Ju willed Rill’s stone-magic to flow.

At once, her bones turned to ice. The smell of damp earth and moss enveloped her, suffused her, became her. Arvin screamed. He let go of her. She fell heavily beside him. But the stone-magic continued to flow, taking Ruk’s shifter-magic with it, arcing through the air in a glowing stream, a single unstoppable rush.

Arvin’s scream faded to a gurgle. Gradually, the flow ceased. Ju could do nothing but lie on the ground with her eyes closed, whimpering. She wasn’t hurt – not even so much as singed – and strangely she could still feel her heart-magic burning inside her; but the shifter-magic and stone-magic were completely gone. Where once it had coiled in her chest, she now felt an aching hollowness, beating to the frantic rhythm of her heart.

Arvin let out a strangled gasp. “Ju…I…”

Ju waited, afraid to move, afraid to look, convinced he would turn to stone at any moment.

She heard him retch.

She opened her eyes, levered herself up on her elbows.

Arvin hunched on his hands and knees in front of her, staring at the ground.

He looked at her and tried to speak. Sweat beaded his forehead. He heaved, his body shuddering with such violence that Ju feared he would rid himself of his own insides.
He tried to speak again, but his voice faded on a dry gurgle. He retched and spat out a perfectly, spherical pebble. His eyes bulged and he spat out another. He wiped his forehead, gave a low, miserable whimper.

“Arvin,” Ju said softly. She couldn’t bear seeing him suffer, just as she could no longer believe he was all demon. “I don’t know what to do for you—”

Arvin shuddered, retched. He shook his head, opened his mouth. From it gushed an avalanche of pebbles, a river of stone, pouring over the ground, rolling towards her. Ju shrieked, shimmied away. The pebbles spurted, sprayed and skipped along the ground, gathering at her feet, each one shaped like a hideous, bloated eye, each one gazing up at her – facets of the demon. Turned to stone.

Arvin retched and ejected a second avalanche of pebbles. Then another.

At last, the retching ceased. He collapsed onto his side and curled up, hugging his knees to his chest, shivering. Ju took off her coat and laid it over him. His skin felt ice cold. She took his hand and sent him a deep, surge of well-wishing.

He opened his eyes, looked up at her and smiled. “Rill knows,” he said hoarsely. “The demon, Eln, Sir Mathias and Christina…they can’t hurt her any more.”

The cry of a newborn rang out from inside the church, at once shrill, uncertain and triumphant.

Arvin smiled. “She really does know.”

Ju leaned back on her heels. She closed her eyes, let out a long, deep sigh. “Is it over now? Is it? Does this mean there’s nothing left to run from?”

Arvin stared at her, blankly. “I’m sorry,” he said. “For everything.”

Ju shrugged. “It wasn’t you.”

She noticed then that her bullet wounds and burns had fully healed. But her arm – the one she’d lost to Rill’s stone-magic – had regrown only so far as the wrist. She wondered what had happened to the sock Solly had given her. She couldn’t remember taking it off, yet at that moment, she felt its loss more keenly than the loss of her own hand. Solly had given it to her, and now Solly was gone.

Gone, like Ruk’s shifter-magic and Rill’s stone-magic.

Stolen.

Turned to stone.

#

When Ju stopped shaking and found strength enough to draw herself to her
feet, she made her way into the church, looking for Papa. A bruised and battered
Tristan greeted her, then grinned and called out over his shoulder, “Mr Weatherton!
Ju’s done it. Just as Fate decreed. She’s done it.”

“Damn the Fates,” Ju said, shaking her head. “They’re from purgatory. Even the best of them.”

Tristan seemed taken aback. He stared at her. She wondered what he made of her bullet shredded coat, her burnt sleeves, the bare stump of her wrist.

He ran a hand through his blood-soaked hair and asked, “Is Arvin out there? Both your Papa and I have a bone to pick with him.” He gestured to his black, swollen eye. “He knocked us both senseless. Took my pistol.”

“He’s there,” Ju said. “The demon’s destroyed. But where’s Papa?”

“He’s there,” Papa said from behind the altar. He stood up and proffered his jacket. The delicate face of a newborn peered out from it, eyes bright, rosebud lips curved into a soft ‘o’.

Tears pricked behind Ju’s eyes. She was afraid to speak, afraid to be happy. The memory of Solly’s dying moment was too unbearably sharp. She could still feel Ruk’s pain, still hear his misery; and his final words to her:

“You’re no better than a demon.

He was so much like Forley and yet so different. Now he was gone and she couldn’t be sure if the demon had taken him of if he’d escaped.

She wanted him back more than ever.

Even so, she couldn’t turn away from everyone without saying anything. She’d not seen Papa so happy with himself for a long, long time.

“Ah Rill,” she said graciously. “She’s beautiful. And Tinder? How is she?”

Papa gave a broad grin. “As well as can be expected. There wasn’t time to find a real midwife, so she had to make do with me.”

“A fine job you did at that,” Tinder said softly. She was lying on the floor at Papa’s feet, propped up with straw. Her hair hung damp and wild about her shoulders, her eyes weary, yet sane. She held up her arms. “Please. Give her to me. I’ve waited so long to hold her.”

Bending carefully, Papa lowered Rill onto Tinder’s lap. “Ah, babies are fickle creatures,” he said. “Take Ju for instance. Eight days late, she was. Her mama thought she’d never be born.”
Chapter 30

Winter in the city had always meant illness and chilblains, scarcity and cold. The hearth could only throw out so much heat, so when the snows began, it never warmed deep enough. But out here, in the monastery, winter comforted like a mantle of peace. The monks’ hearths blazed day and night with heart-magic. No mage would dare threaten them.

But that’s if there are any mages left, Ju told herself. Rumour had it that, after Grindle’s death, his harvesters scoured the city, while his automatons continued to manufacture hundreds more. It wasn’t until days later that sentries found his workshop and put a stop to it. By then it was too late. Hundreds of harvesters had been released. Some had been captured and destroyed. Others had simply disappeared, returning only at dawn and dusk, seeking out the unwary and draining them.

For anyone with heart-magic, the streets were now unsafe. For anyone without it, life seemed suddenly brighter. The city would never be the same again. For better or worse? Even the monks could not say.

Ju sighed. She drew on her coat, pulled on the fur cap that Tinder had bought for her along with the fur-lined boots, alpaca scarf and mittens. Although she enjoyed the warmth of the monastery with its low-ceilinged rooms, tapestries and furs, she adored the silence of the forest with its numbness of snow. It was as if it called to her, wanted her to be part of it.

She was about to make her way outside, when she heard the door to the inner halls clang open behind her. “Would you mind if I accompanied you?” Arvin asked. “These rooms are somewhat stifling?”

“Of course,” Ju said without turning around. Since leaving the city, Arvin had kept his distance. Ju guessed he was wracked with guilt over what had happened. He had apologised to her profusely more than once, but his previous interest in her had noticeably cooled. Not that she regretted it. He would always be a mage. And she would always be a worker.

He caught up with her on the portico and shivered, hunching into his coat. “So bleak out here.” His breath clouded the air between them. “I cannot see how the monks bear it.”
Her cheeks stung at the startling blue of his eyes. His hair fell over his forehead, unruly and at the same time endearing. She was tempted to give him a surge of well-wishing to warm him, but was afraid he’d not welcome it, or worse still, take it as a sign that she missed his advances. Instead, she started down the steps and stepped into the snow.

It was freshly fallen from the night before and shallow enough to wade through without too much effort. Arvin lumbered awkwardly beside her.

“How are Tinder and Rill?” Ju asked. “I haven’t seen or heard from them for over a week.”

Arvin sighed. “They’re finding it hard to adapt. Rill’s still growing at a prodigious rate. She looks nearly a year old already. How long has it been since her birth? Four weeks? Five?”

Ju shook her head. She’d not counted the days since arriving here, had not felt the need to.

“Now Tinder’s hair is turning grey,” Arvin added. “She keeps to her room. Whatever magic had maintained her and Rill’s youth all those years has now gone. By spring, Rill will be fully grown. And Tinder—”

“Will be nearly as old as Papa,” Ju finished.

Arvin smiled at that. “Well, he does visit her daily. She’ll not see anyone else; not even the monks.”

“He visits her daily? Now that’s something he’s kept from me.”

They walked for a while in silence. Ju felt suddenly foolish for being nervous in Arvin’s company. To distract herself, she meditated on the cold crunch of her feet sinking into the snow. They came to a stream. When Arvin looked like he would turn back, Ju pointed to a line of stepping stones. “This way.” She crossed them easily and waited for Arvin to catch up with her.

He stood back and shook his head. “The cold. We should go back.”

Ju turned away from him, looked uphill at the snow, marvelling at how it clung like lace to the fir trees. Out here the forest’s pull felt so much stronger, as if it belonged to her or maybe she belonged to it. Whenever she walked this far, she wanted to keep going, thinking she might touch its heart. But that was ridiculous. This was the first time she’d left the city. How in Fate’s name could she be connected to a forest?

Even so, sometimes she imagined that Ruk was out there, hovering at the
edges of the monastery, wanting to come in, but afraid to. She could still see his face, grief-stricken, enraged, accusing her of acting demon.

She could see Solly’s face too, poor beautiful Solly. The girl had known all along she’d die young, but not like that.

Ju crossed the stream back to Arvin. “Shall we go then?”

They picked their way over the snow in silence. When they were almost at the monastery, he asked, “What have you planned for yourself? I cannot see you remaining here forever.”

“I’ve not thought too hard about it.” She proffered her handless arm, its stump prettily hidden inside the alpaca mitten. “I shall build myself a new hand first. I’ll learn to wield my heart-magic without burning it.”

Arvin flinched. “I’m sorry.” His voice held no less regret than it had the first time he’d said it and every time since. “I tried to fight the demon—”

“I know you did. I know it wasn’t you. I’m only thankful I had the means to stop it.”

He seemed comforted by that and fell silent again. She supposed most of his guilt came from knowing that, when the demon took her shifter-magic and stone-magic, she’d not get it back. Although her heart-magic had fully replenished itself, she had once again lost the ability control it. Now, when her fingers sparked, they burned, just as they always had. If she hurt herself, she would heal as slowly as any human.

As for her hand, there was no chance of growing a new one again. Ever.

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The following day, Arvin did not ask to walk out with her, and nor did he the next day or the next. In a way Ju was grateful. She loved the forest and she wanted time to think alone and try to understand why she believed it was summoning her.

On the day that Rill uttered her first sentence – “Tinder, where’s Ju?” – Ju was so caught up in the excitement of it that she did not get out to walk until well into the afternoon. Fresh snow had fallen outside. Ju plodded through it, made her way over the stepping stones in the now-frozen stream. She walked deeper into the forest, unable to resist its pull on her, certain that, at last, she would understand why.

She reached the clearing. Ahead stood the tall, lean silhouette of a man illuminated from behind by the stark white of a hillside. She knew at once it was Ruk.
overwhelmed by her memory of the agony of his grieving. It reminded her too much of her own grieving for Forley – and for Solly too – as if their deaths were her fault. Forgetting what had drawn her here, she turned and ran back towards the monastery, blood pounding in her ears, feet slipping in the snow. Winter filled her lungs, chilling her. She could not tell if she shivered from the cold or from seeing Ruk.

He caught up with her by the stream. She lost her footing on the stepping stones and almost fell onto the ice. He caught her, steadied her. She tensed, stumbling again as he guided her to the other side. “I’m not here to hurt you,” he said. “I don’t want your heart-magic either.”

She looked up at him. His ropey hair was now threaded with metal trinkets and their jingling made her ache for Forley even more. But his eyes were different. They’d lost the fierceness she remembered. She guessed that the emptiness behind them was taken up by his grief. It hurt her to see him like this so she sent him a deep surge of well-wishing.

He lurched away, stared at her, gaping. “What happened to it? My shifter-magic. It’s gone.”

Ah, so that’s why he was here. “It didn’t replenish.”

“Of course it didn’t replenish. It’s not heart-magic. It’s part of me.” He tapped his chest. “It’s what makes me a shifter. It’s like your hand. If you cut it off, it doesn’t grow back.”

Ju could not look him in the eye. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to take it. I…”

He lunged for her, grasped her shoulders and stared at her with his eyes narrowed. “Sweet, purgatory. You lost it. How?”

Ju held his gaze. She wasn’t afraid of him, but was terrified of hurting him with her heart-magic.

“How?” he demanded.

“Arvin’s demon. It took it. I couldn’t fight it because I’d already used my own magic to fight Grindle when he tried to kill me.”

“What about Rill’s stone-magic? Why didn’t you fight with that?”

Ju shuddered at the memory. “I did. But it took your shifter-magic with it. I couldn’t stop it. When the last of it left me, the demon turned to stone.”

Ruk froze as if he, too, had turned to stone. He held his breath for what seemed an age, then let it out slowly. “Do you understand what losing my magic means? Do know what it makes me now?” He let go of her, lurched backwards. He
stormed away through the snow, then turned around and stormed back to her. His eyes were fierce; and something else.

Ju flinched, understanding at last that he was afraid – maybe even terrified. It occurred to her that without his magic, he’d not be able to shift. Clearly he wasn’t turning demon, or into a child again…

“You’re human,” she blurted.

He let out a sneering laugh. “I don’t know. If only it were that simple.” He held up his arm, open and closed his hand. “I’m like Rill used to be. But instead of being trapped in stone, I’m trapped in flesh. Instead of shifter-magic, I’ve got memories.” He tapped his head. “Forley’s memories, animal memories, a score of human memories from men and women whose names I can barely recall. Do you know how that feels? I can’t bury them, even in sleep.”

He turned away and started back over the stream.

“What will you do?” Ju asked.

He shrugged. She watched him climb up the hillside, his feet steady in the snow. When it seemed he would continue walking without so much as a reply, he turned around and asked, “Can you feel it? That pull? Do you know what it is?”

Ju shook her head.

“It’s the remnants of Rill’s stone magic. It’s in both of us, keeping us tied. Rill, no doubt, feels it too, but she’s ignoring it. Perhaps she’s too young. Perhaps she doesn’t want us to know.”

Ju gaped at him. “Tied?” She shivered. “What does that mean?”

Ruk let out a harsh laugh. “Let’s hope it fades. Let’s hope that, like Rill, we learn to ignore it.”

“Yes,” Ju said, numbly. “Let’s hope.

He stared through the trees, past her towards the monastery. “Are they in there? Tinder? Rill? Arvin?”

“For the time being.”

“They used us, you realize. Rill woke me from sleep and summoned me into the city. She wouldn’t let me shift into anyone but Forley. She sent me to him, knowing that his memories would lead him to you. I do not even want to contemplate what she knew about Solly. If she knew all along how she’d die…” He balled his fists. “I do not believe that Fate can’t be changed. I do not believe that Solly was meant to die then.”
Grief ached at the back of Ju’s throat, for Forley and Solly and those she’d known who’d died before them. Mama, Old Rosie…

“Tinder and Arvin do not need you now,” Ruk continued. “So why do they stay?”

“They’re afraid to return to the city, but they have nowhere else.”
Ruk snorted at that. “The city’s not everything.”

“No, it’s not.”
He looked at her, eyebrows raised.

Now that she understood his pull on her, she needed to prove to herself that she could control it. “I’m leaving it all behind me. I’m not looking back.” She held up her handless arm. “I have some designing to do. This time it won’t be wings.”

His lips twitched into a hint of a smile. “Given time, your wings will be made of genius.”

