

Chapter 1

WE SCALE THE ROUGH BRICKS OF THE BUILDING'S FACADE. Their crumbling edges soften under our claw-like fingers; they jut out of the flat, adenoid face of the wall to provide easy footholds. We could've used fire escapes, we could've climbed up, up, past the indifferent faces of the walls, their windows cataracted with shutters; we could've bounded up in the joyful cacophony of corrugated metal and barely audible whispers of the falling rust shaken loose by our ascent. We could've flown.

But instead we hug the wall, press our cheeks against the warm bricks; the filigree of age and weather covering their surface imprints on our skin, steely-gray like the thunderous skies above us. We rest, clinging to the wall, our fingertips nestled in snug depressions in the brick, like they were made especially for that, clinging. We are almost all the way to the steep roof red with shingles shaped like fish scales.

We look into the lone window lit with a warm glow, the only one with open shutters and smells of sage, lamb, and chlorine wafting outside. We look at the long bench decorated with alembics and retorts and colored powders and bunches of dried herbs and bowls of watery sheep's eyes from the butcher's shop down the alleyway. We look at the girl.

Her porcelain face has cracked—a recent fall, an accident?—and we worry as we count the cracks cobwebbing

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her cheek and her forehead, radiating from the point of impact like sunrays. Yes, we remember the sun. Her blue eyes, facets of expensive glass colored with copper salts, look into the darkness, and we do not know if she can see us at all.

But she smiles and waves at us, and the bronzed wheel-bearings of her joints squeak their mechanical greeting. She pushes the lock of dark, dark hair (she doesn't know, but it used to belong to a dead boy) behind her delicate ear, a perfect and pink seashell. Her deft hands, designed for grinding and mixing and measuring, smooth the front of her fashionably wide skirt, and she motions to us. "Come in," she says.

We creep inside through the window, grudgingly, gingerly, we creep (we could've flown). We grow aware of our not-belonging, of the grayness of our skin, of our stench—we smell like pigeon-shit, and we wonder if she notices; we fill her entire room with our rough awkward sour bodies. "We seek your help," we say.

Her cracked porcelain face remains as expressionless as ours. "I am honored," she says. Her blue eyes bulge a little from their sockets, taking us in. Her frame clicks as she leans forward, curious about us. Her dress is low-cut, and we see that there is a small transparent window in her chest, where a clockwork heart is ticking along steadily, and we cannot help but feel resentful of the sound and—by extension—of her, the sound of time falling away grain by grain, the time that dulls our senses and hardens our skins, the time that is in too short supply. "I will do everything I can," she says, and our resentment falls away too, giving way to gratitude—falls like dead skin. We bow and leap out of the window, one by one by one, and we fly, hopeful for the first time in centuries.

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LOHARRI'S ROOM SMELLED OF INCENSE AND SMOKE, THE AIR thick like taffy. Mattie tasted it on her lips, and squinted through the thick haze concealing its denizen.

"Mattie," Loharri said from the chaise by the fireplace where he sprawled in his habitual languor, a half-empty glass on the floor. A fat black cat sniffed at its contents prissily, found them not to her liking, but knocked the glass over nonetheless, adding the smell of flat beer to the already overwhelming concoction that was barely air. "So glad to see you."

"You should open the window," she said.

"You don't need air," Loharri said, petulant. He was in one of his moods again.

"But you do," she pointed out. "You are one fart away from death by suffocation. Fresh air won't kill you."

"It might," he said, still sulking.

"Only one way to find out." She glided past him, the whirring of her gears muffled by the room—it was so full of draperies and old rugs rolled up in the corners, so cluttered with bits of machinery and empty dishes. Mattie reached up and swung open the shutters, admitting a wave of air sweet with lilac blooms and rich river mud and roasted nuts from the market square down the street. "Alive still?"

"Just barely." Loharri sat up and stretched, his long spine crackling like flywheels. He then yawned, his mouth gaping dark in his pale face. "What brings you here, my dear love?"

She extended her hand, the slender copper springs of

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her fingers grasping a phial of blue glass. "One of your admirers sent for me—she said you were ailing. I made you a potion."

Loharri uncorked the phial and sniffed at the contents with suspicion. "A woman? Which one?" he asked. "Because if it was a jilted lover, I am not drinking this."

"Amelia," Mattie said. "I do not suppose she wishes you dead."

"Not yet," Loharri said darkly, and drank. "What does it do?"

"Not yet," Mattie agreed. "It's just a tonic. It'll dispel your ennui, although I imagine a fresh breeze might do just as well."

