
THE WHATNOT
THE SEQUEL TO THE PECULIAR
STEFAN BACHMANN

Stefan Bachmann

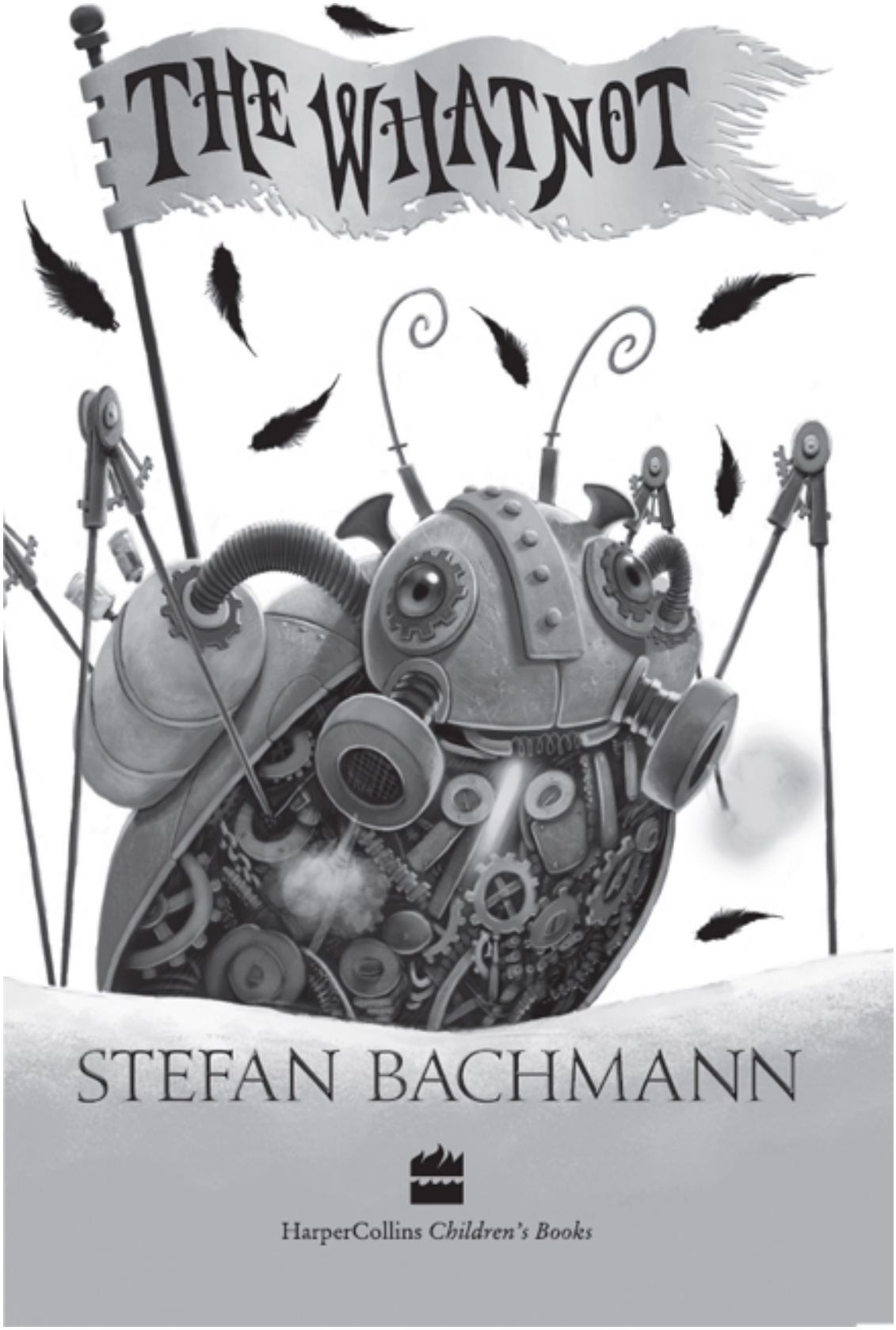
The Whatnot

«HarperCollins»

Bachmann S.

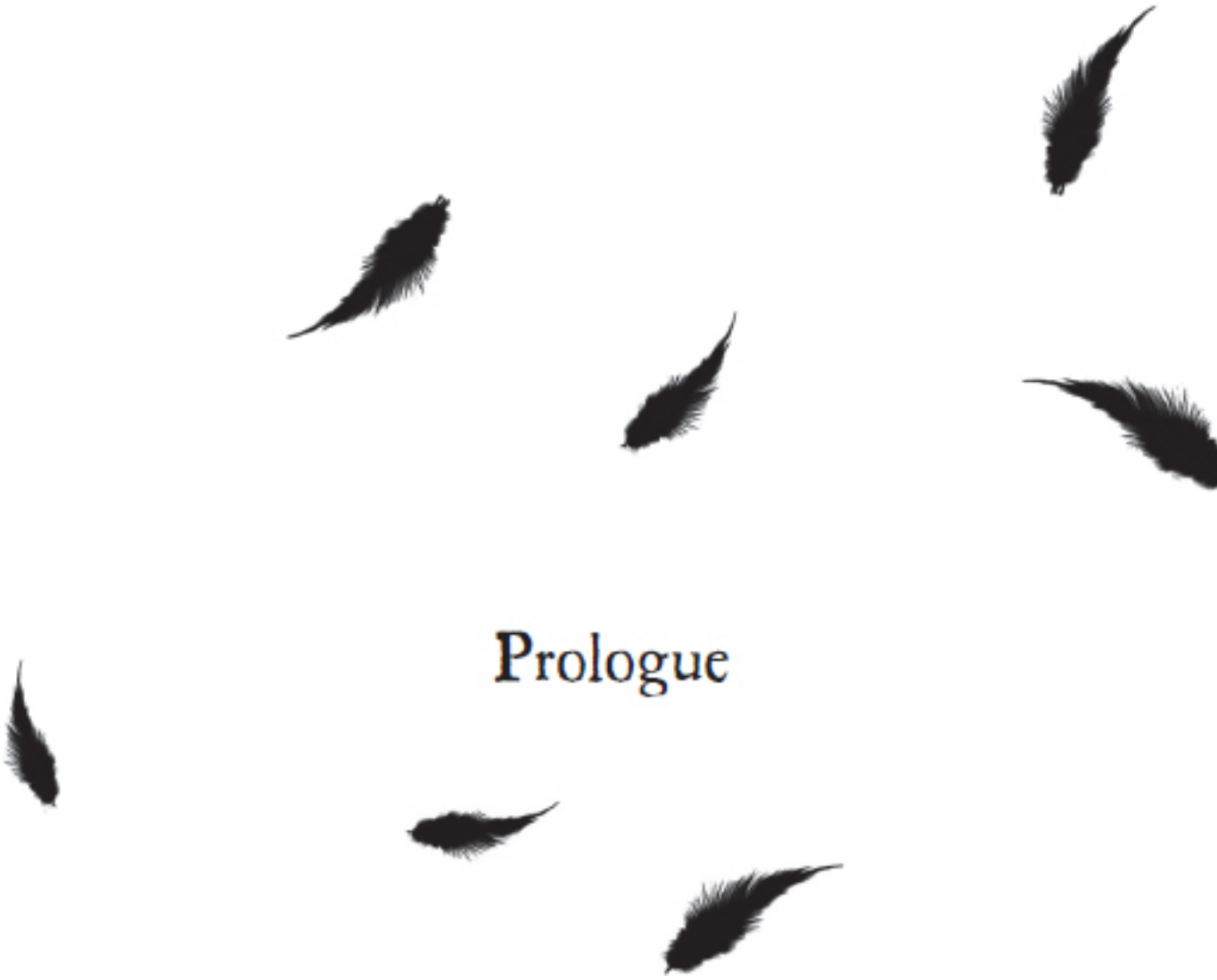
The Whatnot / S. Bachmann — «HarperCollins»,

The thrilling sequel to Stefan Bachmann's steampunk faery fantasy THE PECULIAR. This is JONATHAN STRANGE AND MR NORRELL for kids, mixed with a dash of THE BARTIMAEUS TRILOGY…Bartholomew Kettle couldn't save his sister. He watched her be pushed through the door between worlds, into the icy forest of faery. He saw her take someone's hand. And he promised that he would find her. But what if he can't? And what if the sinister forces who were hunting them both haven't given up, but are just biding their time? Stefan Bachmann spins a consuming tale of magic, of good and evil, of family, and of figuring out where you belong.