Yes. That’s what Forley would have said. Before she could answer, he turned around and continued on his way. She watched after him and kept watching when he disappeared into the trees and she could no longer hear the crunch of his footsteps sinking into the snow. He was just like Forley all over again, leaving her because she would not tell him she wanted him to stay.

Snow began to fall, light flakes dusting the air, sticking to her face. She huddled into her coat, grateful for the cold. When she focussed on it she could still feel her connection to Ruk. For reasons that she was not yet willing to fathom, she hoped that he felt it too.
Steampunk:
Imagined Histories and Technologies of Science and Fantasy

Fantasy sets up worlds that genuinely exist beyond the horizon, as opposed to those parts of our own world that are located beyond that line of sight but to which we might travel, given sufficient means.\(^1\)

Science Fiction is so often haunted by a sense of corruption. We can never entirely escape the aromas of Frankenstein’s “workshop of filthy creation”.\(^2\)

We [steampunkers] are archaeologists of the present, reanimating a hallucinatory history.\(^3\)

Introduction

Ursula Le Guin argues that fantasy literature is not merely an escape from reality, but also a literature closely tied to mythology and the unconscious. It is both art and play, “a different approach to reality [and] an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence”.\(^4\) In other words, fantasy offers a break from reality and at the same time illuminates our place in it. As Eric Rabkin states: “If we know the world to which a reader escapes, then we know the world from which he comes”\(^5\).

My novel *Heart Fire* is a work of steampunk fantasy devised with an awareness of these possibilities. It is set in an invented world in the city of Forsham, a pseudo-Victorian city undergoing an industrial revolution powered by both steam-driven technology and magic. When writing *Heart Fire* I drew on common steampunk tropes such as automatons, mad science and air ships. At the same time I remained aware that, in the past decade, steampunk has become popular and somewhat clichéd as both a literary genre and an aesthetic. As a result I sought to

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subvert the clichés by combining them with fantasy elements that are unusual to steampunk, using them to compare and contrast science with the occult, taking the stance that in Victorian times both were considered to be valid disciplines. In this respect, I do not see my work as crossing genres, but instead as imitating the Victorian scientific view that was yet to be fully divorced from its links with the occult, which were often represented in the fiction of the time\(^6\). This mixture reflects and dramatizes “the complex interplay of scientific and magical forms of knowledge in the early nineteenth century”?\(^7\). With this in mind, I mixed science and fantasy in *Heart Fire*, posing the questions: what if the occult were real and how would a world function if magic could either enhance or destroy science-based technology? As a result, I used old clichés in unexpected ways, showing repercussions from the misuse of technology from different perspectives. This allowed me to follow the steampunk tradition without being derivative and at the same time introduce weirdness through tropes that are generally seen to fall outside of what is expected within the steampunk revival of the past decade.

In the vein of all genre fiction I aimed for a well-paced story with timely plot reversals to keep the reader guessing, while also exploring themes of otherness and class oppression by highlighting human vulnerability in the wake of technological progress, a theme that recurs in steampunk literature. Although *Heart Fire* can be read as a self-contained novel with a satisfying conclusion, it has the potential to be continued as a trilogy, a feature that is widely sought by publishers of genre fiction.

In the exegesis, I will discuss the writing of *Heart Fire* as a steampunk text from the perspective of a writer in the genre of fantasy. I will also argue that literary steampunk is not limited simply to texts representing steam-driven machinery, but also includes fantastical texts that rely on pseudo-Victorianism often set in imaginary worlds characterized by anachronism, pseudoscience, technofantasy, magic, hybridity and imagined events inspired by science fictional history as well as real history.

In response to the widely held view that steampunk is a science fictional genre focusing on technology, I will explore ways in which both science and magic in fantasy steampunk texts follow rules, with science conforming to the laws of physics,

\(^6\) For a discussion of works such as ETA Hoffman’s “The Sandman” and Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M Valdemar” see Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, & Machines: Science Fiction & the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2006).

\(^7\) Willis 61.
and magic conforming to laws of internal consistency established within the text’s world-building. As a result, mechanical tropes can be interpreted as technologies of science, while magical tropes can be interpreted as technologies of fantasy. The combined effect is to defamiliarize the advantages and disadvantages of technology from both the past and present. This collision of disparate elements of science, magic, mythology and intertextuality – which I refer to as hybridity – not only illuminates the human condition in unique ways, but also creates a sense of wonder, as Brian Attebery observes, “The unknown can generate wonder; so can the familiar seen in a new light”.

To contextualize my argument, Chapter One “A Brief History of Steampunk”, will begin with an exploration as to why steampunk resists definition, not only due to the anarchic preferences of fans of the genre, but also due to the hybrid and subversive nature of the texts themselves. I will then discuss steampunk’s conception in the 1980s and show that the genre encompasses not only the popular texts of recent decades that have been inspired by the fashion aesthetic, the works of nineteenth century proto-science fiction and the visual richness of movies such as The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003) and Van Helsing (2004), but also works that fall into the genre of new weird fiction, fantasy fiction and gaslight romance.

In Chapter Two, “Dickens Meets Frankenstein”, I will discuss the first of the three main novels that influenced the techniques I used when writing Heart Fire: James P Blaylock’s Homunculus. I will focus on Blaylock’s representations of Frankensteinesque pseudoscience and anachronistic technology to show that although the novel’s setting feels historically accurate, some details have been changed to accommodate the effects of its rewritten history. The novel’s tone is irreverent and humorous, yet its critique of technology serves to highlight human frailty through the familiar yet unlikely trope of the reanimated dead.

Chapter Three, “Hybridity and Complexity”, will explore the relevance of setting and hybridity in steampunk with a discussion on world-building, politics, race and ethics in China Miéville’s Perdido Street Station. It will show how human frailty and the advantages and disadvantages of technology are highlighted through the addition of weirdness and complexity, creating a novel which, in itself, is Frankensteinesque in the way it is stitched together by a myriad of disparate elements.

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Chapter Four, “Gender, Frankenstein and What It Is To Be Human”, will sum up the hybridity of steampunk with a discussion of Ekaterina Sedia’s *Alchemy of Stone* to address the way the novel focuses on issues of gender from the point of view of an automaton. The novel can also be read as a defamiliarization of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, but unlike Frankenstein, the creation is not despised by her creator; instead, she is loved too much.

In Chapter Five, “The Mechanics of Heart Fire,” I will conclude with a discussion of the personal influences that led me to write *Heart Fire* along with other techniques that I used to manipulate familiar fantasy and science fictional tropes with the aim give my work the appearance of originality.

1. A Brief History of Steampunk: What Wound it Up and Why it Still Ticks

It is generally agreed that steampunk as a sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy began in 1978 with the publication of James P. Blaylock’s short story, *The Ape Box Affair*, a humorous tale of an amateur scientist’s bungled rocket experiment with the resultant escaped ape being mistaken for a space alien in nineteenth century London. It is set in the world of Blaylock’s later novel, *Homunculus* (1986) and features many of the same characters as well as anachronistic technology such as a nineteenth century rocket ship, an oxygenator box and an electric-sedation cap.

Thirty years later, when I began my post-graduate studies, texts such as Blaylock’s had officially been delegated their own genre – steampunk – but only a handful of academic publications could be found to complement them. These included Herbert Sussman’s “Cyberpunk Meets Charles Babbage: The Difference Engine as Alternative Victorian History” (which argued that William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s 1991 novel, *The Difference Engine*’s “alternative past becomes a metaphor for the potential dangers of present technology”10) and Steffen Hantke’s “Difference Engines and other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk” (which linked steampunk to “postmodernity”11). Academic articles by Grace Dillan, Joan Gordon and Carl Freedman had focused on the works of China Miéville, exploring themes such as Miéville’s exploration of Marxism, materialism, memory

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9 This is the title of a paper that I presented at the steampunk/science fiction & fantasy convention, *Wastelands II: Age of Iron* held in Perth Australia 18-19 October 2008.

At the time, many of my colleagues in both SF fandom and academia considered steampunk to be a sub-genre of science fiction, originally inspired by the texts of Jules Verne and HG Wells, but not by anything in the genre of fantasy. Most considered *The Difference Engine* – which posits the beginning of the computer age one hundred years before its time – to be the benchmark text of steampunk. Some had read the highly complex *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville; yet many had argued that it was only partly influenced by steampunk elements and seemed more at home in the genre of new weird. Fan-written works were barely making an appearance, most notably with *Steampunk Magazine #1* (2007) a free online publication offering both fiction and informal essays focussing predominantly on the genre’s aesthetic aspects in art, music, popular culture and role-playing games.


Almost five years later, nearly everyone with access to a computer, movie or television screen has seen and heard of steampunk, even if some are still unable to give it a name. Popular movies such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) and *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) feature anachronistic technology and Victorian settings with characters portraying twenty-first century attitudes. For years, websites such as *boingboing.net* and *wired.com* have regularly posted images of do-it-yourself technology such as laptops transformed into brass-keyed, nineteenth century typewriters or living spaces renovated with steampunk furnishings. Popular bands

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12 Once the fantasy element crept in, fans would relegate it to gaslight fantasy, gaslight romance or gothpunk, despite the fact that many of these texts said as much about technology’s effect on society as did science fictional steampunk, albeit from a different perspective, as I will argue later.
13 *Mainspring* has been labelled as clockpunk due to Lake’s world-building premise that the Earth rotates on a solar system-sized clockwork mechanism.
15 See example article at Hugh Hart, “Geek Gives New England Home an Extreme Steampunk Makeover” *Wired* (01 May 2012)
such as *Abney Park* and *The Synthetic Dream Foundation* are still in demand. Websites selling steampunk inspired jewellery and fashion proliferate\(^{16}\).

For many, the recent steampunk revolution promised to be little more than a passing phase. In 2008, Audrey Soffa protested against opportunistic promoters of the aesthetic, claiming that artists who used the genre’s increasing popularity to promote creations that could not be sold in the mainstream were wasting their time “because, in a couple of figurative seconds, it [was] going to be gone”\(^{17}\). Designer, Randy Nakamura wrote an even more vitriolic protest against steampunk’s design flaws calling the entire subculture “humbug”\(^{18}\).

Yet in 2012, despite these criticisms, the steampunk aesthetic is showing no sign of disappearing. Fans are still dressing up in corsets, top hats, mohawks and goggles like “fashion’s jackals running wild in the tailor shop”\(^{19}\). Enthusiasts are still creating do-it-yourself-artworks. Steampunk inspired movies such as *Hugo* (2011) – which features a writing automaton reminiscent of creations by Pierre Jaquet-Droz (1721-1790) – are still filmed against a backdrop of Jules Vernesque cogs, wheels and ample offerings of steam. Science fiction fans are running steampunk-themed conventions and panels. Gamers are playing steampunk-themed games such as *Machinarium*\(^{20}\), and novels and anthologies are flooding the market to the point where an aesthetic that at first seemed fresh and unique has rapidly become a cliché. Even fashion designer Louis Vuitton could not ignore the appeal of blending subversion with nostalgia when his “Fall/Winter Collection”\(^{21}\) had models dressed in hybridized anachronistic fashions arriving in an authentic steam train to alight onto a gothic-inspired catwalk. Vuitton’s theme, however, was more Edwardian than Victorian, which begs the question: what exactly is Steampunk?

\(^{16}\) For examples see *Brute Force Studios & Fallen Angel Fashions* \(<http://www.bruteforceleather.com/store/scripts/default.asp>\) (07 May 2012).


\(^{19}\) The Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective (NYC): 11.


With the genre’s potential for diversity in mind, Ann and Jeff Vandermeer take a broad-reaching stance and define it as “dark pseudo-Victorian fun”\(^\text{22}\). This position is echoed by Bowser and Croxall, who observe that the “one common element arguably shared by all steampunk texts, objects, or performance is…the invocation of Victorianism”\(^\text{23}\). In this sense, the Victorianism is not simply the nostalgic return to the past we see in the mainstream collection of antiques or in the writing of historically accurate fiction. It is, in fact, Victorianism seen through a backward looking lens, or in other words, a speculative fictional lens both irreverently tampered with and ingeniously enhanced with the benefit of hindsight. As Bowser and Croxall assert:

Like most science fiction, it takes us out of our present moment; but instead of giving us a recognisably futuristic setting, complete with futuristic technology, steampunk provides us with anachronism: a past that is borrowing from the future or a future borrowing from the past.\(^\text{24}\)

This is certainly true of novels with alternate history foci, such as *The Difference Engine* or *World Shaker*, which, despite its outward appearance of flippant adventure, depicts a city-sized juggernaut maintained by slaves in a world ruined by imperialism and over-exploitation. As a result, with novels like Sterling and Gibson’s and Harland’s in mind, it is easy to conclude that steampunk is predominately about technology. In fact, Stefania Forlini, does exactly this when examining the steampunk aesthetic alongside Neil Stephenson’s novel, *The Diamond Age* (1995), announcing that, “First and foremost, steampunk is about things – especially technological things – and our relationships to them”\(^\text{25}\). Although this is true in a good deal of steampunk, it excludes works that are not obviously about technology and runs the risk of including works that contain some of the trappings of steampunk but in essence, are not. For example, the wizard-world of the *Harry Potter* series has Edwardian settings with steam trains and various clockwork devices, but when fantasy author, Cory Daniels, asked: “Is Harry Potter Steampunk?”\(^\text{26}\), writers and fans generally agreed that it was not, arguing that the novel’s characters are neither Victorian nor against

\(^{22}\) *Steampunk* (San Francisco: Tachyon, 2008): ix.


\(^{24}\) ibid.


the establishment, and there is a lack of anachronistic technology and a predominance of magic. Yet paradoxically, Tim Powers’ novel, *The Anubis Gates* (1983), one of the original novels that the term steampunk was coined for, contains technological anachronism, and although the chapters that are set in an alternate London that predates the Victorian era by two decades, it is a good example of the way steampunk is stitched together from disparate elements, much like a Victorian collector hoarding treasures from exotic and newly-conquered cultures. For example, it mixes technofantasy (in the form of time travel) with Egyptian mythology, werewolves and British poets (both real and fictitious) in an imagined history that is told with the benefit of hindsight, or in other words, the knowledge of time paradoxes that only a post-nineteenth century writer could visualize. Yet *The Anubis Gates* has been dismissed by many fans and critics as steampunk’s somewhat lesser and melancholic counterpart known as “gaslight romance” or what John Clute and Roz Kaveney define in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as “historical technofantas[y]”, mostly due to its lack of emphasis on technology.

Part of the problem in the attempt to define steampunk stems from the fact that works are written in the genre of either science fiction or fantasy or very often both. In a different entry in the same encyclopaedia cited previously, John Clute states:

> [steampunk] can best be described as technofantasy that is based, sometimes quite remotely, upon technological anachronism…as a marriage of urban fantasy and the alternate-world tradition, steampunk can arguably be traced back to the influence of Charles Dickens, whose vision of a labyrinthine, subaqueous London as moronic inferno underlies many later texts.

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27 John Grant writes that technofantasy is “Fantasy that has scientific/technological trappings, or uses scientific/technological tools: it is distinguished from science fiction in that there is no attempt to justify such use in scientific or quasiscientific terms (sometimes there is a bit of gobbledygook, but both creator and audience know this for what it is)”. (John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1997 (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999): 935.

28 A recent example: on a steampunk panel at Swancon 36, (Byrne, Harland, and Hannett. “Steampunk: Style and Substance”. Perth. 24 April 2011), editor and steampunk enthusiast, Jeremy G. Byrne, stated that *The Anubis Gates* was most likely not steampunk after agreeing that its technology was anachronistic but not mechanistic. Another example: Fan review page *The Book Smugglers* argue that *The Anubis Gates* is not steampunk because it pre-dates the Victorian era and is fantasy fiction and not science fiction. (Steampunk Week – Book Review: *The Anubis Gates* by Tim Powers. 12 April 2010 <http://thebooksmugglers.com/2010/04/steampunk-week-book-review-the-anubis-gates-by-tim-powers.html> (12 December 2011).