Loharri made a face; he was not a handsome man to begin with, and a grimace of disgust did not improve his appearance.

Mattie smiled. "If an angel passes over you, your face will be stuck like that."

Loharri scoffed. "Dear love, if only it could make matters worse. But speaking of faces . . . yours has been bothering me lately. What did you do to it?"

Mattie touched the cracks, feeling their familiar swelling on the smooth porcelain surface. "Accident," she said.

Loharri arched his left eyebrow—the right one was paralyzed by the scar and the knotted mottled tissue that ruined half of his face; it was a miracle his eye had been spared. Mattie heard that some women found scars attractive in a romantic sort of way, but she was pretty certain that Loharri's were quite a long way past romantic and into disfiguring. "Another

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accident,” he said. “You are a very clumsy automaton, do you know that?”

“I am not clumsy,” Mattie said. “Not with my hands.”

He scowled at the phial in his hand. “I guess not, although my taste buds beg to differ. Still, I made you a little something.”

“A new face,” Mattie guessed.

Loharri smiled lopsidedly and stood, and stretched his long, lanky frame again. He searched through the cluttered room until he came upon a workbench that somehow got hidden and lost under the pile of springs, coils, wood shavings, and half-finished suits of armor that appeared decorative rather than functional in their coppery, glistening glory. There were cogs and parts of engines and things that seemed neither animate nor entirely dead, and for a short while Mattie worried that the chaotic pile would consume Loharri; however, he soon emerged with a triumphant cry, a round white object in his hand.

It looked like a mask and Mattie averted her eyes—she did not like looking at her faces like that, as they hovered, blind and disembodied. She closed her eyes and extended her neck toward Loharri in a habitual gesture. His strong, practiced fingers brushed the hair from her forehead, lingering just a second too long, and felt around her jaw line, looking for the tiny cogs and pistons that attached her face to the rest of her head. She felt her face pop off, and the brief moment when she felt exposed, naked, seemed to last an eternity. She whirred her relief when she felt the touch of the new concave surface as it enveloped her, hid her from the world.

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Loharri affixed the new face in place, and she opened her eyes. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the new sockets.

“How does it fit?” Loharri asked.

“Well enough,” she said. “Let me see how I look.” She extended one of the flexible joints that held her eyes and tilted it, to see the white porcelain mask. Loharri had not painted this one—he remembered her complaints about the previous face, that it was too bright, too garish (this is why she broke it in the first place), and he left this one plain, suffused with the natural bluish tint that reminded her of the pale skies over the city during July and its heat spells. Only the lips, lined with pitted smell and taste sensors, were tinted pale red, same as the rooftops in the merchants’ district.

“It is nice,” Mattie said. “Thank you.”

Loharri nodded. “Don’t mention it. No matter how emancipated, you’re still mine.” His voice lost its usual acidity as he studied her new face with a serious expression. There were things Mattie and Loharri didn’t talk about—one of them was Mattie’s features, which remained constant from one mask to the next, no matter how much he experimented with colors and other elaborations. “Looks good,” he finally concluded. “Now, tell me the real reason for your visit—surely, you don’t rush over every time someone tells you I might be ill.”

“The gargoyles,” Mattie said. “They want to hire me, and I want your permission to make them my priority, at the expense of your project.”

Loharri nodded. “It’s a good one,” he said. “I guess our gray overlords have grown tired of being turned into stone?”

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“Yes,” Mattie answered. “They feel that their life spans are too short and their fate is too cruel; I cannot say that I disagree. Only . . . I really do not know where to start. I thought of vitality potions and the mixes to soften the leather, of the elixirs to loosen the calcified joints . . . only they all seem lacking.”

Loharri smiled and drummed his fingers on his knee. “I see your problem, and yes, you can work on it to your little clockwork heart’s content.”

“Thank you,” Mattie said. If she had been able to smile, she would have. “I brought you what I have so far—a list of chemicals that change color when exposed to light.”

Loharri took the proffered piece of paper with two long fingers, and opened it absentmindedly. “I know little of alchemy,” he said. “I’m not friends with any of your colleagues, but I suppose I could find a replacement for you nonetheless, although I doubt there’s anyone who knows more on the matter than you do. Meanwhile, I do have one bit of advice regarding the gargoyles.”

Mattie tilted her head to the shoulder, expectant. She had learned expressive poses, and knew that they amused her creator; she wondered if she was supposed to feel shame at being manipulative.