To my family, who made me who I am

CONTENTS



Prologue

NO one noticed the soldier. He stood in the middle of the ballroom, dark and hunched against the blazing lights, and no one saw. Brightly colored frocks whirled around him. Coattails spun past. The laughter and the chatter filled the air, and the clockwork maids sped right up to him with their heavy trays of glasses and red currant tarts, but he never moved. His face was white as bone. Blue shadows stood out under his eyes, and his uniform was blotted with mud.

Mr. Jelliby did not notice him either, not at first. He was busy being worried and a little bit irritated, leaning against the fireplace and watching the guests as they moved toward the dancing floor. The gentlemen were in full uniform, jangling with swords and medals of bravery, though most had not seen a day of battle. Red sashes slashed down their chests. The ladies smiled and whispered. *Such bright birds,* Mr. Jelliby thought. *So happy. For tonight.*

It was hot in the ballroom. The great windows were edged with ice, but inside it was a furnace. Candles were lit, the fire stoked, and the chandeliers burned so bright that the air around them rippled and the ceiling was heavy with smoke. Mr. Jelliby rubbed the hair above his ear, as if to scratch away the silver that was appearing there. He could smell the red currant tarts as they skimmed past. He could smell oil from the servants' joints, and the damp wraps and overshoes lying in steaming heaps in the neighboring room. The orchestra was tuning up. Dear Ophelia was stooped over a sofa, trying to placate Lady Halifax, who seemed in constant peril of exploding. Mr. Jelliby felt he needed to sit down. He turned away from the mantel, looking for the most convenient escape. …

That was when he spotted the soldier.

Good heavens. Mr. Jelliby squinted. What were things coming to that you could get into a lord's house dressed like *that*? The lad's coat was filthy. The wool was sodden, the buttons dull, and the collar was black with who-knew-what. Had he been fresh off the battlefields it might have made some sense to Mr. Jelliby, but the Wyndhammer Ball was the going-off celebration. The war had not even started yet.

"Dashing good bash, this," Lord Gristlewood said, sidling up to Mr. Jelliby and interrupting his thoughts. Mr. Jelliby jumped a little. *Drat.*

Lord Gristlewood was a droopy, fleshy man with pale, swollen hands that made Mr. Jelliby think of dead things soaking in jars of chemicals. Worse yet, Lord Gristlewood was the sort of man who thought everyone liked him even though no one actually did.

"Dashing good," Mr. Jelliby said. He scanned the crowd, making a point to ignore the other man.

Lord Gristlewood did not take the hint. "Ah, would you look at them. … Brave lads, every one. The pride of England. Why, a thousand bellowing trolls could not frighten these men."

Mr. Jelliby pressed his lips together.

"Well, don't you think?" Lord Gristlewood asked.

"No, I don't usually." Mr. Jelliby spoke quietly, into his glass, hoping Lord Gristlewood wouldn't hear.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh—That is—I certainly hope so!"

Lord Gristlewood smiled. "Of course you do! Cheer up, old chap. It's a celebration, after all."

"Indeed." Mr. Jelliby set his glass down sharply on the mantel. "Well, *old chap,* if I'm to be honest with you, I see no reason to celebrate. We are entering into a civil war."

Lord Gristlewood's smile slipped a little bit.

Mr. Jelliby didn't stop. "Tomorrow all you'll hear is, 'Hand in your wife's jewels!' and 'Enlist your footman!' and 'All for the good of the empire!' and other such bunk. And then the bodies will start coming back in sacks and wagons, and one will be your footman, and no one will be dancing then. It's not a funny thing, fighting faeries."

"Oh, but you are gloomful," Lord Gristlewood said. "Come now. It'll never go so far. The faeries are wild! They are leaderless and unorganized, and we shall settle them the way we settled the French. With our superior intellect. Let them come, I say. Let them strike us with all they've got. We won't fall." Lord Gristlewood gave an uneasy laugh and slid away, apparently deciding to grace a less depressing person with his presence.

Mr. Jelliby sighed. He picked up his glass again, turning it slowly. He took a sip. Over the glinting rim he saw the soldier, standing dark and solitary among the dancers.

Mr. Jelliby watched him a second. Then he smiled. *Of course. The boy is shy!* Why had he not thought of it before? No doubt the young soldier was frightened out of his wits and wondering how best to ask one of the ladies for a dance. Mr. Jelliby decided to go and rescue him. There was bound to be some equally unhappy nobleman's daughter about, ideally lacking a sense of smell.

Mr. Jelliby pushed off into the crowd, setting course for the dancing floor at the center of the room. It was like navigating a sea of cotton candy, pressing between all those frocks. More and more couples were moving toward the dancing. In fact, the room seemed to be getting fuller by the second, not with people exactly, but with heat and laughter. Mr. Jelliby's head began to buzz.

He had not gone ten steps when Lady Maribeth Skimpshaw—who moved within her very own atmosphere of rosy perfume—intercepted him, grabbing his arm and smiling. She had a very pink, gummy smile of the sort that comes with false teeth. Mr. Jelliby had heard she'd had her beginnings in London's theater district, so doubtless all her real teeth had been traded for poppy potions and illegal faery droughts.

"Lord Jelliby! How perfectly delightful that I've found you. Your wife's arm is going to fall off. She should stop fanning that odious Lady Halifax. The fool thinks someone's stolen one of her gems, but she probably just forgot how many she put on this evening. No matter. I've kidnapped you and that's what is important." Her smile stretched. "Now. I know you are terribly busy managing your estates and counting your money and all that, but I absolutely *must* speak to you very urgently."

"Oh dear, I hope not."

"What?"

"I hope Ophelia's arm doesn't fall off. Shall I get you a tart?"

"No, Lord Jelliby, are you listening to me?" Her fingers tightened around his arm. "It's about young Master Skimpshaw. I want to ask you a favor for him."

Oh, drat again. People were always asking favors of Mr. Jelliby now that he was a lord. They asked for positions in government, or good words slipped to admirals, or whether he had any nonmechanical servants to spare. It drove him to distraction. Just because he had saved London from utter destruction and the Queen had given him a house and some stony fields in a distant corner of Lancashire did not mean he wanted to spend the rest of his life being charitable to aristocrats. Anyway, one would think they could handle their own problems.

"Terribly sorry, my lady, but you will have to find me later. Someone is in need of my assistance now, and"—Mr. Jelliby broke free of Maribeth Skimpshaw's clutches—"and I really must be *going.*" He set off again toward the young soldier, trailing rose scent in ribbons behind him.

The orchestra was in full tilt now, sweeping everyone up in a glorious, whirling waltz. Mr. Jelliby could hardly see the soldier anymore. Only snatches of him, in between the spinning figures and bright gowns. His face was chalky. Drained, almost.

"Lord Jelliby? Oh, Arthur Jelliby!" someone called from across the room.

Mr. Jelliby walked faster.

And then, all at once, a rustle passed through the crowd, a disturbance, like the wind in the treetops before a storm. It started on the dancing floor and spread out until it had reached the farthest corners of the ballroom. The rustle swelled. Shouts, then a shriek, and then people were peeling away from Mr. Jelliby, backing up against the walls.

Mr. Jelliby stopped in his tracks.

The young soldier stood directly in front of him, not five paces away. He was alone, all alone on the polished floorboards. His hand was raised, stretched out in front of him. In it was clutched a bloody rag.

Mr. Jelliby let out a little cough.

The rag was blue, the color of England, the color of her army. Shreds of a red sash still clung to it. A spattered medal. The young soldier's mouth opened, but no sound came out. He simply stared at the rag in his hand, a look of mild surprise on his white, white face.

The ballroom had gone deathly still. No one spoke. No one moved. The clockwork maids had all creaked to a halt. The old ladies were staring so hard their eyes seemed about to pop from their heads. Lady Halifax lay sprawled over a fainting couch, face red as an apple.

Mr. Jelliby's first thought was, *Good heavens, he's killed someone,* but he couldn't see anyone hurt. No one seemed to be missing a piece of his uniform, nor were there any wounds visible among the swaths of lace and satin.