29 Clute and Grant 390-391.

30 Clute and Grant 895.
If this argument still holds, then *The Anubis Gates* may well be considered steampunk. The problem rests not with its predominance of anachronistic technofantasy but with the fact that steampunk has enjoyed a mass revival in the past decade with texts inspired by the do-it-yourself aesthetic and brimming with stunning visuals such as the steam-driven machinery seen in the novels of Jules Verne and movies such as *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2006), *La Cité des Enfants Perdus/City of Lost Children* (1995) and many more.

Although the time travel represented in *The Anubis Gates* seems part magic and part science, it nevertheless mimics science by adhering to a set of rules that remain consistent within the text. Its effects on the human characters are logical and predetermined with the potential to change reality to either enhance the human condition or ruin it. For example, time travel is explained as “gaps in the wall of time”\(^{31}\) which “radiate out in a mathematically predictable pattern from their source”\(^{32}\). A careful calculation allows the protagonist, Doyle, to travel back in time to visit the fictitious nineteenth-century poet, Ashbless. Foul play, however, causes Doyle to miss the gap that will return him home, leaving him permanently trapped in the past where he is vulnerable to shapeshifters, gods and the occult. It is not quite the same as the waving of a Harry Potter wand. Nor is it any less scientific than the time travel represented in HG Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895). It is, however, less mystical than Oswald Barnstable’s jump into an alternate 1973 in Michael Moorcock’s *Warlord of the Air* (1971), which is widely regarded as a work of proto-steampunk.

When writing *Heart Fire*, I used magic and science in much the same way as Powers uses magic and science in *The Anubis Gates*; or in other words as differing methods of manipulating reality. In this way, magic can be interpreted as a technology of fantasy, coexisting with its mechanistic counterpart: the technology of science. This is in keeping with the Victorian worldview where science and the occult were considered to be valid disciplines or, as Martin Willis argues, it reflects and dramatizes “the complex interplay of scientific and magical forms of knowledge in the early nineteenth century”\(^{33}\). It also mimics the mixture of science, pseudoscience and occult seen in proto-science fiction, for example, the vitalism in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the human-like automaton of ETA Hoffman’s *The Sandman*.

\(^{32}\) Powers 42.
\(^{33}\) Willis 61.
(1816) and the mesmerism of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of Mr Valdemar” (1845). Therefore, although novels like *Heart Fire* and *The Anubis Gates* may be interpreted by some readers as pure fantasy, they can also be seen as a steampunk texts that are posing the question: what if the occult were real?

This argument may appear somewhat subversive to readers who still view steampunk as predominately a genre of science fiction. However, it cannot be ignored that steampunk, as the name suggests, is a genre of subversion, not only by virtue of its plot and characters, but also through the intentions of its progenitors, KW Jeter, James P Blaylock and Tim Powers.

**Steampunk’s Subversive Beginnings**

The term “steampunk” was originally coined by KW Jeter in a letter he wrote to *Locus* magazine in 1988. According to Jeter himself at a panel discussion at *World Fantasy Convention*, San Diego, 2011:

> The letter was much more of a poke, more or less friendly in nature, at all the people who were coming up with a [literary] movement of the week...something punk. Probably the original was cyberpunk but...you had splatter-punk, and then some other-punk and I was more poking fun at the notion of let’s take something and add punk to the end, just to make it seem like something was going on. But in retrospect, I think that what I was talking about was that we were doing things that we really hoped would irritate people – that, in a lot of ways, we were the ones who were most putting the punk into steampunk. It was sort of subversive and inherently anarchic and all of this would have happened without that label being attached to it.35

The subversion that Jeter is referring to is not confined to the punk-like characters and themes in the books he was publishing at the time, but to the influences that inspired them. These Jeter explains, were texts written by Robert Louis Stevenson and old-school thrillers that were unpopular amongst Jeter’s peers in the sixties and seventies: “We had a tremendous respect and enthusiasm for material at that time that nobody was really into that much36”. In the same interview, Blaylock attributes his

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34 Jeter is referring to the three original steampunk writers: Tim Powers, James P Blaylock and KW Jeter.
36 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oH UbuYdw&v=rrU88-ex7uw#t=305s>. 
inspiration to works by Dickens, PG Woodhouse, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as well as pirate novels and a fascination with Victorianism: “I just sort of wanted to play in that era and fake some of the language”, while Powers had a taste for H Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Fritz Leiber, Mervyn Peake. Adding to Jeter’s explanation, Powers irreverently and playfully confessed that he chose to set his novels in Victorian London to avoid the work of inventing an imaginary world: “You don’t have to have any intrinsic imagination. You’d simply have to read research books and find the cool bits”.

If the above is to be taken seriously then, as literary agent John Berlyne concluded in the same panel discussion, steampunk began as little more than Jeter, Blaylock and Powers being “reactionary to annoy colleagues at college” and not quite the conscious attempt at “revisionist history” that academics had tried to superimpose on it.

Regardless of steampunk’s playful origins, the name has endured, despite the unfortunate fact that not all steampunk texts are about steam-driven technology. Somewhat astutely, Jason B Jones observes: “The very name *steampunk* suggests a playful will-to-anachronism – *steam* is obsolete, whereas *punk*, certainly at the time of the term’s coinage, resonated as deliberately modern and contemporary”.

Contrary to Jeter et al’s confessions above, Jess Nevins asserts that steampunk’s origins lie in the nineteenth century with the dime novels (which were published around the same time as Jules Verne and HG Wells) for it is these that the “first generation of steampunk writers were reacting against”. The dime novels were later to be known as the ‘Edisonade’, “a term coined by John Clute after the

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37 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbYdw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=379s>.
38 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbYdw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=463s>.
39 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbYdw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=765s>.
40 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbYdw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=2326s>.
‘Robinsonade’, or stories about lone travellers stranded on remote islands, in the vein of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe”43. The first Edisonade is attributed to Edward S Ellis with his short story “The Huge Hunter”, “and appeared in Irwin P. Beadle’s American Novels #45 (August 1868)”44. Invented by the hunchbacked dwarf Johnny Brainerd, the huge hunter was a steam-driven locomotive that took the shape of a ten-foot man, manufactured from iron. Its chest housed a door which “opened to receive the fuel, which, together with the water, was carried in the wagon, a pipe running along the shaft and connecting with the boiler”45. This fearsome machine pulled a pioneer-like wagon, and with Brainerd at its controls, set out to explore and conquer the Wild West, defeating Indians and discovering gold, which predictably made Brainerd a wealthy man.

In the thirty years following “The Huge Hunter”, over one hundred similar stories were published, with Harry Enton’s “variations of steam men and steam horses”46 and Luis Senarens’ adventure stories “both on the American frontier and around the world, using a variety of electricity-powered vehicles and weapons”47. These stories differed from what was later to become steampunk in the way that they accepted imperialist ideologies and the assumption that technology would improve rather than threaten the quality of human life. Jess Nevins argues that where the Edisonade is “propagandist”48, steampunk is the opposite: “like all good punk, [it] rebels against the system it portrays”49. Therefore, instead of seeing the conquests and benefits reaped from using advanced and/or fantastic technology to dominate unexplored lands, steampunk acknowledges the seamy underside of technological progression – the ruin, the exploitation and mismanagement, or as Nevins aptly writes: “Steampunk is a genre aware of its own loss of innocence ... [its worlds] are polluted, cynical, and hard, quite unlike the clean and simple worlds of the Edisonades”50.

Whether or not the punk aspect of steampunk was a deliberate reaction to nineteenth century dime novels is moot. Since the dime novels, proto-steampunk has

43 ibid.
44 Nevins 4.
46 Nevins 5.
47 ibid.
48 Nevins 10.
49 ibid.
50 ibid.
appeared in many forms including the movie *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954)\(^{51}\) and novels such as Ronald Clarke’s *Queen Victoria’s Bomb* (1967) and Michael Moorcock’s *A Nomad of the Time Streams*\(^{52}\) trilogy (1971-1981).

The first novel attributed to steampunk is KW Jeter’s *Morlock Night* (1979) which juxtaposes science with Arthurian legend and explores the possibility HG Wells’ time machine falling into Morlock hands and the resultant changes that ensued in the traveller’s future, which also happens to be our past\(^{53}\). Powers’ and Jeter’s numerous steampunk works that followed also contained a similar blend of science and fantasy.

As the steampunk canon began to expand, other novelists tried new and varied permutations of the genre. For example, in 1986, Bob Shaw’s *The Ragged Astronauts* portrayed a planetary system that allowed inhabitants to travel between worlds in hot air balloons. In 1991, *The Difference Engine* reinforced steampunk’s science fictional links to cyberpunk, while in 1994 Michael Swanwick maintained close connections with fantasy with *The Iron Dragon’s Daughter*, the story of a human changeling’s search for freedom in a world of magic and sentient dragon-shaped war engines.

Three decades after the publication of *The Difference Engine*, many quality novels have followed, including a gamut of gaslight romances and pseudo-Victorian fantasy adventures such as Gail Carriger’s *The Parasol Protectorate Series (2009-2010)* and Cassandra Clare’s *The Infernal Devices* (2010-2011). Many feature female characters sporting bustles, lace and upper class manners, finding themselves in dire and often consensual contact with vampires, werewolves and automatons. Although their storylines are immensely entertaining, blending fantasy elements with all the enthusiasm of an eccentric Victorian collector, they do little to critique technology or society. Less forgivably, novels that are marketed as erotic fantasy romps such as Katie McAllister’s *Steamed* foist pseudo-Victorianism and punk-like attitudes onto characters with the unapologetic audacity of stolen backdrops that barely function as plot devices. Predicting an increase in this state of affairs, Nevins concludes,

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\(^{51}\) *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is considered by some fans to be true steampunk, appearing before Jeter, Blaylock and Powers coined the term. However, the movie is an adaptation of the original Jules Verne text, which was originally written as science fiction with similar futuristic technology and tropes to those seen in the movie.


\(^{53}\) This a twentieth century trope and did not appear in Wells’ original novel; it illustrates how steampunk critiques old ideas using the benefit of hindsight.
This abandonment of ideology is an evolution (or, less charitably, an emasculation) that is inevitable once a subgenre becomes established—witness how cyberpunk went from a dystopic critique of multinational capitalism to a fashion statement and literary cliché\(^5^4\).

This same point regarding steampunk’s loss of its subversive elements had already been made two years earlier by the editors of *Steampunk Magazine*: “too much of what passes as steampunk denies the punk, in all its guises”\(^5^5\). This criticism was promptly followed up with a promise that true steampunkers would continue to “snee at utopias while awaiting the new ruins to reveal themselves…rebuilding yesterday to ensure our tomorrow”\(^5^6\), a most punk-like attitude that steampunk would endure, continuing to uphold its punk aspects. A true fan of literary steampunk could ask for no less.

This promise to uphold subversion begs the question, why has the concept of punk been combined with steam? Or in other words, why adhere to Victorianism? Why not explore neo-classicism? Or druidpunk? Or Ancient Romanpunk?

To answer this question I will now explore how we are linked to the Victorians through not only recent history but also science fictional history.

**The Nineteenth Century: Our Historical and Science Fictional Mirror**

As a child I would look to outer space as a symbol of unexplored newness and untapped opportunity; but unfortunately with present-day technology, even our moon is barely attainable. This is reflected in the latest science fiction, which in the quest for accuracy is limited by known physics, known astronomy, known astrobiology and known methods of space travel. The Victorian times, however, were times of unspoiled speculation, where the possibility of canals on Mars still existed, journeys to the centre of the Earth were yet to be discredited and the repercussions of the industrial revolution were welcomed by some, despised by others and yet to be fully understood.

If twenty-first century science cannot lead me to unbounded territory, then as a writer of fiction, I look to steampunk, where nineteenth century pseudo-science and fantasy can locate me in the past, the present and the future all at once. Technology and magic may well be opposites, but regardless of their era, both can impart a sense of wonder; yet both can exact a cost.

\(^5^4\) Nevins 11.
\(^5^5\) The Catastrophone Orchestra and arts Collective (NYC): 11.
\(^5^6\) ibid.
Simon Cooper observes that “[o]ur relations with technology are often marked by a deep ambivalence”\textsuperscript{57}. Science fictional works have traditionally mirrored this ambivalence with texts such as Jules Verne’s scientific romances, which revere technological advancement and texts such as Aldous Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World} (1932) which warn of technology’s dehumanising potential. Steampunk is particularly useful as a means to critique technology because industrial societies of the nineteenth century – the historical setting for most steampunk novels – were on the brink of experiencing the same anxieties relating to technology that we do today. Furthermore, by placing futuristic technology in an anachronistic setting, it defamiliarizes it. In other words, by allowing the reader to see familiar technological artefacts in a strange and interesting way that is historically linked to our present, steampunk is able to illuminate the relationship between humanity and technology in ways that realist fiction – and possibly even futuristic science fiction – cannot. For example, Herbert Sussman focuses on \textit{The Difference Engine’s} Victorianism and cyberpunk aspects to argue that the novel’s “alternative past becomes a metaphor for the potential dangers of present technology”\textsuperscript{58}. Expanding on this, Patrick Jagoda asserts:

\begin{quote}
If history is a temporal system, complete with subroutines of control and opposition, then steampunk is a mechanism for rendering and reprogramming that system. It is not so much a utopian vehicle of escape as an engine of difference that generates worlds and histories that are wholly other – and also our own\textsuperscript{59}.
\end{quote}

Jagoda’s paper explores the consequences of steampunk’s defamiliarization of history, where the worlds represented are real but not real, and the times are history, but not history. He argues that when historical and fictional characters are juxtaposed, history and imagination are transformed from opposites into colluding elements that not only illuminate the present, but give in to our “simultaneous need to live within history and to escape it”\textsuperscript{60}. Therefore, in \textit{The Difference Engine}, the concept of a computer system dominating society one hundred years before its time, not only


\textsuperscript{58} Sussman [NP].


\textsuperscript{60} Jagoda 64.
presents us with a tantalizing “what if” but also reflects our own present day insecurity about our society’s ever-increasing dependence on technology.

The reason that this defamiliarization functions so well in a nineteenth century setting is that the Victorians are similar to us in many ways. They saw the establishment of the empirical sciences, the industrial revolution, the first wave of feminism, the rise of imperialism and colonialism, all of which are still relevant in today’s society. As Steffen Hantke argues: “What makes the Victorian past so fascinating is its unique historical ability to reflect the present moment”61. For us the nineteenth century represents a turning point – a time where things could have happened differently in ways we can only imagine with the benefit of hindsight. As Peter Nicholls writes,

Victorian London has come to stand for one of those turning points in history where things can go one way or the other, a turning point peculiarly relevant to sf itself. It was a city of industry, science and technology where the modern world was being born, and a claustrophobic city of nightmare where the cost of this growth was registered in filth and squalor. Dickens – the great original Steampunk writer who, though he did not write sf himself, stands at the head of several sf traditions – knew all this62.