As expected, he snickered. “Aren’t you just the sweetest machine in the city? And oh, you listen so well. Heed my words then: I remember a woman who worked on the gargoyle problem some years back. Beresta was her name, a foreigner; Beresta from the eastern district. But she died—a sad, sad thing.”

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“Oh,” Mattie said, disappointed. “Did she leave any papers behind?”

Loharri shook his head. “No papers. But, lucky for you, she was a restless spirit, a sneaky little ghost who hid in the rafters of her old home. And you know what they do with naughty ghosts.”

Mattie inclined her head in agreement. “They call for the Soul-Smoker.”

“Indeed. And if there’s anyone who still knows Beresta’s secrets, it’s him. You’re not afraid of the Soul-Smokers, are you?”

“Of course not,” Mattie said mildly. “I have no soul; to fear him would be a mere superstition.” She stood and smoothed her skirts, feeling the stiff whalebone stays that held her skirts full and round under the thin fabric. “Thank you, Loharri. You’ve been kind.”

“Thank you for the tonic,” he said. “But please, do visit me occasionally, even if there’s nothing you want. I am a sentimental man.”

“I shall,” Mattie answered, and took her leave. As she walked out of the door, it occurred to her that if she wanted to be kind to Loharri she could offer him things she knew he wanted but would never ask for—she could invite him to touch her hair, or let him listen to the ticking of her heart. To sit with him in the darkness, in the dead hours between night and morning when the demons tormented him more than usual, and then perhaps he would talk of things they did not talk about otherwise—perhaps then he would tell her why he had made her and why he grew so despondent when she

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wanted to live on her own and to study, to become something other than a part of him. The problem was, those were the things she preferred not to know.

MATTIE TOOK A LONG WAY HOME, WEAVING THROUGH THE market among the many stalls selling food and fabric and spices; she lingered by a booth that sold imported herbs and chemicals, and picked up a bunch of dried salamanders and a bottle of copper salts. She then continued east to the river, and she stood a while on the embankment watching the steam-boats huff across, carrying marble for the new construction on the northern bank. There were talks of the new parliament building, and Mattie supposed that it signaled an even bigger change than gossip at Loharri's parties suggested. Ever since the mechanics won a majority, the renovations in the city acquired a feverish pace, and the streets themselves seemed to shift daily, accommodating new roads and more and more factories that belched smoke and steam and manufactured new and frightening machines.

Still, Mattie tried not to think of politics too much. She thought about gargoyles and of Loharri's words. He called them their overlords, even though the city owed its existence to the gargoyles, and they had been nothing but benefactors to the people. Did he know something she didn't? And if he were so disdainful of gargoyles, why did he offer to help?

Mattie walked leisurely along the river. It was a nice day, and many people strolled along the embankment, enjoying the first spring warmth and the sweet, dank smell of the river. She received a few curious looks, but overall people paid her

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no mind. She passed a paper factory that squatted over the river like an ugly toad, disgorging a stream of white foam into the water; a strong smell of bleach surrounded it like a cloud.

From the factory she turned into the twisty streets of the eastern district, where narrow three-storied buildings clung close together like swallows' nests on the face of a cliff. The sea of red tiled roofs flowed and ebbed as far as the eye could see, and Mattie smiled—she liked her neighborhood the way it was, full of people and small shops occupying the lower stories, without any factories and with the streets too narrow for any mechanized conveyances. She turned into her street and headed home, the ticking of her heart keeping pace with her thoughts filled with gargoyles and Loharri's strange relationship to them.

Mattie's room and laboratory were located above an apothecary's, which she occasionally supplied with elixirs and ointments. Less mainstream remedies remained in her laboratory, and those who sought them knew to visit her rooms upstairs; they usually used the back entrance and the rickety stairs that led past the apothecary.

When Mattie got home to her garret, she found a visitor waiting on the steps. She had met this woman before at one of Loharri's gatherings—her name was Iolanda; she stood out from the crowd, Mattie remembered—she moved energetically and laughed loudly, and looked Mattie straight in the eye when they were introduced. And now Iolanda's gaze did not waver. "May I come in?" she said as soon as she saw Mattie, and smiled.

"Of course," Mattie said and unlocked the door. The

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corridor was narrow and led directly into her room, which contained a roll-top desk and her few books; Mattie led her visitor through and into the laboratory, where there was space to sit and talk.

“Would you like a drink?” Mattie asked. “I have a lovely jasmine-flavored liqueur.”

Iolanda nodded. “I would love that. How considerate of you to keep refreshments.”