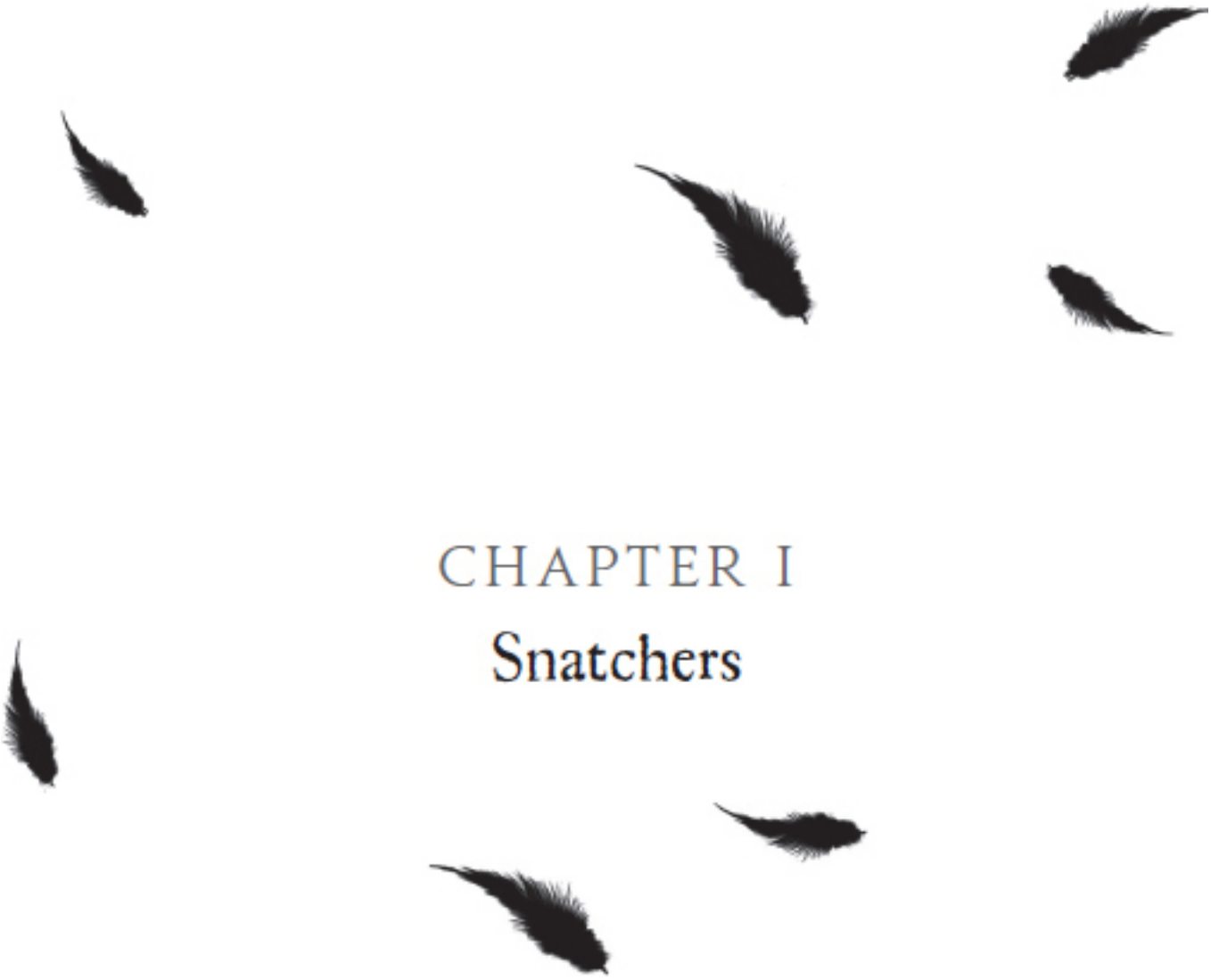
"Young man," Mr. Jelliby started to say, unsteadily, taking a step toward the soldier. "Young man, what in—"

But he didn't have time to say anything else, because suddenly the soldier began to change. As Mr. Jelliby watched, blood came up between the soldier's teeth and gushed down his chin in a crimson sheet. Bright holes tore themselves through the fabric of his uniform. He spasmed, once, twice, as if being hit by some great, invisible force.

And then he began to fall, so slowly. Petals of black pulled away from his coat, his arms, and the side of his face as he descended through the air. There was a sound like distant guns. And before he struck the floor, he seemed to disintegrate, turn to ash and smoke and black powder.

Then he was gone, and the ladies were screaming.

Mr. Jelliby heard glass breaking. The lights were so hot now, so raging hot. He couldn't smell the tarts anymore. Only the fear, thick as river mud in the rippling air.



CHAPTER I

Snatchers

PIKEY Thomas dreamed of plums and caramel apples the night the faery-with-the-peeling-face stole his left eye.

It was a wonderful dream. He wasn't in the bitter chill of his hole under the chemist's shop anymore. The old wooden signboard with its painted hands and hawthorn leaves no longer creaked overhead, and the ice wasn't crusting his face. In his sleep Pikey was warm, curled up by an iron stove, and the plums were drifting out of the dark, and he was eating a caramel apple that never seemed to get any smaller.

He always dreamed of caramel apples when he could help it. And iron stoves, too, in the winter. And plums and pies and loud, happy voices calling his name.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap. *Far, far away on the other side of his eyelids, a figure entered the frozen alley.*

Pikey bit down on his apple. He heard the footsteps, but he tried not to worry. Whoever it was would be gone soon. Folk were always stumbling into the chemist's alley from Bell Lane, from the

gutters and sluiceways and all the other fissures between the old houses of Spitalfields. None of them ever stayed for long.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Pikey squirmed inside his blankets. Go away, *he thought.* Don't wake me up. *But the footsteps kept coming, limping slowly across the cobbles.*

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.*Pikey didn't feel warm anymore. The plums still fell, but they stung now as they touched his skin, spitting, icy cold. He tried to take another bite of his apple. It turned to wind and cinders, and blew away.*

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Snow was falling. Not plums. Snow. It gusted into his little hole, and suddenly Pikey's nose was filled with the stench of old water and deep and mossy wells. A racket kicked up, old Rinshi straining against her chain, barking at something and then stopping, sharp-like. There was a grating, a scrape of metal.

Pikey saw the blood before he saw the figure, always the blood trickling toward him between the stones. Then the alley was filled with screams.

Pikey Thomas was running for his life.

It was a clear day, sharp and cold as a knife, but he couldn't see a thing. The string that held the patch over his bad eye was slipping. The square of ancient leather slapped his face, disorienting him. He bounced off a drainpipe, did an ungainly whirl, kept running. Behind him, he heard the sound of a bell, coming after him, clanging furiously. Ahead was a gutter. He leaped into it and whistled over the frozen grime, sliding fast as anything. The gutter ended in a rusting grate. Pikey hurled himself over it, struck the cobbles running. His fingers went to the patch, trying desperately to tighten the string, but it wouldn't stay, and he couldn't stop. It was only about to get worse.

The cobble faery tripped him in Bluebottle Street.

There Pikey was, a knob of black bread clutched inside his jacket, pounding up a street that was as empty and icy as any in London. His pursuer was still two or three corners behind him. Pikey was sure he would get away. And then he felt the tremor in the ground beneath him, the rattle of the cobbles as a tiny faery raced through its secret tunnels. It popped up the stone just as Pikey's foot was flying toward it.

Pikey let out a yelp and went careering into the wall of a house. His head knocked against stone. Pain shuddered through him, and he heard a wicked little voice sing, "Clumsy-patty, clumsy-patty, who's a clumsy pitty-patty?"

Pikey spun, pushing himself away from the wall.

The faery was peeking out from under the lifted cobblestone, black-bead eyes glittering. It was a spryte, not three inches from head to toe. Bits of frosty branches grew behind its pointed ears and a dreadful grin was on its face, stretching halfway around. It was a very yellow grin, full of prickly little teeth.

"Shut up," Pikey hissed. He ran at it, determined to smash it into a stringy mess. Too slow. The faery pulled down the cobble like a hat and was gone.

Pikey froze. He glanced back down the street, listening, making sure he still had some seconds to spare. Then he struck his boot heel against the ground three times, getting softer with each strike so that it would sound like he was walking away. The faery shot back up, still grinning. And Pikey leaped, straight onto the cobble. There was a squeak. The cobble smashed back into place. The faery's hand twitched where it was pinched in.

"Serves you right, too," Pikey said, but he had no time to enjoy his little victory. The bell was close now, echoing up between the buildings. An instant later, a huge officer in blue and crimson skidded into the street. A leadface.