Nicholls’ reference to Dickens as a steampunk writer may come as a surprise to fans of the aesthetic as most would think firstly of Jules Verne and HG Wells and perhaps Dickens only so far as his influence on smoky London settings, with poverty and its urchins picking pockets under the oppressive influences of thieves. However, as Martin Willis points out, Dickens was also aware of technology’s ever-growing darker side: “fictional representations of the collisions between the human and the machine paint a similarly stark portrait”63 to the real life horrors of his time. Willis follows this assertion with an example from the Dickens novel Dombey and Son (1846-1848) showing an image of a man being consumed by the machine:

He heard a shout…felt the earth tremble – knew in a moment that the rush was come – uttered a shriek – looked round saw the red eyes, bleared and dim, in the daylight, close upon him – was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air64.

61 Hantke [NP].
63 Willis 102.
64 ibid.
Compare this to a description from the relatively recent steampunk novel, *Whitechapel Gods* (2008):

Spikes of iron had sprouted from his bald pate and his bare chest was riddled with gears and bulbs of all types of metals, the tips of much larger growths festering beneath the skin. As the doctor made his second cut, lateral and shallow, across the base of the rib cage, black oil welled up, slipping down Tor’s flanks and staining the sheets and blankets.

The doctors called the disease the morbus imperceptus incrementum. Other folk called it the “clacks”\(^65\).

In the Dickens text, the human body is invaded from the outside, torn apart by the unstoppable mill. In Peters’ work, which is a technofantasy presented in the guise of science fiction, the Dickensian influences are subtle yet undeniably anachronistic. Here, the technology invades the body from the inside much like a disease, with the flesh being torn apart by a man wielding surgical instruments, and a disease turning flesh into machine parts. The explanation for this disease, however, is partly scientific and partly supernatural in that it is presented in the language of science with a pseudo-Latin name in keeping with the times. Yet the disease itself depends on the intervention of mechanical Gods, in line with an era where science was still a nascent discipline and the occult had not yet lost its validity.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* displays a similar mixture of science and occult. In the 1818 edition of the novel, she does not explain the exact nature of the monster’s animation but, in the preface of the 1831 edition, she notes that, before writing *Frankenstein*, she knew about the theory of galvanism:

They [Lord Byron and Shelley] talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin…who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse might be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things; perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth\(^66\).

Therefore, it can be argued that Frankenstein was based on scientific theory being mooted in Shelley’s time. However, regardless of whether Frankenstein is science fiction, science fantasy or horror, the notion of animating the dead is one that persists.

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in steampunk today, leading readers to experience the same sense of horror as it was first experienced in the beginning of the nineteenth century, where medical science was still in its formative stages and the dissection of corpses was only a step away from Mary Shelley’s gruesome speculation.

In *Billion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss locates *Frankenstein* as the “first great myth of the industrial age”67. The novel’s gothic backdrop frames the story of a man, Victor Frankenstein, who uses barely understood science to overreach his capabilities. He then abandons his creation and suffers dire consequences. Human frailty is highlighted not only when the monster murders those who Frankenstein loves, but through the monster itself, whose emotions appear more human than the cold-hearted dismissal of its creator’s:

> Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God, a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator…Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.68

Frankenstein’s monster is hideous and pitiful – a classic horror character, unforgettable for the way it at once symbolizes and defamiliarizes the human condition.

In steampunk, humankind’s relationship to technology is represented in both science fictional and fantastical forms. Examples of science fictional influences include the exploitation of the working underclass in the juggernaut city of *Worldshaker*, life in the nano-engineered Victorian world of *The Diamond Age* and life under the controlling AI of *The Difference Engine*. In contrast, examples of science fantasy influences include the invasive mechanical disease of *Whitechapel Gods*, the juxtaposition of time travel and Arthurian legend in *Morlock Night* and the juxtaposition of time travel, shapeshifters and Egyptian legend in *The Anubis Gates*. These latter three texts present pseudo-science in the same way that vitalism is presented in *Frankenstein*. Therefore, regardless of their place on the speculative fiction spectrum, each text can be read as steampunk for the way they are set in a pseudo-Victorian world, blend old tropes with new tropes creating anachronistic technology which is critiqued with the benefit of hindsight. The overall effect is at

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67 Aldiss 23.
68 Shelley 116-117.
times humorous, at times grotesque and bleak and at times deeply moving, contrasting technology and magic with human frailty, illuminating not simply what we used to be, but we might have been, what we are, and intriguingly, what we can never be.

2. Dickens Meets Frankenstein: James P. Blaylock’s Homunculus

A dirigible undergoing a decades-long flight, seemingly piloted by the fleshless skeleton of Doctor Randal Birdlip, passes regularly over nineteenth century London. It is predicted to land at Hampstead Heath within days. Meanwhile, a space alien in the shape of an eight inch-tall homunculus is trapped inside a man-made box. Its presence appears to give perpetual motion to machines as well as to animate the dead. This, along with memoirs describing murderous experiments in the quest for perpetual life, expose the scientist-philosophers of Langdon St Ives’s Trismegistus Club to the criminal undertakings of zombies, an insane evangelist, the hunch-backed scientist, Narbond, and his psychopathic assistant, Willis Pule. Despite criminal mix-ups and the theft and destruction of St Ives’s rocket ship, the criminals are disbanded, their plans thwarted and the homunculus is unwittingly set free, enabling it to use its supernatural powers to pilot Birdlip’s skeleton and reclaim its alien spaceship to return to the stars.

Homunculus is a work of fantasy with a sprinkling of science fiction. Blaylock does not make any serious attempt to represent the novel’s scientific elements as real, and nor does he take an accepted point “A” in history and ask: “what if point “B” happened instead?” What he does, however, is take elements of science fictional history from the nineteenth century – the vitalism used to animate Frankenstein’s monster, the alchemy of perpetual motion, the Jules Vernian escapades into outer space – to pose the question: what if these were real instead?

Regardless of Homunculus’s light emphasis on steam-driven machinery, Tim Powers asserts that the novel, along with Jeter’s Infernal Devices (1987), is one of “the purest examples of steampunk, despite all that’s been written since”69. Published in 1986, it has been praised as “surreal British comedy in the vein of Monty Python or

69 Berlyne et al
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbuYdw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=2206s>.
*Fawlty Towers*”70 and – although winner of the 1986 *Philip K. Dick Award* – it has also been criticized for its lagging pace and “shallow characters”71.

*Homunculus* was an important influence during my writing of *Heart Fire* for the way that Blaylock combines pseudo-science and the occult to both complement and contrast with each other. As Brian Attebery states in *Strategies of Fantasy*, “If science fiction’s gaze is outward and ahead, fantasy’s is inward and into the past”72. Here, Attebery is referring to science fantasy. The ‘inward’ is the human psyche along with the myth and legend that filters not only into realistic fiction but also into science fiction, where predictions of future technologies are as dependent on logical extrapolation as they are on human imagination. As Ursula Le Guin asserts, science fiction and fantasy are so close “as to render any effort at exclusive definition useless”73.

To address Le Guin’s assertion in relation to steampunk, I will recall a common science fictional trope where the scientist succumbs to ambition and overreaches his capabilities with dire consequences. Mary Shelley used it unforgettably in the creation of *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, the theme of which also recurs with equal frequency in fantasy novels with witches and mages seduced by the potential of magical abilities. In a steampunk text, it is possible to take the Prometheus myth and use it as both a fantasy trope and a science fictional trope. In other words, steampunk can be a fantastical narrative set in the past infused with myth combined with scientific elements from the future. The reader is thus encouraged to see the world and themselves from two different perspectives: looking both outward through the representation of technology and inward via the unconscious through myth and legend.

Blaylock’s representations of technology are infused with fantasy and myth to function as tropes of steampunk. They are set up using realistic details, textual foreshadowing, repetition and internal consistency, allowing readers to see logical consequences as the plot progresses, enabling them to suspend their disbelief and accept the novel’s impossible elements. These same techniques are used by fantasy writers when setting up rules of magic to create internal consistency within a fantasy novel. Although many readers see these techniques as genre bending, they can also be

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71 ibid.
72 Attebery 109.
73 Le Guin 21.
seen as a reflection of the early Victorian world-view of science and the occult 
eexisting together as valid disciplines, holding their own in the same way as Mary 
Shelley’s *Frankenstein* holds its own as an example of vitalism. In contrast, Blaylock 
does not intend the reader to take his scientific representations seriously, he does 
however subvert – in true steampunk fashion – the science fictional expectations of 
the present day reader by presenting science that has long since been discredited by 
using the language of science and the techniques of fantasy.

When explaining the importance of using real science in science fiction, 
Stephen Gillett writes that, “skilfully done—as background, not lecture it imbues a 
sense of reality that can carry your reader along, that can elicit the willing suspension 
of disbelief almost unconsciously”\(^{74}\). In *Homunculus*, the major representation of real 
science, in the form of perpetual motion, appears somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

Blaylock does not state this openly, but instead has William Keeble, a member of the 
Trismegistus Club, reflect on the principle naturally and logically in a conversation 
about the decaying orbit of Birdlip’s dirigible:

> Perpetual motion is a tricky business, you know – rather like separating an 
egg from its shell without altering the shape of either, and then suspending 
the two there, one a quivering, translucent ovoid, the other a seeming solid, 
side by side. It’s not done in a day. And the whole thing is relative, isn’t it? 
True perpetual motion is a dream, although a sage named Gustatorius 
claimed to have produced it alchemically in 1410 in the Balkans, for the 
purpose of continually turning the back lens of a kaleidoscope. A wonderful 
idea, but alchemists tend to be frivolous, taken on the whole\(^{75}\).

Keeble’s dialogue uses the language of science, albeit in what passes for Victorian 
science. Although most readers would agree that true perpetual motion is indeed a 
dream, only those educated in history or with Google at their fingertips would know 
that the sage, Gustatorius, is a fictional character. Even so, the explanation has an 
authentic if not humorous tone to it, allowing the reader to forgive the author’s 
audacity and at least accept the explanation for the purposes of reading further.

Perpetual motion is then taken a step past its usual mechanistic connotations 
to the familiar and grisly trope of reanimating the dead, not merely with the 
homunculus but with the less effective juices harvested from a carp bladder. Again, 
the assertion of the carp’s role in immortality arrives through dialogue, completely in


character with the voice that delivers it, ostensibly as a means of an awkward exchange between enemies, but in reality as a pseudo-scientific explanation:

“Carp is it? They say carp is...What do they say? Immortal. That’s it.”

“Do they?” asked Pule, feigning deep interest.

“Science does. They’ve studied them. In China mainly. Live forever and grow as big as the pool they’re kept in. That’s a fact. Read up your Bible—it’s all there. Loads of talk about the leviathan—the devil’s own fish. Shows up as a serpent here, a crocodile there—they can’t keep him straight. But he’s a carp, sure enough, with his tail in his own mouth...”

This is the only explanation the reader is given, apart from dramatization in the form of the spraying of yellow mist manufactured from immortal carp juices in a later scene. Nevertheless when Joanna Southcote’s skeleton is miraculously animated—creating an outrageously funny scene with a chattering skull and disembodied piano-playing hands—readers are prepared for the impossibility of what the author is presenting because the idea has already been foreshadowed by the fact that the homunculus itself possesses the same magical ability:

But the thing in the box can arrest entropy. He can separate tepid water into ice and steam if he likes. He can animate the carcass of a rat dead in a wall for months and dance it about the room like a marionette. He’s prodigiously old, and the only consequence of his thwarting time is his shrunken state.

This repetition of a theme through variation establishes rules of magic, in the same way as science fiction adheres to rules of physics previously established in the real world. Rules of magic give imaginary worlds internal consistency to allow plot twists and character decisions to feel logical instead of contrived and convenient. But internal consistency, Ann Swinfen explains, also “requires a firm basis in primal world reality. The inhabitants and affairs of a secondary world will awaken an interest in the reader only if he can feel some underlying comprehension and sympathy for them.” In other words, the reader must also see something recognizable alongside the unrecognizable. This is clearly evident in Homunculus, where the rules of animating the dead have first been established through the intertextual borrowings from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. When Pule and his

76 Blaylock 109.
77 Blaylock 69.
assistant raid the graveyard and dig up Joanna Southcote’s body in a gothic scene humorously reminiscent of Dr Frankenstein’s grave raiders – and also when Owelsby’s memoires are read, revealing past murders carried out in order to harvest body parts – any reader familiar with the science fiction canon is able to make the connection. This connection is then reinforced by the pseudo-scientific explanations of the homunculus’s anti-entropy qualities and the life extending effects of the carp elixir. Although common sense tells the reader that the scenario is clearly impossible, the narrative has sufficient internal consistency for readers to be drawn into to the story and suspend their disbelief.

In *Heart Fire*, I use a similar mixture of internal consistency and pseudo-science to convince readers to accept the concept of human souls being connected to magic. I begin the story with Ju being forced to submit to a powerhouse where she must give up her skin-magic to feed machines. But as her stronger and more dangerous heart-magic shifts to take its place, the reader gradually learns how magic works in this world. At the death of Rosie, the reader sees that the removal of too much magic results in the loss of one’s soul, which is given a seemingly expert explanation at a natural and timely moment in Chapter Sixteen, where it is implied that souls and magic are linked. Together, they serve to keep the heart beating much the same way as in the real world where the human heart has traditionally been considered the seat of the soul and, in contrast, has scientifically been proven to be powered by small electric waves that can be recorded by an electrocardiograph.

“…His smokeless, steamless automatons are fuelled, not only with heart-magic, but with souls. Human souls.”

Arvin blinked. What in Fate’s name was the woman talking about? “Souls cannot not be separated from bodies and kept as prisoners. If a body dies, the soul either ceases to exist or gives itself up to Fate’s will.”

“Not necessarily,” Christina said. “Besides, if that were the case, why does the complete stripping of heart-magic also strip the soul? Don’t you see? The two are inextricably bound.”

Arvin sighed. “Then what does that make me? I have no heart-magic. Am I soulless?”

“Of course you have heart-magic,” Christina countered. “But like most workers you have so little that your heart consumes every last drop to keep itself beating. In contrast, people like myself and Miss Weatherston have more than enough. We could feed an entire planet of hearts if needed.”
Therefore, to give magic the appearance of science, people with a small amount of electricity like Arvin have only small reserves of magic, and those like Ju have large and potentially dangerous reserves. The science behind this is part real and mostly imagined. Even so, science and magic are inseparable, with science following the laws of physics and magic following rules of internal consistency. Furthermore, both have limits and costs. When Ruk uses too much heart-magic, he weakens, as if heart-magic is, in reality, nothing more than an excess of electricity. When Ju uses it without knowledge and training, she risks destroying herself. When Sir Mathias Grindle overreaches his capabilities, he faces, like Prometheus, lethal repercussions. My aim is to allow readers to recognize these age-old limitations, sympathize with the novel’s characters and suspend their disbelief in the impossible elements in order to continue reading.

Characters and magic, however, do not function in a vacuum. Fantasy novels are well known for their detailed and unique settings, not merely for the sake of backdrop, but to impart realism into a clearly impossible situation, adding familiarity from yet another perspective. This is even more noticeable in steampunk, where not only the laws of physics have been challenged, but histories have been rewritten, and characters’ actions conform to neither nineteenth century nor twenty-first century social expectations.

When steampunk texts are set in Victorian London, historical backdrops may at first appear to be accurate recreations of the past, but on closer scrutiny they are changed due to the effects of the fantastical tropes foisted onto them. For example, in a science fictional alternate history, if an event “A” is changed to event “B” a butterfly effect ensues, causing numerous changes in the future, as happens in The Difference Engine where not only is computer technology invented one hundred years before its time, but the resulting twentieth century leads to a balance of power in Europe and America that is vastly different to our own. Similarly, if an author adds magic to a recreated world, then certain aspects of the world must also change. Therefore, if readers are to be persuaded into accepting the impossible, they must not only be able to sympathize with characters, they must also see evidence of the impossible events functioning logically in the novel’s setting.