Mattie poured her a drink. “Of course,” she said. “How kind of you to notice.”

Iolanda took the proffered glass from Mattie’s copper fingers, studying them as she did so, and took a long swallow. “Indeed, it is divine,” she said. “Now, if you don’t mind, I would like to dispense with the pleasantries and state my business.”

Mattie inclined her head and sat on a stool by her workbench, offering the other one to Iolanda with a gesture.

“You are not wealthy,” Iolanda said. Not a question but a statement.

“Not really,” Mattie agreed. “But I do not need much.”

“Mmmm,” Iolanda said. “One might suspect that a well-off alchemist is a successful alchemist—you do need to buy your ingredients, and some are more expensive than others.”

“That is true,” Mattie said. “Now, how does this relate to your business?”

“I can make you rich,” Iolanda said. “I have need of an alchemist, of one who is discreet and skillful. But before I explain my needs, let me ask you this: do you consider yourself a woman?”

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“Of course,” Mattie said, taken aback and puzzled. “What else would I consider myself?”

“Perhaps I did not phrase it well,” Iolanda said, and tossed back the remainder of her drink with an unexpectedly habitual and abrupt gesture. “What I meant was, why do you consider yourself a woman? Because you were created as one?”

“Yes,” Mattie replied, although she grew increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation. “And because of the clothes I wear.”

“So if you changed your clothes . . .”

“But I can’t,” Mattie said. “The shape of them is built into me—I know that you have to wear corsets and hoops and stays to give your clothes a proper shape. But I was created with all of those already in place, they are as much as part of me as my eyes. So I ask you: what else would you consider me?”

“I sought not to offend,” Iolanda said. “I do confess to my prejudice: I will not do business nor would I employ a person or an automaton of a gender different from mine, and I simply had to know if your gender was coincidental.”

“I understand,” Mattie said. “And I assure you that my femaleness is as ingrained as your own.”

Iolanda sighed. Mattie supposed that Iolanda was beautiful, with her shining dark curls cascading onto her full shoulders and chest, and heavy, languid eyelids half-concealing her dark eyes. “Fair enough. And Loharri . . . can you keep secrets from him?”

“I can and I do,” Mattie said.

“In this case, I will appreciate it if you keep our business private,” Iolanda said.

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“I will, once you tell me what it is,” Mattie replied. She shot an involuntary look toward her bench, where the ingredients waited for her to grind and mix and vaporize them, where the aludel yawned empty as if hungry; she grew restless sitting for too long, empty-handed and motionless.

Iolanda raised her eyebrows, as if unsure whether she understood Mattie. She seemed one of those people who rarely encountered anything but abject agreement, and she was not used to being hurried. “Well, I want you to be available for the times I have a need of you, and to fulfill my orders on a short notice. Potions, perfumes, tonics . . . that sort of thing. I will pay you a retainer, so you will be receiving money even when I do not have a need of you.”

“I have other clients and projects,” Mattie said.

Iolanda waved her hand dismissively. “It doesn’t matter. As long as I can find you when I need you.”

“It sounds reasonable,” Mattie agreed. “I will endeavor to fulfill simple orders within a day, and complex ones— from two days to a week. You won’t have them done faster anywhere.”

“It is acceptable,” Iolanda said. “And for your first order, I need you to create me a fragrance that would cause regret.”

“Come back tomorrow,” Mattie said. “Or leave me your address, I’ll have a courier bring it over.”

“No need,” Iolanda said. “I will send someone to pick it up. And here’s your first week’s pay.” She rose from her stool and placed a small pouch of stones on the bench. “And if anyone asks, we are casual acquaintances, nothing more.”

Iolanda left, and Mattie felt too preoccupied to even look

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at the stones that were her payment. She almost regretted agreeing to Iolanda's requests—while they seemed straightforward and it was not that uncommon for courtiers to employ alchemists or any other artisans on a contract basis, something about Iolanda seemed off. Most puzzling, if she wanted to keep a secret from Loharri, she could do better than hire the automaton made by his hands. Mattie was not so vain as to presuppose that her reputation outweighed common good sense.

But there was work to do, and perfume certainly seemed less daunting than granting gargoyles a lifespan extension, and she mixed ambergris and sage, blended myrrh and the bark of grave cypress, and sublimated dry camphor. The smell she obtained was pleasing and sad, and yet she was not certain that this was enough to evoke regret—something seemed missing. She closed her eyes and smelled-tasted the mixture with her sensors, trying hard to remember the last time she felt regret.