"Thief!" the leadface shouted, his voice oddly flat and dull inside his iron half-helmet. *"Thief!"* But before he could see Pikey, Pikey was moving again, slipping under an archway and down a steep flight of steps, heart hammering.

The leadface charged up Bluebottle Street, flailing his bell. Pikey flattened himself against the gritty stone of the stairwell, just far enough down so that he could still see the street. He saw the black boots go by. He allowed himself a careful smile. The officer was running straight for the cobble faery. In five steps he would be flat on his face. *Three. Two …* And the officer kept right on running, hurtling toward the end of Bluebottle Street and the sooty flow of traffic on Aldersgate.

Oh. Pikey wiped his nose. *Must have stomped that faery harder than I thought.*

He leaned back against the slimy wall, waiting for the sound of the bell to become lost in the noise of the steam coaches and crowds. Then he strode up the steps and into the street, hands in his pockets, looking for all the world as if he had just gotten up and was off to sell matches or shine shoes or squawk the news at unsuspecting pedestrians.

Of course, he wasn't. He had just snatched his supper and now he was going to find a quiet spot where he could eat it. Leadfaces were inconvenient; so were cobble sprytes, especially since they had supposedly been banned from the city months ago together with all the other faeries. But they were nothing Pikey Thomas couldn't handle.

He picked his way back toward Spitalfields, careful to avoid the places where the leadfaces prowled and where the war agents sat at their painted recruiting booths. They were everywhere these days, and they went after most anyone they saw. "For Queen and Country!" they liked to bellow into their loudening horns. "For England, to eradicate the faery threat! Step right up, all men of hardy constitution!"

Pikey didn't know if he had a hardy constitution, but he knew he couldn't go to war. A year ago he would have. He was only twelve, but he would have signed up in an instant. The army had bread. It had thick coats and colorful banners and great bashing songs that made your feet want to march even if they didn't know where they were going. And you got a musket, too, for shooting faeries, which sounded good to Pikey. But that was before. Before the snowy night in the chemist's alley, and the blood between the cobbles, and the feet limping closer, straight toward him no matter how far he pressed himself into the dark. Before everything changed and he didn't know what he was anymore.

From an alley, Pikey watched as a group of boys not fourteen hunched over a war agent's table and signed their Xs on squares of brown card paper. When they had finished, the leadface handed them each a coat and a pair of huge scuffed boots. Then the boys were loaded into a wagon and it creaked away.

The leadface at the booth began scanning the passersby again, eyes invisible behind the dark holes of his helmet. Pikey hurried on. Those boys would be fighting soon, somewhere in the North. Fighting forests and rivers and whispery magic nonsense. He wondered if their boots would come back to London afterward, when they were gone, and be given to other boys.

He went up street after street, ducking into alleys when he heard the leadfaces' shouts, hurrying beneath the drooping, blackened houses. They had been the mansions of the faery silk weavers once. Now they were the houses of pickpockets and bloodletters and the poorest of the poor. Sometimes a woman leaning out of a window, or another boy in the street, would spot Pikey and shout, "Oy, pikey!" in a not-very-nice voice. Pikey always hurried faster then.

Pikey wasn't his real name. Or Thomas, either, for that matter. "Pikeys" were what folks called foreigners, and because Pikey had a face as brown as an old penny (whether from dirt or because he actually *was* a foreigner not even he knew), the name had stuck. As for Thomas, it was the name on the box he had come in, twelve years ago on a doorstep in Putney: *Thomas Ltd. Crackers and Biscuits. Premium quality.*

People had thought that funny once, coming from a cracker box. Pikey didn't think it was funny at all.

In the pigeon-choked space in front of St. Paul's Cathedral, a gang of boys accosted him.

"Give you a ha'penny if you show us your socket," the oldest and tallest one snarled. He wore a blue coat with brass buttons, much too big for him, and a pair of boots with popped toes. He looked like the leader.

The other boys crowded around, prodding Pikey, dirty faces pressing in. "Yeh, show us your socket! What happened, eh? Did you see something you weren't supposed to? Did Jenny Greenteeth pluck it out and string it up for a necklace?"

If Pikey'd had a socket he would have taken the boys' offer in an instant. A ha'penny could buy him a proper meal, let him sit in the warmth and stink of an inn and eat potatoes and gravy and gray boiled mutton until he burst. But he didn't have a socket, and the boys wouldn't like what they saw.

"Shove off. Leave me alone."

"Aw, come on, piker. Just a peek? Whada you say, fellas, you think we can see his brains through it? What say I pull off the patch and we get a look-see at his brains, all yellow and squishy inside."

The boys murmured their assent, some more readily than others. The gang leader stepped forward, reaching for Pikey's patch. Pikey braced himself for a fight.

"I said, shove *off*!" His voice went hard like a proper street rat's, but he was too short to make it count. The boy in the brass-button coat kept coming.

Pikey ducked away, ready to run, but two of the boys grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back.

"You stay where you're put at," one of them whispered, close next to his ear.

"Help!" Pikey croaked. There were people everywhere. *Someone* would hear him. Or see. The spot in front of St. Paul's was one of the busiest in London, even in winter, even with the sky going black overhead. Costermongers shouted from their pushcarts, offering lettuces and cabbages and suspicious-looking roots. Peddlers haggled, servants bought. A red-and-gold striped cider booth stood not ten paces away, with a whole line of people waiting in front of it. They couldn't all be deaf.

"Help, *thief*!" he cried.

No one even glanced at him.

"Stop cryin' like a little pansy. We only want a quick look. Shut up, I say. Shut up, or you'll get us all in trouble." The leader planted a heavy fist in Pikey's stomach, and his next shout came out in a puff of white breath.

He hung for a second, gasping, his arms still clamped behind him. He felt the leader's fingers undoing the string of the eye patch, pulling it off.

"We only want a quick look—"

Pikey shut his eyes hard and threw himself back with all his strength. His head thudded against the head of the boy behind him and they both went down, rolling over the cobbles. Pikey landed on the other boy's stomach with a satisfying squelch and sprang back up, one hand covering the place where the patch had been, the other swinging wildly.

The leader struggled to his feet and spat. "You little cog splinter. I'll beat you blue—" He came at Pikey swiftly, the hobnails in his boots snapping against the ground.

"Pound 'im!" the boys shouted, jostling, forming a ring. "Pound 'is other eye out!"

Pikey didn't have time to think. He flung up both hands to protect himself. …

The boy in the brass-button coat stopped dead in his tracks. The other boys went silent.

Too late Pikey realized what he had done. The eye where the patch had been was bared for all to see. He felt the cold sliding against it. He knew how it looked, what they all saw—a flat, empty orb, gray as the frozen sky. No pupil. Nothing like a regular blind eye. Only endless, swirling gray.

For a moment Pikey was looking into two places at once and his brain practically screamed with the effort. London was on one side, cold and dark and swarming with people like so many shadow ants. But on the other side was a different place, a great, dead forest rising out of the snow.

He couldn't hear anything of that world. He still heard London, though. Shouts. The clatter of a gas trolley. The gang leader cursing, backing away.

"Faery-touched," said the boy in the brass-button coat. *"Faery-touched, is this one!*"

Now people were paying attention. Pikey whirled, saw folks slowing their steps, staring, a veiled woman in black bombazine, one gloved hand clapped over her mouth. The whispers spread, fanning out around him. From the corner of his good eye, Pikey saw men slipping toward the spiderweb of streets that went off St. Paul's Church Yard, to the entrance of Fleet Street where the leadfaces stood. Somewhere not far away, a bell began to ring.

Pikey pushed his fist into his clouded eye. *Not again,* he thought. *Not twice in one day.* And then he ran, smashing between the people, toward the widest street he could see. Four leadfaces marched quickly past him in the opposite direction, toward the yells and the growing panic. Pikey had lost his patch, left it behind in the hand of the boy in the brass-button coat, but he didn't care. Not then. He put his head down and ran as fast and as hard as he could.

He ran until his breath rattled inside his rib-cage. He ran until his muscles burned and his legs felt like bags of water. And when he finally raised his eyes from the cobbles, he found himself in a part of London he had never seen before.