On a much smaller scale, this can be seen most clearly in the technofantasy used to describe St Ives’s star ship, which on the outside resembles an early twentieth
century science fictional rocket, but on the inside, is much like a nineteenth century solarium, at once locating it in neither our past nor our future:

Windows, heavy with glass, encircled the craft beneath the conical locking mechanism of the hatch…rapping the iron skin of the ship, peering in at the little cluster of potted orchids and begonias that would aid Keeble’s box in supplying oxygen…he pushed the tester button with his finger and a little spray of green chlorophyll dust shot out, carried on a mixture of helium and oxygen…

Here, technofantasy has been delivered using the language of real science. In this future-past setting it feels believable and simultaneously familiar and alien.

In *Heart Fire* I use a similar mixture of old and new with the manufacture of Grindle’s automatons. Readers are introduced to automatons working in the capacity of factory workers:

He led Arvin to a workroom where automatons with rubbery faces assembled harvesters with disturbing efficiency. Not one of them spoke. Their tinkering sounded rhythmical, synchronized as if by mutual agreement.

There is no scientific explanation as to how the machines are assembled or function, only the appearance of a factory and the assumption that the final product is successful. Later in *Heart Fire*, however, readers receive supernatural explanations for the reason why automaton’s faces are identical to the person whose soul has been used to animate them.

*It’s Sir Mathias’s little game*, the demon explained. *He allows the stolen soul to imprint itself on the automaton’s blank features. Its written instructions allow it the semblance of autonomy, while at the same time forcing it to do his bidding.*

Prior to this scene, readers have already seen automatons with souls and faces of living beings. The explanation, however, is not given until much later, unfolding naturally with the story, allowing readers to learn the mystery of the automaton’s workings, bit by bit, as the characters themselves learn.

Like all settings in fantasy novels, steampunk settings are required not only to add realism alongside the fantastical elements and the changed histories but also to give a sense of authenticity to the backdrop. *Homunculus* begins with a vivid

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79 Blaylock 117.
80 Blaylock 122.
description of a typical cloudy London sky that then follows the journey of a dirigible piloted by the ghoulish remains of the long-dead Doctor Randal Birdlip, an image at once impossible and vivid:

a rigid figure in a cocked hat, gripping the wheel, his legs planted widely as if set to counter an ocean swell, the wind tore at his tattered coat, whipping it out behind him and revealing the dark curve of a ribcage, empty of flesh, ivory moonlight glowing in the crescents of air between the bones. His wrists were manacled to the wheel, which itself was lashed to a strut between two glassless windows

This image is supported by an elaborate description of the sights and sounds of the street markets and pubs below, with their costermongers, squid sellers, florists, ragpickers, a pea seller, rain and wet cigars. These realistic details contrast with the novel’s impossible elements and provide a sense of familiarity, further persuading the reader to suspend their disbelief. In fact, some of the details appear so accurate that the reader can almost feel with St Ives, the protagonist, rain dripping down the back of his neck and his discomfiture at the “mutability of appetite” after having eaten four too many cheap English sausages.

According to Tim Powers, the research for the setting of *Homunculus* (and for other early steampunk novels written by Blaylock, Powers and Jeter) was taken from Henry Mayhew’s 1851 book, *London Labour and London Poor*: “We all had a copy of it and would sit around and we’d go through sections of it… it was as if a little time machine appeared in front of us.” However, unlike Charles Dickens, who had firsthand experience of London, Blaylock’s London is essentially London from the eyes of, not only an outsider but also, as Blaylock implies himself, from the eyes of a time-traveller. At times, the landscapes are infused with Dickensian humour when villain territory is ridiculed:

It was perhaps more difficult to find a window pane that remained entire than it was to find one broken, and the only evidence of industry was in the removal of dirty glass shards from some few of the bottom floor windows and the subsequent dumping of the broken glass onto the cobbles of the street. The effort, perhaps, was made to facilitate the sort of person who would crawl in at the window rather than step in at the door, a purely practical matter, since few of the doors hung square on their rusted hinges,

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81 Blaylock 4.
82 Blaylock 6.
83 Berlyne et al <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&list=FLMy1jAvliYP_7P9oHUbUydw&v=rrU88-cx7uw#t=508s>
and were in such appalling disrepair as to dissuade any honest man from attempting to breach them.\textsuperscript{84}

However, in contrast, the relatively benign interior of the Trismegistus Club does not escape a mild taunting:

Great posts of tobacco stood atop groaning shelves, now and then separated by a row of books, all tilted and stacked and quite apparently having nothing at all to do with tobacco, but being, it seemed to St Ives, their own excuse—a very satisfactory thing. Everything worth anything, he told himself, was its own excuse. Three of four lids were askew on the tobacco canisters, which leaked an almost steamy perfume into the still air of the room\textsuperscript{85}.

Unlike Dickensian texts, Blaycock’s prose includes no ridicule of the double standard and selfish attitudes of the over-fed upper classes\textsuperscript{86}. Blaylock’s humour is indiscriminate, aimed at heroes and villains alike, acting as a counterpoint to the absurdities within the text. This poses the question: where is Homunculus’s ‘punk’ aspect? If there is no differentiation between villains and heroes, is the punk aspect simply in the author’s original claim that his intention was to subvert the type of literature that was popular at the time he first wrote steampunk? Or is it, more subtly, in the way that human frailty in the face of technology is represented not through obvious means through the living, but through impossible means through the living dead?

**Human Frailty In the Face of Technology**

Tooey died in Horsemonger Lane Gaol, screaming mad, half his face scaled like a fish\textsuperscript{87}.

In the novel, Tooey’s story is told in retrospect, long after he died from exposure to the unpredictable effects of carp elixir. Blaylock does not spell out exactly what killed Tooey, but juxtaposed with talk of experiments, the animation of dead bodies and exposure to the homunculus, the reader is able to infer that his death is the result of some unanticipated side effect, a risk that any scientist takes when dealing with the extreme alongside the unknown; and all the more so when juxtaposed with the occult.

\textsuperscript{84} Blaylock 34.
\textsuperscript{85} Blaylock 23.
\textsuperscript{86} For an example, see the decaying fog filled streets that surround the chancery in Chapter One of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens.
\textsuperscript{87} Blaylock 10.
Human frailty relative to technological expansion is as salient now as it was at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Dickens recognized it in *Dombey and Son*, in the scene with the worker caught up in the jagged mill. Blaylock repeats it with the image of Birdlip’s skeleton in the dirigible, the scientist destroyed by overreaching his capabilities. The image is at once darkly humorous and absurd, yet symbolizes all too clearly human vulnerability in the face of technology and progress.

The settings of *Homunculus* – the grimy, wet streets, the dilapidated shops and dwellings – all seem to conspire against the unwary passer-by, whether hero or villain: “Langdon St Ives stood in the rainy night in Leicester Square and tried without success to light a damp cigar”. St Ives’s inconvenience is somewhat trivial however, compared to the indignities suffered by the unfortunate Pule, already plagued by a severe case of acne, when he interferes with technology beyond his understanding:

A jet of gas wheezed out, spraying over his face. Spitting and coughing, he cast the box onto the bed. He’d been poisoned. He knew it. The box wheezed again, and a great cloud of green dust blew out of the spout with such a force that although he threw himself over backwards onto the floor, the gas enveloped him utterly.

Although this incident leads only to Pule’s face being stained an odd shade of green, frightening strangers and allies alike, there is the potential of danger in the humour as Pule retaliates violently against those who flee him.

However it is not the living who provide the most lasting images of human frailty, but the dead: the skeleton of Birdlip piloting the dirigible and Joanna Southcote raised from the grave, her decapitated skull animated with carp elixir, the effects of which are only partially successful, illustrating once again that life is tenuous even if science and the occult is drawn on to maintain it:

Just as the voice started up again, the teeth gave out, seeming to take the voice by surprise, for it continued momentarily, uttering something about dread things in the sea before closing off like a faucet. Each effort by the toothy skull seemed more tired than the last. Shiloh peered in at it, shaking it just a bit as if fearing that the thing was running down – which it very apparently was, for away it went one last time, getting off a half-dozen staccato chatters before slowly playing out and, whether of its own accord or

88 Willis 102.
89 Blaylock 6.
90 Blaylock 173.
because of a misstep of the evangelist, falling over onto its side and giving up the ghost\textsuperscript{91}.

“Life” in this case, does not simply imply a fragile existence for the living, but an even more fragile one for the dead. Mary Shelley portrayed this in the hideous yet tragic abandoned monster of Frankenstein. Dickens portrayed it in future visions given to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Future in \textit{A Christmas Carol} (1843), where future deaths of Tiny Tim and Scrooge himself were dependant on the actions of the living in the present. In contrast, death in realist fiction represents endings and missed opportunities. In steampunk, not only is death flouted, it is also given life beyond the grave. \textit{Homunculus} turns the tragedy of death into comedy, horror and an exploration of humankind’s preoccupation with immortality.

I take up the theme of fragility beyond death in \textit{Heart Fire} with the concept of human souls being transplanted into automatons, using it as a representation of a misuse of technology. Sir Mathias Grindle is a mage born without heart-magic. He resents all those who are born with it. He therefore plans to eliminate his rivals by turning them into automatons, not simply to be used to serve him, but to eliminate all heart-magic from the city. The notion that humanity can be so easily consumed by machines is certainly not a new one. However, the idea that it takes magic and human skills – in the form of Ju’s heart-magic and Rill’s stone-making magic – to fight that consumption adds a different slant to my aim of subverting what has already been written in the genre of steampunk.

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textit{Homunculus} succeeds as a work of fantasy steampunk for the way it combines futuristic technology in a Dickensian setting and mixes real science with pseudo-science and the occult. It uses realistic elements to allow readers to suspend their disbelief to accept the fantasy elements to highlight human frailty against the uses and misuses of technology. Therefore, although it is not predominately about steam-driven technology, it does fulfil in part Stefania Forlini’s assertion that Steampunk is “first and foremost”\textsuperscript{92} about our relationship to technology.

Although the historical events of \textit{Homunculus} are not presented as an alternate history in a science fictional sense, they can be read as an imagined history

\textsuperscript{91} Blaylock 164.
\textsuperscript{92} Forlini <http://neovictorianstudies.com/>.
or a history containing elements of science fictional literary history, inspired by texts such as *Frankenstein* and the works of Jules Verne. Furthermore, the mix of science and magic is not only a reflection the Victorian worldview where science and the occult were valid disciplines, it is also an example of the hybrid nature of steampunk and a reflection of how the Victorians borrowed (and stole) elements from other times and other cultures to enhance their own culture.

Unlike the works of Dickens, however, *Homunculus* lacks the strong political undertones of class disparity. Its setting serves to provide realism and familiarity, but not political commentary. However, regardless of this omission, *Homunculus* succeeds as a novel of humour and adventure, retaining its place as a benchmark for the steampunk canon.

When writing *Heart Fire*, I was very much influenced by Blaylock’s use of internal consistency and repetition of themes as a means to present pseudo-scientific and techno-fantasy elements. Although *Heart Fire*’s setting is loosely based on a nineteenth century city and not London, I remained aware that I was not aiming to write an entirely accurate account of the nineteenth century, but was instead looking back at the Victorian era with the benefit of hindsight, using realistic details to impart familiarity and authenticity as a means to contrast with the novel’s impossible elements. At the same time I wove in pieces of science fictional history with the aim of creating, like Blaylock, a Dickensian setting with my own mixture of Frankenstein-esque monsters: robotic soul-stealers, unborn stone-makers, and the dead-brought-to-life in the form of automatons, each one stitched together like Blaylock’s zombies raised by the homunculus, or by carp elixir, in the same vein as the nefarious undertakings of the hunchback scientist, Narbondo.

### 3. Hybridity and Politics: China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*.

*Perdido Street Station* is a convoluted story about the scientist, Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, who is approached by the “garuda”, Yagharek, an exiled and de-winged birdman who has been stripped of his wings as punishment for rape, which his people define as “choice-theft…with utter disrespect”⁹³. Isaac’s quest to restore Yagharek’s ability to fly inadvertently releases a clutch of monstrous predators called slake moths that terrorize the city by feeding on the sentience of its many different species of

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inhabitants. To defeat the predators, Isaac must join forces with the self-evolved artificial intelligence, the Construct Council and the spider-God, the Weaver. The risk of creating this union is the loss of human freedom, an outcome Isaac must find a way to avoid or at least assuage. During this partnership, both the advantages and disadvantages of technology are highlighted, but the underlying message is that with judicial planning the dangers can be overcome or at least minimized. However the cost to many of the participants is high when Isaac loses not only friends and allies, but his lover Lin, who is left severely disabled after being attacked by a moth. Throughout the text, moral dilemmas abound, culminating in the ultimate forced sacrifice of an innocent man who is joined to a machine and brutally killed in the name of battle. This poses a question common to many science fictional texts: does the end justify the means?

*Perdido Street Station* is set in New Crobuzon, an industrial city that spreads out like a grotesque illness, magnificent in its power, at once stifling and liberating. This is how it feels to Yagharek, whose species name has been misappropriated by Miéville from Hindu and Buddhist culture. Yagharek is an outcast, grossly misunderstood by humans and rejected by his own kind. He arrives in New Crobuzon hoping to use the city’s resources to bypass his punishment for rape, to regain his ability to fly. Instead, he discovers friendship; but his crime is too great for even that to endure. Abandoned, he is consumed by the city: “I turn and walk into my home, the city, a man”94.

New Crobuzon is a city in the imaginary world of Bas-Lag, a world that is distinctive for its accomplished and rigorous internal consistency, its hybridity and its bleak outlook. Miéville borrows many of the text’s features from previous science fictional and fantasy works, but combines them in a way that feels original. The novel’s era is indeterminate, yet its city’s architecture retains the brooding tone of nineteenth century London alongside retro-futuristic mechanical devices. It is a ruined city, “a chaos-fucked Victorian London”95, a thriving mixture of the past, present and future, as much a character in the novel as setting, acting as both protector and foil for the novel’s protagonists and antagonists alike. If the characters

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94 Miéville 867.
were to be transposed into a different setting, the plot as it unfolds in *Perdido Street Station* would no longer be possible.

Like *Homunculus*, *Perdido Street Station* influenced my writing of *Heart Fire* for the way it blends science with fantasy. Pseudo-science is indistinguishable from magic, appearing in many different forms such as the water sculpting of the vodyanoi, the God-like habits of the multi-dimensional Weaver (whose appearance strongly resembles a Lovecraftian spider monster), and in the retro-cyborgs known as Remades, unfortunate criminals of the state whose bodies have been grafted onto coal-fired machines\(^96\). Science appears in the form of the Construct Council – an artificial intelligence that has evolved from a scrap heap – the slake moths and the chaos engine. At times the slake moths seem more fantastical than scientific, and the Remade, with sufficient explanation, would place *Perdido Street Station* easily in the genre of science fiction.

Miéville states that his writing influences include a childhood exposure to role playing games:

> …if you play them for any length of time, you get to know pretty much all the mythological beasts of all pantheons out there, along with a fair bit of the theology. I still love all that—I collect fantastic bestiaries, and one of the main spurs to write a secondary-world fantasy was to invent a bunch of monsters, half of which I’m sure I’ll never be able to fit into any books.”\(^97\)

In the same interview, Miéville also admits a love for the surrealists, SF, fantasy and horror, classic ghost stories and writers such as M. John Harrison, Mervyn Peake, Gene Wolfe, Iain Sinclair, Aldiss, Harrison, Moorcock, Disch and Ballard. He sees writing fantasy and representing the impossible, not so much as a way to defamiliarize aspects of the real world, but as “a subversive, radical act, in that it celebrates the most unique and human aspect of our consciousness”\(^98\).