He had gone in entirely the wrong direction. He must be miles from Spitalfields now, miles from the chemist's shop. Night was falling. The streets were emptying of the regular people, filling with the irregular, the debauched, the drunk, the gaudily dressed fops and hoop-skirted ladies painted up so heavily they resembled nightmarish clowns. Overhead, the streetlamps cast dim reddish halos. The flame faeries that had been inside the lamps before the Ban had been replaced by brimstone bulbs, and these produced an ugly, bloody-looking light, but at least there was no more knocking and spitting, no more glowing faery faces trying to get the attention of the people below. Pikey was glad for it.

Stupid faeries. It served them right they had been sent away. He remembered how, a long time ago, Spitalfields had been swarming with them—faeries with spines, faeries with inky eyes and onion-white skin, with heads of barnacles and thorns, and so many fingers. You couldn't go anywhere without seeing one, and Pikey had lost count of all the times he had woken in his hole under the chemist's shop with his bootlaces knotted together, or with nettles wound into his hair. Well, now the faeries were being kicked out, and he hoped they all landed in bramble patches.

He continued to hurry, peering at everyone and wiping his nose. The pubs were bursting with light and riotous war songs. Some ways up ahead a door opened and a great fist punched out holding a filthy jabbering fool by the collar and depositing him in the green-tinged ice of a gutter. Closer, a street circus was setting up its hoops and props. An organ-grinder was playing a jangling, off-key tune. Pikey spotted a lady pulling a miniature hot-air balloon beside her, its basket filled with opera glasses and a fan and other necessaries. He saw someone wearing a pair of newfangled shoes, built of clockwork and powered by coal, that lifted your feet so that you didn't have to lift them yourself. The man who wore them was galumphing about like a two-ton elephant, and Pikey was careful to give him a wide berth.

He slowed to a walk, fishing in his pocket for the bread. His hand had dropped from his clouded eye, but he didn't care. He doubted he would be the first person noticed here. The streets were becoming wider. The crowds dwindled away and all went very quiet, the air somehow heavy, as if all the snow that was waiting to fall was pressing down on it, compacting it over the city. Only the occasional steam coach passed by now. Pikey looked up at the soaring stone buildings, with their spires and gables and wrought iron anti-faery gates.

He rounded a corner. He didn't know where he was, but it must have been a rich place. The houses here seemed absolutely bursting with light. It was almost as if there were no floors or walls inside them and they were simply great hollow shells, little suns burning within.

Traffic had picked up again. Well-bundled ladies and gentlemen were coming up the street, canes swinging, gowns whispering beneath heavy furs. Steam coaches and mechanical horse-and-fours rattled past, leaving swaths of coal smoke behind them. All were headed to the same destination —a great palace of a house, four floors and a green metal roof, and all of its windows, all the way to the roof, lit, punching golden holes in the night.

Pikey approached the house, gnawing at his bread. He watched from behind a lamppost as a great fat lady went up the steps to the door. She wore a delicate hat shaped like a fly and was practically dripping with diamonds. But she didn't look happy. In fact, she looked downright peeved. Pikey wondered how anyone could be peeved when they had so many diamonds. And going into such a bright, warm house. …

"Ah, the Wyndhammer War Ball," said a droopy, tucked-up gentleman, passing close by the lamppost. A very tall lady walked at his side, and he was hurrying to keep up. "What a dashing good bash this will be, don't you think, dear? Don't you?"

After a while, Pikey spotted the telltale red-and-blue of a leadface and slipped behind a coach wheel, walking along with it as it rumbled over the cobbles. The coach wheel was taller than he was and hid him right to the top of his head. The leadface marched past. As soon as he was gone, Pikey hurried back to the huge house and swung over the iron railing, onto the steps that went down to the servants' entrance. He didn't want to leave yet. It was getting colder, but the lights from the windows were so cheery. They shone down onto his face and he imagined he could almost feel their warmth. The panes were fogged right over it was so hot inside.

He sat down on the fourth step from the top and bit away at his bread. It was hard as a rock and full of gritty kernels that probably weren't flour. Pikey liked it quite a lot. The last carriage left. Faintly the sound of an orchestra drifted into the street. He heard muffled laughter and loud, happy voices.

And then he heard a different sound from the shadows at the bottom of the stairs. A scuttling, scraping noise, like knives dragging swiftly over stone. He sat up.

Was it a rat? The windows of the servants' hall were dark. No doubt everyone was in the kitchens, wiping and boiling and building towering platters of pork chops and hothouse fruits.

A steam coach turned onto the street, headlamps blazing. The light sliced through the railings, sending spokes of shadow spinning along the wall. In the blackness at the bottom of the steps, a pair of eyes glimmered. Two huge silver globes, there for a second, then gone.

Faery.

Pikey scooted up one step, muscles tense, ready to run. The noise came again, the sharp flutter, and this time it was accompanied by a weeping, thin and high, like a child crying.

Another steam coach coughed and sputtered up the street. The two globes lit again as the headlamps passed, then vanished into the dark. Whatever was at the bottom of the steps began to move.

It approached slowly, painfully, a pale slender thing dragging heavy black wings behind it like a cloak.

Pikey's heart skipped a beat. *That weren't no cobble spryte.*

The wings were huge, ruffled with dark, spiny feathers, and the blue-lipped mouth was riddled with teeth. A black tongue flicked from it every few seconds. But when Pikey peered at the faery it didn't look as if it were about to gnaw his leg off. Rather, it looked as if it were about to drip into a puddle. One of its wings hung limp, the feathers smashed. The bone was bent at a hideous angle.

Pikey eyed the creature as it pulled itself up the stairs, keeping his bread safely behind his back. The faery might not *seem* dangerous, but faeries could look however they wanted to look if it suited their fancy. He wasn't about to fall for any hookem-snivey.

"Boy?" it said in a high, whistling voice. *"Boy?"*

Just like a baby, Pikey thought. He frowned.

"Boy?" It had reached the seventh step. It stretched a thin-fingered hand up toward Pikey, pleading.

"What d'you want?" Pikey asked gruffly. He shoved the bread into his pocket and glanced around to make sure no one was near. Fraternizing with faeries was dangerous. If anyone so much as smelled of spells or piskie herbs, it was off to Newgate, and Pikey had heard there was a kindly looking old man there in a butcher's apron, and he was always weeping, and he would weep and weep as he pulled your fingernails out, but he would interrogate you until you'd say anything. Then you'd be sent to a different prison. Or hanged. Whatever the case, you were in for it. Pikey had been in for it all day, and he'd had enough.

The faery continued up the steps, its round eyes locked on his.

"What?" Pikey snapped. "You can't have my bread if that's what you want. I ran a long way for it. Go away."

"Boy," it said, yet again. "*Wing."*

"Yeh, looks broken to me. Rotten luck." Some servant in the downstairs had probably caught it stealing and had smashed it with a frying pan. Served it right, too.

"Help." The faery was on the step below Pikey now, looking up at him with great mirror eyes that seemed to grow larger with every breath.

"I ain't helping you." Pikey turned his face away. His gaze flickered back. He didn't want to be awful. But he wasn't about to put his neck out for a faery. Someone might be watching from one of those glowing windows. A street sweeper might pass just in that instant. Pikey couldn't be seen with it. It was hard enough staying alive with one eye looking like a puddle of rain.

"Please help?" The voice was so human now; it sent a little stab through Pikey's heart despite himself. The faery was just bones, a few thin sticks wrapped in papery skin. And it was hurting. He wouldn't leave a dog like that. He wouldn't even leave a leadface like that.

He frowned harder and joggled his knee. Then he leaned forward and took the damaged wing in his hand. The faery shied ever so slightly at his touch, but it did not pull away.

"Fine," Pikey said. "But if someone sees, I'm going to shove you at 'em and get outta here, you hear me?"

The feathers felt smooth and oily between Pikey's fingers, strangely immaterial, like smoke. He felt gently along the bone. He didn't know a great deal about doctoring, but Bobby Blacktop, the old chemist's boy, had gotten run over by a gas trolley a year ago and had both his legs broken. Pikey had learned a few things from that.

Suddenly the faery sat up, ears twitching, as if picking up a sound only it could hear. *"Quickly,"* it hissed. *"Quickly!"*

"Ow, aren't you one to make demands. What's the hurry, then? Where you gotta be?" Pikey's fingers found the joint, clicked it back in place. "It was just banged out o' the socket is all. Is that better? Does it work now?"