It has been widely agreed that *Perdido Street Station*’s mixture of science fiction, fantasy and steampunk makes it difficult to define as a genre. David Horwich describes it as “a sprawling, intense book that defies precise genre definition”\(^99\).

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\(^96\) I refer to the Remade as a fantasy trope instead of science fiction as no scientific or medical explanation as to how a human body can be grafted on to coal-fired machinery is given in the novel.

\(^97\) Joan Gordon <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/Miévilleinterview.htm>.

\(^98\) ibid.

while Mike Perschon asserts it “is easily placed under the steampunk umbrella”\(^{100}\).

However, when compared with the original steampunk works by Blaylock, Powers and Jeter, with its mixture of science, fantasy and pervasive pseudo-Victorian setting, the novel as a whole can be seen as steampunk that has evolved and burgeoned into a chaotic organism much like the hybrid characters brought to life within its pages. This evolution is evident not only in the text itself, but also in Miéville’s original intentions before commencing the novel – intentions which are comparable to Blaylock, Powers and Jeter’s subversive claims of reacting against the texts that were popular when they, too, began writing steampunk. As Miéville himself admits,

\[\ldots\text{when I was writing Perdido Street Station I said to myself quite calculatingly I want to write an anti-Tolkien fantasy. So I kind of made a checklist of what Tolkien does and then did the opposite. So for example, Tolkien’s fantasy is feudal, so I made mine capitalist. His is rural, so I set mine in a city. In his, racial distinctions actually pan out into the type of person you are – you are defined by your race – so in mine, racism is as fallacious a way of understanding people as it is in the real world. So it was an explicitly anti-Tolkien fantasy}\(^{101}\).

Unlike Tolkien’s heroes who strive to protect and reinstate trueborn kings, Miéville’s heroes are punks, existing in the hidden parts of their severely controlled police state, acting against those in power. When fighting the novel’s destructive forces they have neither the benefit of support from the city’s leaders nor the privilege of reward for their efforts. But in true punk style, survival with one’s ideals intact is reward enough even when the resulting costs are high. These costs are part of what gives Perdido Street Station its bleak outlook, despite the obvious fact that no battle within a fantasy world is waged without some kind of personal loss to the victors.

Many reviewers saw the personal loss aspect of Perdido Street Station as too bleak, however, for me it resonated deeply with the concept of subversion. Miéville’s protagonists are indeed heroes, but their enemies are the majority. In reality, Isaac’s prospects of winning unscathed were slim. If he and his allies had walked away unharmed, then Perdido Street Station may well have ended on a staple fantasy cliché, a situation that Miéville had not only set out to avoid, but would have done nothing to critique the uses and misuses of technology.

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Similarly, when I set out to plot *Heart Fire*, I remained aware that when Rill used stone-making magic against Arvin, and when Ju used heart-magic against the demons, there had to be a final price – not just a token price – but something that mattered. In this case, Ruk lost Solly, the one person he had spent the entire book learning to love; while at the same time Ju uses up all of Ruk’s shifter-magic, not only ensuring that her arm will remain permanently amputated, but also trapping Ruk permanently in human form. Ultimately, Ju’s wielding of Ruk’s magic had been to fight both magic and science-based technology, or in other words, demons, automatons and an airship on the brink of exploding. This situation created hybridity within the text, at once contrasting science with fantasy, a feature common to all fantasy steampunk.

**Hybridity and Complexity**

In early steampunk works, such as KW Jeter’s *Morlock Night*, hybridity pervaded the text in the way that elements of setting were stitched together from disparate elements of real history, mythical history and science fictional history. Furthermore, in works such as Tim Powers’ *The Anubis Gates*, with its borrowings from Egyptian mythology, this hybridity can be seen not only as a reflection of the Victorian obsession collecting artefacts from what were perceived to be exotic cultures but also as the Victorian worldview of science and the occult existing together as valid disciplines.

The hybridity in *Perdido Street Station* pervades the novel at a much deeper level: one that transcends structure. It permeates the setting, characters, plot and ideologies. As Joan Gordon observes “the city’s hybridity is as central to the novel as *Perdido Street Station* is to the city of New Crobuzon”\(^\text{102}\). Within the setting it can be seen in the streets of Bonetown or in “the hovels of Badsie, in the lattice of dust-clogged canals, in Smog Bend and the faded estates of Barrackham, in the towers in Tar Wedge and the hostile concrete forest of Dog Fenn”\(^\text{103}\). In the characters, it can be seen in the khepri\(^\text{104}\), the cactus-people\(^\text{105}\), in the Remade\(^\text{106}\); but most

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\(^{103}\) Miéville 119.

\(^{104}\) Khepri: part human part scarab beetle.

\(^{105}\) Cactus-people: part human part vegetable.
spectacularly in Mr Motely, a Remade who seemed to be a mixture of all races: “one hand terminating in five equal spaced crabs’ claws; a spiralling horn bursting from a nest of eyes; a reptilian ridge winding along goats’ fur”\textsuperscript{107}. In the plot the novel’s hybridity can be seen in the stitching together of science and fantasy, the blurring of boundaries between the impossible and possible, myth and logic in the form of monsters and invention, chaos and order. Finally, in the novel’s ideology, Miéville, has added the finishing touches to a world created from words, with a completeness that is not only visual, but political: its protagonists hold Marxist ideals to survive a brutal fascist regime, which both mirrors and contrasts with the myriad of politics in our own present world.

As a whole, the repetition of themes within \textit{Perdido Street Station’s} text provide the reader with interconnectivity, creating not only realism but also a dialogue between the invented world and our own, to simultaneously hold up a mirror and reflect some aspects of it and distort others by means of defamiliarization. Acknowledging this complexity, Joan Gordon concludes,

\begin{quote}
More and more, we are all seeing the [real] world as a vast interconnected network, and so we critics are seeing the worlds of fiction in the same way, and the writers of those fictions likewise. When we see our worlds this way, we often see conspiracies and totalitarian regimes, and sometimes we are right. Therefore, we need the transformative feedback mechanisms of dialectics to prevent that insidiously easy movement from friendship to regime. The heterogeneous site of \textit{Perdido Street Station} provides such a dialectics. We must continue the conversation.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

This conversation, along with complexity and detail, not only continues the conversation between past and present, real and imagined, it also allows the reader to suspend their disbelief, accepting the fantasy elements as not so much metaphorical aspects or allegories of the real, but as different ways of looking at it. This resonates deeply with Ursula Le Guin’s quote in the introduction to this exegesis about fantasy literature being “a different approach to reality [and] an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence”\textsuperscript{109}.

When writing \textit{Heart Fire}, I was limited to, at most, fifty per cent of the word count of \textit{Perdido Street Station}, so was unable to develop \textit{Heart Fire}’s city of

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\textsuperscript{106} Remade: human beings who have been punished for politically subversive acts by having steam driven machinery or other body parts grafted onto them so that their shame is permanently displayed.
\textsuperscript{107} Miéville 94.
\textsuperscript{108} Gordon 474.
\textsuperscript{109} Le Guin 196.
\end{flushright}
Forsham with Miéville’s attention to detail. I was, however, influenced by Miéville’s world-building methods and created hybridity by mixing well-known tropes such as magic, automatons and stone-making with unusual tropes to create the illusion of newness, for example, Rill’s being turned to stone for eighteen years in her human mother’s womb and Ruk’s feeding on dying memories as a means of shapeshifting. I combined these with the themes of nineteenth century class oppression and used them as important influencing factors in the plot by ensuring that these came into play when characters made important decisions. For example, Sir Mathias’s motivation for destroying all heart-magic grew out of the class system that ensures his lack of heart-magic will cause him to be rejected as a misfit. In contrast, Ju’s excess of magic and constant exposure to oppressive influences has resulted in her mistrustful nature, which works both for her and against her when she must decide if the rebel mage, Arvin, is trustworthy or not, or if the shapeshifter, Ruk, is her friend or enemy. As a result, my aim was to use the setting of Heart Fire not only as a backdrop, but much like a character in its own right, influencing the plot, while at the same time reminding the reader of times past and perhaps of times present in the real world, albeit, in different forms, distorted and retold.

Another aspect of Perdido Street Station that influenced my writing of Heart Fire is the way in which Miéville’s narrative showed the squalid side of New Crobuzon, exposing the exploitation that made technological advances possible. However, unlike his political precedent, Dickens, Miéville does not recreate nineteenth century conditions: instead, he distorts them.

A Pseudo-Victorian Setting Through a Twenty-First Century Lens
The novels of Charles Dickens opened numerous windows into the atrocities against the oppressed during the nineteenth century. Steampunk at its best has the potential to continue Dickens’ tradition, juxtaposing social commentary with twenty-first century concerns. At its not-so-best, Steampunk skims the edges of its fashionable aesthetic, performing “an emasculation”110 as Jess Nevins accused, focussing on adventure and fun, and leaving the true punks abandoned for bustles and top hats. As a result, in 2010 there was a backlash against steampunk, with critics being appalled at the way many steampunk writers were pandering to the excesses of the upper middle classes of the nineteenth century. Nisi Shawl noted that:

110 Nevins 11.
Almost without exception they [steampunk texts] glorified British Victorian imperialism…despite the fact that many of the cultural, scientific, and aesthetic elements steampunk celebrates had been appropriated from nations the British Empire conquered, and the related fact that the machinery steampunk focuses on had primarily been maintained by nonwhites.111

Shawl then recapitulated by noting that writers from colonized nations of the past and present were beginning to venture into steampunk publishing, giving the example of Shweta Narayan whose story “The Mechanical Aviary of Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar” was published in *Shimmer Magazine’s Issue 11: The Clockwork Jungle Book*. Shawl then confessed that she was writing her own novel set in the African Congo and concluded that “steampunk is in the process of constantly restating itself”112.

Shawl’s complaints against Steampunk are echoed by Charles Stross who resents the nostalgic elements and takes umbrage at the glossing over of Victorian England’s darker side of exploitation and oppression, critiquing the genre as a “romanticization of totalitarianism”113 and going on to compare it to “the interstellar autocracies so common in space opera”114. He concludes that steampunk is “the story of all the people who are having adventures — as long as you remember that an adventure is a tale of unpleasant events happening to people a long, long way from home”115. In other words, Stross’s complaint centres on the historical fact that steampunk fails to address the reality that the wealth and discoveries that financed the progress and inventiveness of European expansion grew on the backs of the working classes and the conquered peoples overseas, an uncomfortable truth that was often ignored in the civilized tea rooms of upper class mansions.

This criticism may well be true of a lot of steampunk, however, in 2009, the year before Stross’s article, Australian writer Richard Harland’s *Worldshaker* had already been published, which addressed the very issues Stross claimed to be missing. *Worldshaker* is set in a city-sized juggernaut that has stripped both Europe and Africa of its resources and is maintained by an oppressed lower class known as

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112 ibid.


114 ibid.

115 ibid.
the filthies who are treated like slaves and kept in the juggernaut’s lower levels in conditions unfit even for animals.

However, while Harland had addressed nineteenth century political injustices in a Jules Verne setting, Miéville in true steampunk fashion had already taken these injustices to an entirely new level. After all, steampunk, as a sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy is not merely about the past, it is also about the present and future. It is anachronistic, not only via its representations of technology, but also through its characters and explorations of ideas. As alluded to, in the previous section, Miéville, achieves this by injecting the novel’s political representations with Marxist sensibilities, thereby creating an anachronistic politic, or in other words, a Marxist revolution in a pseudo-Victorian setting. Carl Freedman asserts,

Now that we can survey the Bas-Lag Trilogy as a whole, it is evident that the creation of what is arguably the most boldly and most meticulously realized alternative world in science fiction serves the ultimate purpose of providing a locus where ideas of socialist revolution can be experimentally concretized.116

Freedman states that *Perdido Street Station* is the first novel of a trilogy, which was followed by *The Scar* (2002) and *Iron Council* (2004). When read together, the three novels describe different aspects of the same world. However, unlike *Iron Council*, *Perdido Street Station* is not about a blatant socialist revolution. Even so, Miéville himself admits that his own Marxist ideas have made their way into the text:

…arguments over union organization, over the class basis of fascism, over the internal contradictions of racist consciousness, and so on, in the book…I fill it with the concerns and fascinations that are in my head, and it’s no surprise that Marxism features large in there.117

For example, Derkhan Blueday, seditious co-editor of the underground newspaper, Runagate Rampant, focuses her efforts on countless permutations of haves and have-nots within New Crobuzon:

…posters are appearing demanding your vote – should you be lucky enough to have one! Rudgutter’s Fat Sun huffs and puffs, Finally We Can see spout weasel-words, the Diverse Tendency lies to the oppressed xenians, and the human dust of the Three Quills spread their poison…Build a party from


117 Joan Gordon <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/Miévilleinterview.htm>. 
below and denounce the Suffrage Lottery as a cynical ploy. We say: votes for all and vote for change!118

Alongside his skewed representations of Marxism, Miéville also addresses issues of race, taking up the theme of hybridity as if embracing its potential for homogeneity and chaos all at once. His non-human characters are a blend of fantasy and science-fictional elements, reminiscent of the bug-eyed aliens of early twentieth century pulp fiction magazines – impossible, anachronistic and essentially steampunk in their subversion of present-day scientific beliefs of how aliens would look and function if they indeed existed. Miéville’s racial concerns are not nineteenth century concerns of invasion and exploitation, but are instead ongoing twenty-first century concerns of prejudice and exclusion. For example, Isaac’s khepri lover, Lin, has the body of woman and the head of a scarab beetle. She communicates using sign language. She dresses like a human woman, shuns her own people and possesses human intelligence and emotions. Yet her people are treated as outcasts. Even as Isaac admires her, he cannot help but dwell on the perceived wrongness of their relationship:

He smiled at her. She undulated her headlegs at him and signed, My Monster.

I am a pervert, thought Isaac, and so is she.119

Similarly, the cactus people live as outcasts, with a third of their numbers crammed inside a dilapidated suburb-sized glasshouse and the remainder living outside in the city where they “worked for their human or vodyanoi bosses without demur or enthusiasm”120.

In Heart Fire, the novel’s word limit allowed me to only hint at Forsham’s political systems, however, being a trilogy, there is certainly room to build upon these hints in later volumes, which I will certainly do. Although Forsham is clearly a city loosely based on London, I do represent non-white races through the Cornican character, Forley Letonder. I do not, however, expand on themes of racial oppression as this novel is about class oppression. Furthermore, I worked under the assumption that the addition of magic, which is accessible to all members of the population (albeit in varying degrees) affects the balance of power between races in this alternate

118 Miéville 154.
119 Miéville 13.
120 Miéville 622.
reality. It could therefore be deduced that in Ju’s world, non-white races have not yet been invaded and exploited in the same way as they have been in our world. I hint at this during a well-timed conversation between Ruk and Solly when, in order to gain Solly’s trust, Ruk draws on Forley’s memories to feign a confession that he was originally sent to Forsham as a spy:

   In the past, my people never saw your country as a threat to our security. Our collective magic is of equal strength to yours. But your recent advances in machinery are quite astonishing. To avoid the possibility of invasion, we must remain on equal technological footing.