The faery's eyelids snapped, once, across its eyes. In a flash its wings unfurled, faster than Pikey would have thought possible. He jerked back. The faery peered at him a second longer, its tongue slithering between its teeth. Then it whirled, wrapping itself in its feathers. There was a brush of wind, a chorus of whispers, like many little voices calling to one another, and then the faery was gone.

It didn't exactly vanish. Pikey thought it might have, but it was more as if it had moved into a pocket, as if the stairs and the street and all of London were painted on the thinnest of veils and the faery had simply slipped behind it.

Pikey stared at the place where it had been. Then he stood quickly. Lights were coming on in the servants' hall below. He could hear voices raised in excitement, the clatter of metal. A hand began to fiddle with the lacy curtains over the window.

Time to go, Pikey thought. He vaulted over the railing and set off briskly along the side of the street.

But he had only taken a few steps when a deep, skull-shivering shudder almost tossed him from his feet. He stumbled. The shudder grew in strength, pounding and stamping louder than all the steam engines of King's Cross station, all going at once.

Pikey turned. It was the house. Fissures were racing up the windows, splitting smaller and smaller. The walls shook and swelled, as if something were straining against them from inside. And then, with an almighty shriek, every window in the house burst outward. All those bright windows, exploding into the night in sprays of gold. The roof blew into the sky. Stone rained down, glass and green metal and shreds of colored silk. Pikey yelled and raced into the street, dodging the falling debris.

An oil trolley skidded around him. Steam coaches honked, belching fumes. Men leaned out of vehicles, ready to shout at Pikey, but their words stuck in their throats. All eyes turned to Wyndhammer House.

Piercing wails were coming from within, swooping down the winter street. There was another resounding *boom*. And then the house began to fall.

CHAPTER II
Hettie in the Land of Night

SIX days and six nights Hettie and the faery butler had walked under the leafless branches of the Old Country, and still the cottage looked no closer than when they had first laid eyes on it.

Of course, Hettie didn't *know* if it had been six nights. It always felt like night in this place, or at least a gray sort of evening. The sky was always gloomy. The moon faded and grew, but it never

went away. She trudged after the wool-jacketed faery, over roots and snowdrifts, and the little stone cottage remained in the distance, unreachable. A light burned in its window. The black trees formed a small clearing around it. Sometimes Hettie thought she saw smoke rising from the chimney, but whenever she really looked, there was nothing there.

"Where are we going?" she demanded, for the hundredth time since their arrival. She made her voice hard and flat so that the faery butler wouldn't think she was frightened. He better think she could smack him if she wanted to. He better.

The faery ignored her. He walked on, coattails flapping in the wind.

Hettie glared and kicked a spray of snow after him. Sometimes she wondered if he even knew. She suspected he didn't. She suspected that behind the clockwork that encased one side of his face, behind the cogs and the green glass goggle, he was just as lost and afraid as she was. But she didn't feel sorry for him. *Stupid faery.* It was his fault she was here. His fault she hadn't jumped when her brother Bartholomew had shouted for her. She might have leaped to safety that night in Wapping, leaped back into the warehouse and England. She might have gone home.

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the red lines through the sleeves of her nightgown, feeling the imprints the faeries had put there so she could be a door. *Home.* The word made her want to cry. She pictured Mother sitting on her chair in their rooms in Old Crow Alley, head in her hands. She pictured Bartholomew, the coal scuttle, the cupboard bed. The herbs, drying above the potbellied stove. Pumpkin in her checkered dress. *Stupid faeries. Stupid butler and stupid Mr. Lickerish and stupid doorways that led into other places and didn't let you out again.*

She paused to catch her breath and noticed she had been clamping her teeth shut so hard they hurt. She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and looked up.

The cottage was still far away. The woods were very quiet. The faery butler barely made any sound at all as he walked, and when Hettie's own loud feet had stopped, the whole snowbound world seemed utterly silent.

She squinted, straining to make out the details of the cottage. There was something about it. Something not right. The light in the window did nothing to dispel the hollow, deserted look of the place. And the way the trees seemed to curl away from it … She closed her eyes, listening to her heartbeat and the whispering wind. She imagined walking forward under the trees, hurrying and spinning, gathering speed. Her back was to the cottage. Then she was facing it, and for an instant she was sure it was not a house at all, but a rusting, toothy mousetrap with a candle burning in it, winking, like a lure.

"Come *on.*" The faery butler was at her side, dragging her along. "We haven't got all of forever. Come on, I say!"

She stumbled after him. The cottage was normal again, silent and forbidding in its clearing.

"I can walk by myself," Hettie snapped, jerking away her arm. But she was careful not to stray too far from his side. They really didn't have all of forever. In fact, Hettie wondered how much longer they could go on like this. They had nothing to eat but the powdery gray mushrooms that grew in the hollows of the trees, and even those were becoming scarcer as they went. There were no streams in this wood, so all they had to drink was the snow. They melted it in their hands and licked the icy water as it ran over their wrists. It tasted of earth and made Hettie's teeth chatter, but it was better than no water at all.

Hettie crossed another snarl of black roots, stomped over another stretch of crusty snow. She was so hungry. She was used to that from Bath, but there it was different. Her mother was in Bath, washing and scrubbing and making cabbage tea, and Hettie had always known that she'd never let her and Bartholomew starve. Hettie doubted the faery butler would care much if she starved to death. He didn't give her anything. He hadn't told her to eat the mushrooms or melt the snow. She had watched him and had stuck her nose up at him, and then she had gotten so hungry she'd *had* to copy him.

But what would happen when there were no mushrooms left? What would happen when the snow all melted?

When she felt she couldn't walk another step, she stopped.

"I'm tired," she said in the sharp, nettled voice that back home would have gotten her a pat on the head from Mother and a silly face from Barthy. "Let's stop. Let's stay here for tonight. We're not getting any closer to that dumpy old house and I want to sleep."

The faery kept walking. He didn't even glance back.

She bounded after him. "You know, what if someone lives in that cottage? Have you thought about that? And what if they don't like us? What'll happen then?"

The faery kept his eyes locked straight ahead. "I suspect we'll die. Of boredom. I've heard tell there's a little girl in these woods, and she follows folk about and jabbers at them until their ears shrivel up and they go deaf."

Hettie slowed, frowning at the faery's back. She hoped he would drown in a bog.

She thought about that for a while. If he did—drown in a bog—it would be frightening. He would lie under the water, and his long white face and white hands would be all that showed out of the murk. And perhaps his green eye, too, glowing even a thousand years after he was dead. She wouldn't want to see it, but she didn't suppose she would object much if it happened. This was his fault, after all.

Finally, when even the faery butler was breathless and dragging his feet, they stopped. Hettie collapsed in a heap in the snow. The faery butler sat against a tree. The woods were dead-dark now. On her first night in the Old Country, Hettie had slept against a tree, too, thinking that the roots might be warmer than the ground, trees being alive and all. She soon learned better. The trees here weren't like English trees. They weren't rough and mossy like the oak in Scattercopper Lane. They were cold and smooth as polished stone, and she had woken with the ghastly feeling that the roots had begun to wrap around her while she slept, as if to swallow her up.

The snow was cold, but at least she was not in danger of being eaten by a tree. She curled up for the seventh time and went to sleep.

The sound of footfalls woke her.

At first she thought the faery butler must be up again, pacing, but when she peered around the tree, she saw he was lying still. His gangly legs were propped up akimbo, long white hands limp in the snow. He made only very small sounds as he slept, little wheezing breaths that formed clouds in the air.

Hettie sat bolt upright. Something was moving through the trees, quickly and stealthily toward them.

Tap-tap, snick-snick. Hard little feet on roots, then on snow, limping closer.

She remembered the faeries she had seen the day they had arrived in the Old Country, the wild, hungry ones with their round, bright eyes. They had all leaped and swarmed around her, poking and prodding until the faery butler had chased them off with a knife. For a few nights they had followed, slinking along at the edge of sight, darting around the trees and giggling, but after a while they had seemed to tire of the strangers and had vanished back into the woods.

Only the cottage remained.

Hettie crawled around the tree trunk. The faery butler was still asleep. She poked him in his ribs, hard.

He grunted. Slowly his face turned toward her, but his eye remained shut. The green-glass one was dull, tarnished lenses loose across its frame. Hettie shivered.

She looked back around the tree.

And found herself staring straight into the red-coal eyes of a gray and peeling face.

"Meshvilla getu?" it said, and placed one long finger to its lips.