Ruk is representative of the racial Other as well as the alien Other familiar to both science fiction and fantasy. His shape-shifting abilities and non-human outlook leaves him vulnerable to misunderstanding and rejection. He is not innately evil, but like Miéville’s garuda, Yagharek, his cultural mores are barely understood by non-shifters. A gesture that seems perfectly right from his perspective is easily misconstrued from another. Such is the case in *Perdido Street Station* when Yagharek first tells Isaac of his crime of “choice-theft”. At first, Isaac does not understand the full implications and Yagharek does not explain, so the matter is bypassed until the novel’s end, when Yagharek’s victim, Kar’uchai, confronts Isaac and explains,

   I was not violated or ravaged, Grimneb’lin. I am not abused or defiled … ravished or spoiled. You would call his [Yagharek’s] actions rape, but I do not: that tells me nothing. He stole my choice.121

Here, Miéville has succeeded in explaining rape from a point of view that is free from the cultural baggage that accompanies stereotypical representations of the crime: not as the spoiling of a woman’s virtue in a way that “sacralize[s] or sexualize[s] women122”, but rape as the theft of her choice. This is not a connection that neither Isaac nor the reader immediately makes, but once it is explained the connotations are not only logical and clear, but the concept of rape is defamiliarized and, as a result, understood on a different and entirely accurate philosophical level. As Miéville explains: Kar’uchai’s explanation of “choice-theft” is not a critique of rape, but “a query about our culture’s faintly fetishistic critique of rape123”.

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121 Miéville 849.
122 Gordon <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/Miévilleinterview.htm>.
123 ibid.
Similarly, in *Heart Fire*, the shapeshifter Ruk faces the prospect of explaining to Solly the reasons why his kind are prone to insanity and why in past incarnations he has murdered his lovers:

“To stop myself from feeling grief again…” Ruk paused, suddenly afraid. But she [Solly] deserved to know who he truly was, so he forced himself to continue. “To protect myself, I’d destroy my lover first…” He waited for Solly to call him murderer, thief, imposter. When she merely kept looking at him, her eyes radiating the same hurt that he felt – the same hurt that was driving him to confess to her – he added. “I destroyed them by absorbing their memories in the shifter way, destroying them before their loss destroyed me.”

From a human point of view this is clearly murder; however from a shifter point of view, where the lover’s memories have been absorbed, while their shape has been assumed to be relived, this is perceived as a perpetuation of life – a preservation – the ultimate form of love. No human could understand this. Even so, Ruk’s lover, Solly, does not judge Ruk on human terms and, as a writer, I do not offer an answer regarding the ethics of Ruk’s past deeds. In fact, as Ruk becomes more and more human and begins to understand exactly what death means, even he cannot judge his past lives. He can only feel the implications of them. Readers are left to make their own judgement.

Similarly, the grey areas of science and ethics are left unanswered in both *Perdido Street Station* and *Heart Fire*, again juxtaposing them with lasting images of human frailty. Through these, good and evil are explored from different perspectives, challenging readers’ instinctive judgements.

**Science and Ethics: Old Questions, New Combinations**

Isaac bound Andrej with coils of ancient rope and propped him as comfortably as possible against a wall. The dying man hummed and exhaled in snotty terror.

Isaac tried to meet his eye, to murmur some apology, to tell him how sorry he was, but Andrej could not hear him for fear. Isaac turned away, aghast, and Derkhan met his eye and grasped his hand quickly, thankful that someone finally shared her burden\(^\text{1}\)124.

The dying man, Andrej, has been tricked into being bound and gagged by Derkhan who had told him that if he followed her she could offer him experimental treatments for his ailing body. Instead, Andrej finds himself unwillingly used as bait for the

\[^{1}124\) Miéville 721.\]
slake moths. He is old, homeless, wasted and without hope. No one will miss him and nothing can save him from his illness – not even wealth – not even the city’s best thaumaturges. As Isaac and Derkhan lead him to a premature death, they keep the old man gagged so as not to be reminded that what they are doing is morally wrong: “We could take his gag away, thought Isaac, and he wouldn’t scream...but then he might speak...He left the gag in place”\textsuperscript{125}.

Andrej is then callously hooked up to the Construct Council and the Weaver by means of a helmet reminiscent of those seen in mad-scientist, pulp fiction texts. The slake moths that have been terrorizing the city are lured to their deaths, destroyed by the combined brain waves emanating from the man, the Construct Council and the Weaver. But as the moths are defeated, Andrej suffers convulsions and terrible pain only to be prematurely killed by a stray bullet from attacking militia. At this point, the scourge that has been terrorizing the city for weeks has been significantly reduced. The end has almost justified the means. Even so:

Isaac clenched his teeth as the old man died. At the very end, in what might have been a twitch of dying nerves, Andrej tensed and clutched Isaac, hugging him back in what Isaac desperately wanted to be forgiveness.

\textit{I had to I'm sorry I'm sorry}, he thought giddily\textsuperscript{126}.

This moral dilemma has already been foreshadowed in a previous scene when Isaac comments on the Construct Council’s motivation for killing a living man in order to use the man’s body as an avatar for the purposes of communication with humans. Isaac contemplates the hideous Frankensteinesque amalgamation of human and machine – a brainless body, still living, but in the process of decay, its hollowed out skull filled with cables connecting it to the junk heap that has self-evolved into an artificial intelligence – in essence, a machine that threatens to surpass humankind in power and capabilities:

The Council don’t care about killing off humans or any others, if it’s…useful. It’s got no empathy, no morals...It’s just a...a calculating intelligence. Cost and benefit. It’s trying to…\textit{maximize} itself. It’ll do whatever it has to – it’ll lie to us, it’ll kill – to increase its own power.”\textsuperscript{127}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125] Miéville 757.
\item[126] Miéville 794.
\item[127] Miéville 761-762.
\end{footnotes}
The Council needs to increase its power to survive. Killing for the sake of survival is exactly what Isaac has done to Andrej. Except Isaac’s killing was premeditated with care and empathy. Readers must then ask, is the killing of one person to save many others any different if it is done with regret? Furthermore, as if Miéville intends readers to feel instead of judge Isaac’s actions, readers are shown Isaac’s desperation when he loses his lover Lin, when she is attacked and her sentience stolen by the single moth that survived after Andrej was prematurely killed.

Miéville does not present answers to moral rightness of Andrej’s death, he merely repeats the theme in varying permutations – facets of the same argument from differing perspectives. From Andrej’s point of view, Isaac has stolen his choice. However, whereas Isaac’s choice-theft saves the city, Yagharek’s theft of Kar’uchai’s choice results in the loss of his wings, the loss of Isaac’s friendship and the loss of his place in the world as a garuda.

In this respect, Miéville, not only offers moral dilemmas but also offers a commentary on humankind’s relationship with technology, highlighting the “deep ambivalence” we feel towards it. In the right hands, technology can be empowering, as can be seen in the way the Construct Council’s cooperation eventually saved the people of New Crobuzon from a seemingly unstoppable horror. Yet at the same time, that empowerment came at a price, with the sacrifice of Andrej and the ever-present danger that the technology itself, like Frankenstein’s monster, would turn against its creator, overpower him, and turn him into its slave.

When offering ethical dilemmas in *Heart Fire*, I also contrasted protagonists’ problems with those of the antagonists. Clearly, Sir Mathias misused technology by creating the harvesters to rid the city of heart-magic. But I left it to the reader to decide if Arvin was right to use a harvester against his Aunt Christina, or if he was acting as a soldier or a coward when he callously used magic to murder the cruel dog-handler, Fingle, as a means to buy freedom for Ju’s innocent father.

**Conclusion: Perdido Street Station as Steampunk**

*Perdido Street Station* is quintessential steampunk regardless of its light emphasis on steam driven technology. It is set in a pseudo-Victorian otherworld and not only combines futuristic technology with magic, but its hybridity is also at once exotic and highly detailed, creating a realistic world that defamiliarizes both old and new. With

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128 Cooper 2.
the same unrestrained enthusiasm of a Victorian collector, Miéville’s influences from previous histories and literary texts are evident from the naming of the garuda, to the Lovecraftian weaver, the vampire-like Slake moths, the pulp fiction appearance of New Crobuzon’s alien races and the Frankensteinesque avatar used by the Construct Council. Lastly, even the Council, at once feared by and crucial to humankind’s survival, repeats a theme common to many science fictional texts by being always at risk of either surpassing or turning against its creator – a constant reminder of human frailty in the face of technology.

Perdido Street Station’s main influence on Heart Fire was the way in which it represented class politics, locating them neither in the nineteenth century nor the twenty-first, defamiliarizing them, making them strange and yet visible from previously unseen perspectives. It also influenced the way in which I set up ethical conflicts, and mirrored them throughout the text, leaving the reader to make judgements for themselves, as my aim was to set up questions and not preach my own version of what is morally correct.

4. Gender, Frankenstein and What It Is To Be Human: Ekaterina Sedia’s Alchemy of Stone

Mattie noticed the tension in the woman’s shoulders, how she carried herself – as if not quite sure what to expect. “It’s all right,” Mattie said. “I’m a machine. No one explains anything to me either.”

Mattie is an automaton, originally created to serve as a mindless house-cleaning slave, but later given intelligence so she can act as a companion for her morose creator, Loharri, who loves Mattie, but also punishes her harshly by removing her eyes, leaving her blind and alone for days. He has given her the ability to feel pain so she does not damage herself; and this allows her to also feel pleasure. Despite giving her the semblance of emancipation, Loharri jealously keeps the key to Mattie’s clockwork heart on a thin chain around his neck so she must always return to him for rewinding. Mattie’s painted ceramic faces are interchangeable, but she is obliged to wear the design of Loharri’s choosing. She considers herself to be a woman, not only because she was created in the shape of one – with built-in corsets, hoops and stays – but also because her femaleness is “ingrained”.

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130 Sedia 18.
Mattie’s city, Ayona, has been magically grown out of stone by gargoyles. But now the gargoyles are crumbling. If they are to endure, they must be turned from stone to flesh. Their only hope lies with Mattie, who agrees to use her alchemical skills to help them; but she is distracted by the growing unrest between the city’s warring mechanics and alchemists, as well as her longing for emancipation and her love for Sebastian, a revolutionary and Loharri’s rival. She befriends Iolanda, a lover of Loharri, who asks her to make a fragrance that would cause regret and compel Loharri to listen to her. In return, Mattie asks Iolanda to steal the key to her heart so that Mattie may keep it for herself.

When revolution breaks out in the city, causing bloodshed and destruction, Loharri suspects Mattie of betrayal. He retrieves a recording device he has planted inside her and sees her love affair with Sebastian and her part in protecting him. He removes her eyes to punish her, but she uses her alchemical skills to find a spare one. She escapes to warn Sebastian of danger. Using souls released from a dying soul-smoker, she succeeds in turning the gargoyles into flesh. She summons Loharri back to her. Iolanda uses Mattie’s alchemical creations to compel him to give up Mattie’s key; but Loharri jealously sends Iolanda and the key to be destroyed in an explosion. He is then killed.

Sebastian is unable to replicate a new key as Loharri has purposely made it too complex to be copied. Mattie’s heart winds down and stops. The gargoyles search for the old key but do not know if it has been destroyed or not.

Justine Larbalestier describes The Alchemy of Stone as “a gorgeous meditation on what it means to not be human.” However, much like Frankenstein’s monster, Mattie seems at times more human than the humans who mistreat her. Her thoughts can be hauntingly perceptive: “perhaps you just think that someone who doesn’t want to be your slave is aiming to be your master,” she tells Loharri when he speaks to her condescendingly. At other times her thoughts are poignant and innocent: “Do you love me?” she thinks, as she and a man she barely knows discuss explosives. She does not thoughtlessly betray her creator, Loharri, but finds herself caught up on a path to destruction when she seeks full emancipation. Unwittingly, she falls in love with Loharri’s enemy, Sebastian, not because he loves her back, but because he offers

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131 Sedia (Front Cover).
132 Sedia 62.
133 Sedia 224.
her something she desperately seeks: a means to defy the boundaries Loharri has programmed into her.

_The Alchemy of Stone_ influenced my writing of _Heart Fire_ for the way it takes nineteenth century and present day tropes to transform them into a text that is uniquely steampunk. It also presents the narrative from an alien perspective – that of a machine – yet at the same time, it is clearly about humans. The novel is not a recreation of history, or an alternative history, but a literary history defamiliarized, or in other words, Mary Shelley’s _Frankenstein_ retold from a female perspective – not as the creation abandoned by its creator, but as the creation that yearns to be set free.

**Feminism from the Perspective of a Machine**

In 2008, _The Alchemy of Stone_ made the Honour List for the James Tiptree Award, “an annual literary prize for science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender”\(^{134}\). Mattie’s Otherness may well be a result of her non-humanness, but her appearance, her way of thinking and the way she is treated by her male creator is more accurately analogous to issues of gender inequality than issues of not being human.

“…and yes, you can work on it to your little clockwork heart’s content”\(^{135}\), Loharri tells her condescendingly when she thanks him for allowing her time to help the gargoyles. However, her freedom only stretches so far. When she finds herself obsessed with her own work, she suddenly stops functioning and only Loharri can fix her:

> “You were ill,” he said, “because you went against your desire to see me. I told you that you always must do so. Didn’t I?”\(^{136}\)

Her worst indignity, however, is the issue of her key. Loharri insists on keeping it for himself, so that she must always return to him to be rewound. The act of winding is not only lifesaving for Mattie, but also intensely personal. If carried out intimately, it is as pleasurable as a sexual encounter. When Loharri learns that Mattie has shared her intimate parts with his enemy Sebastian, as well as protecting him against the law, he cannot forgive her. He abandons her and sends her to the equivalent of death – a destiny without a key.

\(^{134}\) [http://tiptree.org].
\(^{135}\) Sedia 13.
\(^{136}\) Sedia 166.
Adam Robots argues that:

the robot is that place in an SF text where technological and human are most directly blended. The robot is the dramatization of the alterity of the machine, the paranoid sense of the inorganic come to life.\(^{137}\)

To summarize, Roberts explains, “as the trope of robot became more embedded in SF, robots or androids came increasingly to be seen as a new race of beings”\(^{138}\) providing commentary on present day racism, as well as the “sinister potential of ‘the robot’”\(^{139}\). This commentary included the positive and illuminating effects of technology on human society. Throughout history, humans have both despised robots and adored them. Eighteenth Century watchmaker, Pierre Jaquet-Droz, was “accused of heresy”\(^{140}\) for inventing and exhibiting a writing automaton, while in the following century, Charles Babbage’s own automaton, the Silver Lady, became “featured entertainment”\(^{141}\) in Babbage’s home. *The Alchemy of Stone*, however, takes the human-robot relationship a step further.

In the past, the theme of robot-human intimacy has appeared in texts such as ETA Hoffman’s *The Sandman*, where the human, Nathaniel, suffered tragic consequences when falling for the unemotional and unthinking automaton Olimpia. In science fiction, the trope has appeared in novels such as Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991), where a woman has an intense love relationship with a soldier robot that sacrifices itself to protect her. In steampunk, the trope first appeared humorously in KW Jeter’s *Infernal Devices* (1987), where an intelligent automaton possessed superior sexual skills, delighting women and intimidating men, echoing the deep paranoia that humans would soon be surpassed by machines as seen in the novel by Philip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968).

In *The Alchemy of Stone*, the themes of feminism and intimacy are also juxtaposed with the theme of racism, represented in the way that Mattie does not like her own kind. She cannot explain why, but confesses: “There are a few intelligent


\(^{138}\) Roberts 116.

\(^{139}\) Roberts 117.


automatons around; a few of them are even emancipated. But you know, nobody likes
making them. And they...we don’t even like ourselves”\textsuperscript{142}.

In regards to the sinister potential of the robot, Mattie is not sinister in a
technological sense. Her betrayal of her creator is driven by a human reaction to
cruelty and unreasonable boundaries. It is non-violent and innocent: “She needed
Loharri out of her head and her heart”\textsuperscript{143} This characterisation begs the question: If
Mattie does not like her own kind, and humans are intensely uneasy amongst robots,
is this because robots are too much like humans? Do humans do see too much of
themselves in them? Do humans fear themselves also?

Although Mattie is a machine, her ability to feel pain and pleasure has made
her think and act with human empathy. Although many science fictional texts have
depicted robots in this way, \textit{The Alchemy of Stone}’s steampunk setting, where magic
is an equally valid discipline alongside science, defamiliarizes the trope. Although the
reader is well aware of the dangers of robots turning against their creators or
resenting them or surpassing them in intelligence and strength, the human characters
in the novel have yet to experience such things. This not only creates dramatic irony,
but also freshness and a new perspective. Furthermore, when Mattie’s mechanical
heart runs down and cannot be rewound, her situation extends the irony by
contrasting with the success of the gargoyles who have now been turned to flesh after
Mattie has infused them with human souls. Sedia does not attempt to philosophise on
the existence of human souls. She merely relies on internal consistency in her world-
building. Readers know they exist in Ayona, and they also know from previous
speculative fictional texts that gargoyles and robots do not possess souls. Therefore,
\textit{The Alchemy of Stone} has taken old assumptions and/or myths and made them fresh
and new, bringing them to life through the eyes of pseudo-Victorian characters and
an anachronistic robot that sees itself as female. The history presented is not a rewrite
of a literal history, but is instead a rewrite of a literary history. Like my automatons in
\textit{Heart Fire}, which are infused with human souls stolen by Sir Mathias Grindle’s
harvesters, Sedia’s gargoyles and robots can be interpreted as part of a steampunk
reworking of the Frankenstein myth from a female point of view.

\textsuperscript{142} Sedia 110.
\textsuperscript{143} Sedia 171.
Frankenstein Defamiliarized

*The Alchemy of Stone* is not obviously about Frankenstein, although it shares many of its themes: the creation of a living being by a man, the mistreatment of that being, the exploration of what it is to be human, the final abandonment of the creation by its creator and the ruin of the creator by its creation.

Mattie has not been created out of the body parts of harvested cadavers except for her hair, which has been taken from a dead boy, a thought that leaves Mattie with a sense of unease whenever she dwells on it. The remainder of Mattie is pure machine, from her clockwork heart to her gears, cogs and body of steel, ceramic and wood. She is not exactly ostracized from society, but she is certainly not accepted as the norm. Most automatons are mindless slaves, while intelligent, freethinking models such as herself are a rarity to be treated as outsiders, especially by men.

To date, movies, novels and short stories have presented retellings and sequels of the Frankenstein myth from many perspectives, focusing on both gothic and feminist themes such as the movie *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994). Others have transformed it into comedy such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948); or as an alternate reality such as Brian Aldiss’ novel, *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973); or as a feminist sequel, such as my own short story, “The Bridal Bier” (2006). The theme of animating the dead through methods akin to vitalism with or without harvested body parts or with the addition of mechanical body parts resurfaces frequently in steampunk in books such as *The Constantine Affliction* (2012), *Perdido Street Station*, and *Homunculus*.

The *Alchemy of Stone* transforms the Frankenstein’s monster trope into steampunk by combining its fantastical pseudo-scientific elements with pure science fictional elements. However, Mattie, the automaton, is not like Asimov’s intelligent Robbie in *I Robot* (1950). She is not bound by the three laws of robotics that makes it “impossible for a robot to harm a human being”144. Mattie, however, does share Robbie’s sometimes confused and sometimes startlingly clear insights as to what it means to be human. She also feels pain and pleasure, and is able to empathize with humans and therefore has inherited a sense of morals. However, like any human, this does not prevent her from fighting her inbuilt constraints against defying Loharri’s wishes and pursuing her own needs – needs that will inadvertently destroy them both.

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When planning *Heart Fire* I had already decided to use the idea of transplanting souls into machines before researching for this exegesis. However, it is worth recalling the quote by Brian Aldiss reminding us that science fiction “can never entirely escape the aromas of Frankenstein’s workshop of filthy creation”\(^\text{145}\). Like Mattie, Sir Mathias’s automatons can be interpreted as Frankenstein defamiliarized, their mechanical bodies are given life with heart-magic which is perpetuated by human souls. Their faces are given individual characteristics by the human souls trapped inside them. Like Sedia, I offer no scientific explanation, however, the logic is consistent within the novel’s world-building.

Although steampunk texts contain the language of science, its authors generally do not attempt to represent science in the serious and accurate manner of science fiction writers. This method of presentation, as seen previously in *Homunculus* and *Perdido Street Station*, not only gives science an arcane tone, but also allows it to be blurred with magic, creating both strangeness and subversion of expectations of the speculative fiction readership, giving age-old tropes a different perspective.

**Science and Magic and Age-old Tropes**

“The Dukes had always insisted that both alchemists and mechanics are represented in the government,” Mattie said. “They represent two aspects of creation – command of the spiritual and the magical, and mastery of the physical. Together, we have the same aspects as the gargoyles who could shape the physical with their minds”\(^\text{146}\).

Here Mattie reiterates the Victorian worldview where science and the occult were both considered to be valid disciplines. Sedia does not elaborate on the nature of magic or science that shapes the physical; however, the trope of manipulating reality with mind power is not uncommon in fantasy or science fiction. Mages such as Merlin, or aliens from *Star Trek*, have willed objects in and out of existence for decades. Recently, Jo Anderton used the trope in her novel *Debris* (2011) about an architect who uses mind power to manipulate matter. Reviewer Stefan Raets could not decide which genre the novel belonged to despite Anderton using the language of science when using the words “pion manipulation”\(^\text{147}\) to describe the process involved: “Whether this process is magic or an extremely advanced technology is

\(^{145}\) Aldiss 30.

\(^{146}\) Sedia 69.

\(^{147}\) *Debris* (London: Angry Robot, 2011), Kindle.
never fully explained, so I’m still not sure whether to call *Debris* fantasy or science fiction”\(^{148}\), Raets writes. In Anderton’s hands, the trope feels like science fiction, mainly because her world has a futuristic feel to it, so much so that Raets ventures to call it “post-steampunk”\(^{149}\).

In contrast, *The Alchemy of Stone* is clearly set in a pseudo-Victorian era, and the gargoyles’ manipulation of reality possesses a fantastical quality, despite being suggestive of a scientific evolutionary progression, albeit couched as a creation story handed down in the form of myth:

They [the gargoyles] sprang from the ground, uncounted eons ago...they talked to the stone and grew it – at first, shapeless cliffs shot through with caves and encrusted with swallows’ nests; then, as their skill and numbers increased, they shaped the living stone whose destiny they shared – shaped it with their mere will! – into tall structures, decorated with serpentine spirals and breathtakingly sweeping walls, into delicate lattices and sturdy edifices\(^{150}\).

When the gargoyles find themselves crumbling, it is not the scientific mechanics they turn to for help, but the pseudo-scientific alchemist, Mattie, whose workshop is filled with pungent chemicals and animal by-products, which she uses to construct a homunculus capable of absorbing the human souls required to infuse the gargoyles with life. Mattie’s alchemy is neither real science, nor pure fantasy, but a mixture of the two, its history steeped in mythology and literary texts inspired by this.

Therefore, like Anderton’s futuristic reality-moulding in *Debris*, Mattie’s alchemical practices are in keeping with the science appropriate to the novel’s era. Furthermore, each trope is wholly familiar and each, when viewed on its own, is somewhat clichéd. However, in their individual settings and combined with unexpected tropes – in Mattie’s case, with alchemy, gargoyles and an intelligent automaton seeking emancipation and love – the trope of alchemy feels fresh and defamiliarized. *The Alchemy of Stone*’s hybridity makes it the equivalent of a Frankenstein novel – not solely in regard to the main character, but also within the fabric of the novel itself: a text stitched together from elements of other texts

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\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) Sedia 55.
representing the past, present and future, or in other words, an intertextual anachronism, much like Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*.

In *Heart Fire* I also take the familiar and clichéd trope of reshaping reality with the human will. For the people of Forsham, this appears in the form of heart-magic at its strongest when used as a weapon – as fire leaping from peoples’ fingertips. It also appears in the form of Rill’s stone-making. Both tropes represent one of literature’s oldest fantasies. Stone-making is a Gorgon trait exemplified by Medusa, while fire-making or hand-generated thunderbolts have been repeated throughout history with deities such as Zeus throwing thunderbolts in Greek mythology, aliens sending out jagged death rays in early twentieth century pulp fiction, and more recently with Voldemort scarring Harry Potter’s forehead in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997). In science fiction the trope has been widely discredited, and in fantasy it is mostly confined to popular titles or to movies and television. However, in *Heart Fire*, I decided to resurrect this trope as it seemed a logical progression for the differing strengths of magic in the world-building where skin-magic (the weaker form) provides well-wishing and finger light in contrast to heart-magic (the stronger form) which provides healing power and destructive fire. This god-like strength has the potential to be unbeatable, but in the end it is the quiet and uncontrolled stone-making magic that prevents the airship from exploding. However, like all technologies, regardless of whether their origins stem from magic or science, advantages are accompanied by costs. Rill’s stone-making prevents the deaths of many, but Solly cannot escape in time and is turned to stone as well.

**Conclusion**

In *The Alchemy of Stone*, Sedia’s gargoyles despise machines yet cannot survive without the skills of an automaton to save them. In contrast, *Heart Fire*’s machines threaten to strip Ju of both her soul and her magic and it is only the combined power of another magical being – the shapeshifter Ruk – that saves her. Although the tropes used in *Heart Fire* are not new, the way they are combined anachronistically and with the benefit of hindsight gives them the appearance of being unusual. The effect is not so much an illumination of the inhumaness of the shapeshifters and machines, but of the humanness in ourselves.

Mattie’s mechanical body and Sir Mathias’s automatons are symbolic of the technology of science, while Mattie’s alchemy and Rill’s stone-making are symbolic of the technology of fantasy. Together, they function as a whole, showing the past
and the present, the human and inhuman, race, gender, love, betrayal and the insatiable desire for freedom. This seamless blend of fantasy and science fiction creates a Frankensteinesque hybridity, transforming old assumptions and myths in otherworld settings, retelling them in alternate literary histories.

5. The Mechanics of Heart Fire: Fiction with a History

My motivation for setting *Heart Fire* in an imaginary world grew out of a need to not be strictly limited by historical details. Although steampunk is notorious for mixing the past, present and future, I wanted my imagination to be given an even freer rein to explore a world where religious leaders worshipped Fate instead of gods, and where the presence of magic had changed society in ways that had left Europe and its colonies mostly unrecognizable.

To complement the world-building, I also wanted to introduce weirdness without being derivative of earlier works such as the hybrid beings in *Perdido Street Station*, or the nymphomaniac human-like newt of “Victoria” in Paul Di Filippo’s *The Steampunk Trilogy*, or the voracious mosquito women of China Miéville’s *The Scar*. My equivalents became Rill, the unborn shapeshifter turned to stone for eighteen years in her human mother’s womb, and Ruk, the shapeshifter who fed on the memories of the dying and risked turning demon from the insanity of bearing too much emotion. Like Miéville’s and Di Filippo’s creations, these tropes are not mechanical, and nor are they scientific. Rather, their credibility depends on their location in a pseudo-Victorian setting where hoax and rumour are presented with the same veracity as empirical evidence. Their existence exerts similar effects on humankind’s relationship with reality, defamiliarizing it and illuminating it.

I also wanted to use the above tropes to contribute towards creating a sense of wonder, which is a trait expected of all science fiction and fantasy. At first I was wary of using airships as a steampunk trope, as airships have become the major steampunk cliché. But towards the end of the plot when it became clear that I needed Arvin and Sir Mathias to quickly catch up with the fleeing Ju, an airship became the only answer. When it became obvious that the airship would need to be destroyed, then Rill’s stone-making magic became the perfect way of transforming yet another clichéd scene into something unexpectedly different.
When devising the plot for *Heart Fire*, my aim was for the novel’s story to be told from the point of view of a member of the oppressed lower class. The novel’s female protagonist, Ju, is a young woman whose talents have been stifled by her circumstances, in much the same way as those of my mother, who grew up in pre-World War II London’s East End and was forced to leave school at fourteen to work in factories. She was not only oppressed by the upper classes, but also by her own family who believed that education would not guarantee that she would find work.

In *Heart Fire*, Ju has the innate talent of heart-magic, stronger than any mage, but as a child, she had been taught to ignore it and keep it hidden out of ignorance and fear of retaliation. No one, not even Ju, understands her potential until circumstances demand it. For my mother, life was much the same. She would have remained a factory worker if World War II had not led her elsewhere.

In contrast, *Heart Fire’s* male protagonist, Ruk, is a shapeshifter who struggles to fit in the human world. He is brown-skinned because I did not want my created world to be unrealistically white. Although Ruk’s human counterpart Forley does not face real world racial issues of discrimination, I remained aware that, while writing a non-white character, I needed to avoid racial stereotypes. Therefore, Forley as a human is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. He wants to protect Ju and offers her money to take her to safety, yet at the same time chooses not to stand up with her against her oppressors. Instead he says: “Ju, I’m a designer – an artist – not a fighter.” Maybe he is a pacifist, or maybe he lacks strength. As a writer, I do not judge Forley’s decision, and neither does Ju. That conundrum is left for the benefit of the reader. Although Ruk is a shapeshifter – an alien – from a secondary world, he does not represent any particular race in our world. I used his inherited human aspects to control his alien aspects and adhered to the assumption that his reactions, although at times seeming abnormal and extreme, are innately human, remembering that, as Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward assert in *Writing the Other*: “No one is truly Normal”\(^1\).

Only recently, I have realized that much of Ruk’s inner emotional turmoil loosely reflects my own experience as a teenager with mild Tourette Syndrome. It was not until adulthood that I was able to gain control enough over my motor tics to feel at ease socially, and not until this year, upon completing this novel, that I

was given the benefit of a diagnosis. Therefore, I understand the sense of estrangement and Otherness that comes from dealing with a condition that is poorly understood.

At the time of writing *Heart Fire*, I was not yet ready to represent characters with tourettic symptoms, however I intend to explore this issue more openly in later fiction, with the aim of debunking myths and stereotypes that have been foisted on people with Tourette Syndrome in literature and popular media\(^{152}\).

As a writer of fantasy, I found the steampunk genre extremely versatile as a way of taking old tropes and combining them in new ways to tell old stories, new stories and personal stories, albeit defamiliarized in the guise of science fiction and fantasy. Readers who do not know my personal history may well interpret Ruk’s Otherness solely as a commentary on race. They may also interpret Arvin’s struggle with demons as nothing more than a plot complication and not an allegory of my own ongoing battle to postpone the manifestations of an unwanted neurological disorder. At the time of writing, even I did not suspect my subconscious had perhaps led me along this path. Maybe it had not, and the connection is simply a coincidence. One’s muse is as enigmatic as she is unbiddable. The ideas flow and the writer arranges them into a coherent structure. I now send my novel out into the world and the words must speak for themselves.

As Roland Barthes argues: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination”\(^{153}\).

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\(^{152}\) Popular media and fiction frequently represents and embellishes the severe cases. For a more balanced description that represents 90% of people affected with this neurological disorder see: *Tourette Syndrome Association of Australia*. [http://www.tourette.org.au/].

Bibliography