Hettie made a little noise in her throat. The skin of its cheeks curled like ash from a burned-up log. Its breath was cold, colder than the air. It blew against her, and she could feel it freezing in a slick sheen on her nose. It smelled rotten, wet, like a slimy gutter.

"Meshvilla?"

She wanted to run, to scream. Panic welled in her lungs. She couldn't tell if the gray thing's voice was threatening or wheedling, but it was without doubt a dark voice, a quiet, windy voice that prickled up her arms.

"No," she squeaked, because back in Bath that had always been the right answer for changelings like her. "No, go away."

The creature pushed closer, eyeing her. Then its horrid hands were feeling over her cheeks, running through the branches that grew from her head. Bone-cold fingers came to rest on her eyes.

Hettie screamed. She screamed louder than she had ever screamed in her life, but in that vast black forest it was just a little baby's wail. It was enough to wake the faery butler, though. He sat up with a start, green clockwork eye clicking to life. It swiveled once, focused on the gray-faced faery.

The faery butler jerked himself to his feet. *"Valentu! Ismeltik relisanyel?"*

The gray face turned, its teeth bared. Hettie heard it hiss. *"Misalka,"* it said. "Englisher. Leave her. Leave her to me."

Hettie began to shake. The long, cold fingers were pressing down. An ache sprang up behind her eyes. She knew she should fight, lash out with all her might, but she could not make herself move.

The faery butler had no such troubles. A knife dropped from inside his sleeve and he swung it in a brilliant arc toward the other faery, who let out a grunt of surprise. It was all Hettie needed. She threw herself to the ground and began to crawl desperately around the base of the tree. Once on the other side, she wrapped her arms around the trunk and peered in terror at the battling faeries.

They moved back and forth across the snow, swift and silent. The faery butler was fast. Faster than rain. She had seen him fight back in London, seen him use that cruel knife on Bartholomew, but right now she was glad for his skill. He moved his long limbs with grace, whirling and slashing, liquid in the moonlight. The blade spun, streaking down over and over again toward the other faery, who barely managed to get out of its path.

"No!" it screamed, in English. "You fool and traitor, what are you—?"

The knife grazed it. Bits of gray skin flew away on the wind. Hettie saw that underneath there was only black, like new coal.

She turned her face into the tree, squeezing her eyes shut. She heard a shriek, a dull thud. Then a whispering sound and a long, long breath fading away. After that, there was nothing.

It was a long time before Hettie dared peek around the trunk. She listened to the faery butler, pacing in the snow and panting. She wondered if she should say something to him, but she didn't dare do that either. He seemed suddenly frightening and dangerous. After a while she heard him lean against the tree, and after another while, his slow, whistling breaths. Only then did she inch from her hiding place.

The faery butler was still again, his green eye dark. The snow between the roots was trampled. At the faery's feet lay what looked like a heap of ashes and old clothes. Already they sparkled with frost.

She edged over to the heap. It didn't look like a faery anymore. It didn't look like anything, really. Nothing to be afraid of. She nudged the pile with her toe. It rustled and gave way, the jerkin and boots collapsing over a delicate shell of cinders.

She wondered what sort of creature it had been. She didn't know if it had been a woman-faery or a man-faery. She had never seen a faery like it in Bath, falling to ashes.

The moon was out like every night, and it shone through the branches, glinting on something in the clothes. Hettie knelt and shuffled about in the pile. Her fingers touched warmth. She jerked back, wiping her hand violently on her sleeve. *Blood? Was it blood?* But it couldn't be. If there was frost, the blood would have gone cold by now. She leaned in again, brushing away the rest of the ashes with the hem of her nightgown. Her hand closed around the warmth. She brought it up to her eye, examining it … and found herself looking into another eye—a wet, brown eye with a black pupil.

Hettie let out a muffled shriek. She almost dropped it. But it was only a necklace. The eye was some sort of stone, set into a pendant, a pockmarked disk on a frail chain. The pendant lay heavily in her palm, the warmth seeping into her fingers.

She stared at it. She hadn't felt anything warm in so long. She ran her thumb over the stone. It looked precisely like a human eye. There was even a spark in it, a knowing little light like the sort in a real person's eye. She couldn't tell what its expression was, because there were no eyebrows or face to go with it, but she thought it looked sad somehow. Lonely.

She peered even closer.

Behind her the faery butler shifted, white hands scraping over the snow. Somewhere in the woods, branches skittered.

Hettie tucked the pendant into the neck of her dress and darted back around the tree. She went to sleep then, and the eye kept her warm the whole night long.

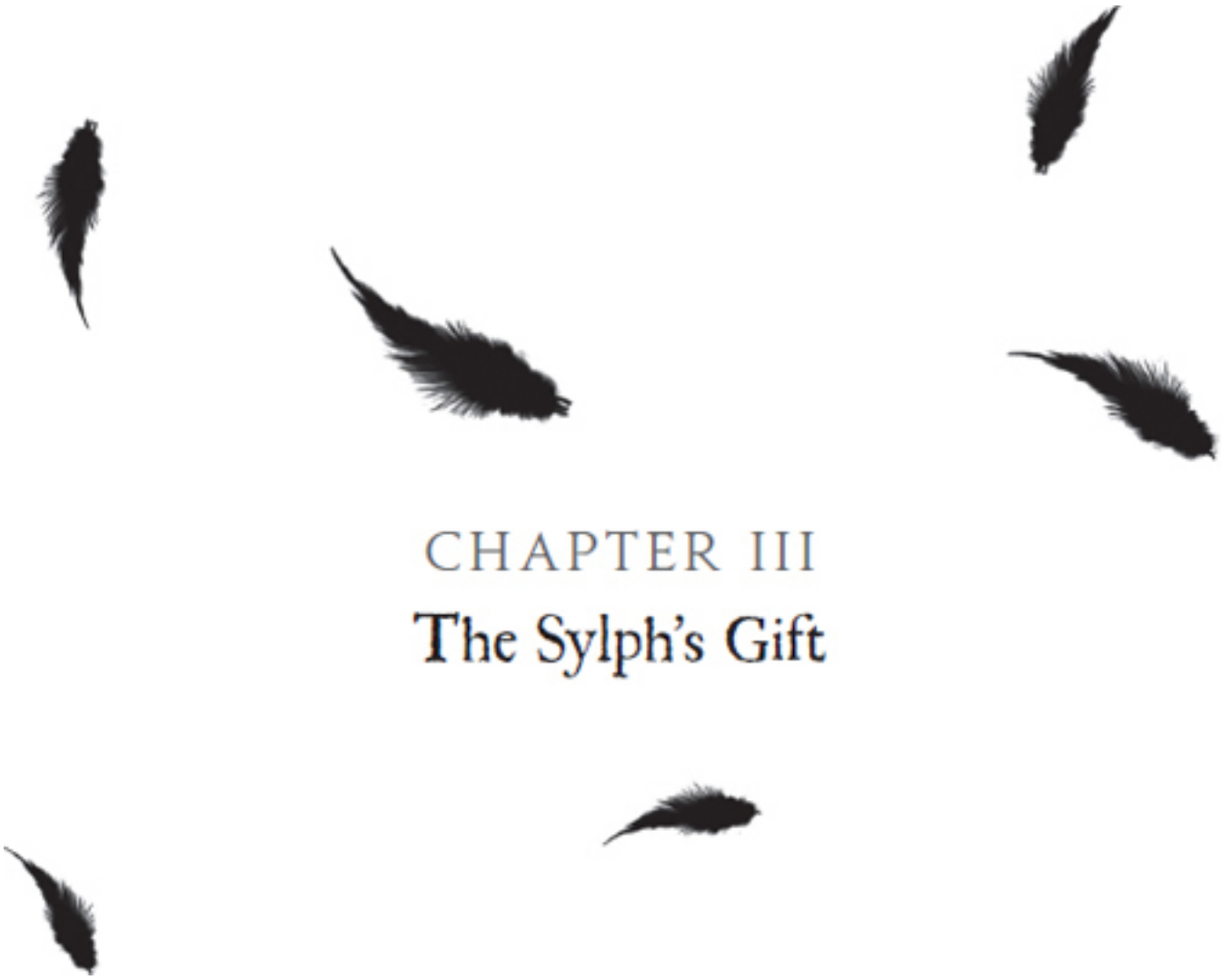
The next morning, when she woke, the forest seemed to have lightened several shades, fading, like the pictures on coffee tins when they were left too long in the sun. The clouds no longer hung so low in the sky. The trees didn't look so close together. The cottage was still a hundred strides away, but when Hettie and the faery butler took their first step toward it, it was quite distinctly only ninety-nine. A short while later they were halfway there.

No light burned in the window anymore. The door hung open on its hinges, showing blackness. The house appeared even emptier and more desolate than before.

When they were only a few steps away, Hettie glanced back over her shoulder. What she saw made her whirl all the way around and stare.

Their footprints extended back in a thin line into the woods. And then the forest floor became packed with them. Thousands upon thousands of prints, winding between the trees—her small ones, and the faery butler's long, narrow ones—going back and forth and round and round, trampling one another and never arriving anywhere.

A tangle of footprints under the very same trees.



CHAPTER III
The Sylph's Gift

GOBLINS were in the walls of Wyndhammer House—two of them, hurtling down the servants' corridor that hid behind the polished paneling of the ballroom. They streaked under fizzing oil lamps, quick as winks in the dimness. The corridor was hot, narrow, barely wide enough for the goblins to run in single file. Spools of wire lay on the floor. Iron bells lined the ceiling. It was an old precaution, meant to frighten off invading faeries, but it had been for naught. The wires had all been snipped.

The goblins were breathing hard, gasping as much from the thick air as from excitement.

"Did you see their faces?" the shorter one exclaimed, in a sort of breathless chuckle. His skin was cracked and brown like the bark of a tree, and he wore a red leather jerkin with copper bottles clinking all along the belt. The bottles were labeled such things as *Soldier Illusion, Needlewoman Illusion, Weeping Waifs Illusion. …*

The other goblin grunted. He was gaunt and pointy, the precise opposite of the short one. "Made 'em scared right enough," he said, leaping a tangle of wire. "It's what we came for. If'n we get out of here before the servants come, it'll all be a good night's work."

The short goblin chuckled again, then wheezed. "A good night's work, he says. A good night's work. I should say it was a good night's work. All those puffed-up pigeons, all pinned up with bottle caps. Won't be going off to battle so happily, will they be? Not so happily at all."

The goblins skidded around a corner and pounded down a flight of steep, worm-eaten stairs. The walls went from brass and gleaming wood to damp, mossy stone. At the bottom of the stairs was a long, dripping cellar, disappearing into blackness.

The short goblin wouldn't stop talking. "The Sly King'll be very pleased with us, don't you think? Don't you, Nettles? Most all of London's up there. All the important parts, at least. All frightened so bad the wax in their whiskers melted. Shouldn't wonder if the Sly King pays us a small fortune when we get back. Shouldn't wonder."

The goblins dashed to the end of the cellar and into a vaulted room, footsteps echoing. Wine barrels lined the walls. Somewhere high above in the house, they could hear a commotion, banging and thuds and raised voices. Then screams.

"Oh, the Sly King, the Sly King, in his towers of ash and wind," the short goblin sang under his breath. "How much d'you think he'll pay, Nettles? How much d'you—"

The goblin named Nettles spun and knocked the shorter one firmly on the head. "*Don't* count your frogs before they're hatched. Nobody knows what the Sly King'll do. Nobody sees. We'll know what we get once we're safe on our way. *Milkblood?*" His voice was suddenly loud, booming under the stone vault. "Milkblood, get us out of here!"

Slowly a small, hunched shape slid out of the shadows.

"Has all gone well?" it whispered. "Will he be pleased with us?"

Knuckly branches grew from its head instead of hair. At first it seemed to be a child, all bones and huge, hungry eyes. But as it approached, the lines became visible around its mouth, the grooves in its corpse-white skin. It was an old woman. An ancient Peculiar.

The short goblin shuddered in disgust. Even Nettles darkened, his brows pinching.

"Not if we're caught," he growled, and opened his mouth wide. One cheek was swollen, the inside pressing against the rows of teeth. A box had been mounted there, grown into the red flesh. Both his hands went for it, and he fiddled with it, coughing. A small glass bottle rolled onto his tongue and he spat it out. It was filled with a dark, luminous liquid. He sent it spinning through the air. "Drink. Fast. Get us away from here."

The Peculiar's hand shot out, snatching the bottle. Her fingers were filthy. All of her was filthy, slicked with a layer of grime. Her bare feet stuck out from under a ragged ball gown. Her arms were stamped with wriggling red lines, like tattoos.

"He'll be pleased with me. Oh, he'll be pleased with me." She sounded as if she were begging.

She uncorked the bottle and gulped it down. Black liquid dribbled over her chin. When there was nothing left, she took a deep breath, dragging in the air. Then she smashed the bottle to pieces at her feet.

Nettles glanced over his shoulder, shifting from foot to foot. They would be searching soon—servants, lords, Englishers, leadfaces. They would search the house, corridor by corridor. They would come here. He barely blinked as an inky line began to trace itself along the pale woman's form. It whispered all the way around her. Then it pulled away. The air shivered, as if being beaten by invisible wings. A door appeared, a very small one, only a foot wide on either side of her. Nettles could just glimpse a seascape behind her, black cliffs and rolling, white-capped waves and a midnight sky full of stars.

"By *stone*, you're getting worse by the day," the short goblin said. "Soon we'll be crawling into the Old Country on hands and knees."

"Shut up, Grout," said Nettles, but his scowl went even deeper.

The woman made a pitiful face, twisting her hands through the soiled lace of her gown. "Yes, watch your mouth. Watch who you're speaking to."

Grout spat. "Oh, and who's that? You're just a slave. You're worse than a slave. You're a *Peculiar*."

"I am the King's servant!" the old woman cried. "Show me the dignity!" But that only seemed to goad Grout further and he started prancing, rattling his bottles.

"You're just a sla-ave!" he sang, hopping around her. "Just a slave, just a slave, just a *rotten slave*."

The pale woman looked to Nettles, her eyes drooping and watery. "Make him stop!" she said.

"Slave, slave, slave!" Grout screeched.

The old woman's eyes became imploring. "I used to be his favorite."

That was that. Nettles's lips twisted into a sneer. "Well, you're obviously not anymore," he said, and it was as if he had slapped the old woman.

She drew back, staring. "How dare you?" she said. "How dare you *both*?" She began to shake. She was so small and old, but she was trembling with fury.

And then suddenly a door banged open at the far end of the cellar and voices echoed, loud as gunshots. Lamplight danced along the walls, coming closer.

"I'll show you," the pale woman snarled. "I'll show you what I can do." She stepped toward the goblins.

"No!" Nettles barked, but too late.

A cold wind whipped into the cellar. And suddenly the space was filled with wings. They slashed past Nettles's face. With a lurch, the door expanded.

"Enough!" he screamed over the flapping wings. He dashed forward, through the door, onto the cliffs. "Come on, both of you, or we're all dead!"

The old woman started to walk. "Say you're sorry!" she shrieked. "Say you're sorry!" With every step she took, the door grew, the feathers whirling wilder and darker. The blackness had reached the ceiling. Bits of dust and stone sifted down. The stars of the Old Country shone into the cellar, glimmering in the puddles on the floor.

"*Now*, you dimwits! D'you want the whole house coming down on our heads? Get in!"

Shouts. The glow of the lamps grew, spreading. Shadows appeared on the walls. The shadows began to run.

Even Grout looked frightened now. "I—I didn't mean nothing by it! I didn't, I'm sorry!"

But the pale woman wasn't listening. "I used to be his favorite," she said. "I am the Door to Bath. I am the greatest door of the age. He'll be pleased with me again."

She began to run, straight toward the oncoming English.

"Come back!" Nettles shouted. "Come back!"

The wings swelled, darker than night. The ceiling gave a wrenching grunt. Grout leaped onto the cliffs.

A deafening screech filled the cellar. It came from Wyndhammer House above and the hall full of heat and dancers. Feet, hundreds of them, battered the floor, pounding on and on like thunder.

Wyndhammer House began to fall.

The bells of St. Paul's were tolling thirty-five minutes past midnight, but Pikey was not even thinking about going to bed. He scratched through the ankle-deep mud, his shoulders up around his ears to keep them from freezing. He didn't count the strikes of the bells.

There was no moon in the sky. The clouds drifted, black and endless, snagging on the spires of St. Paul's, on weather vanes and gable tips. It was so dark.

Only dead folk and the fay come out on moonless nights. Dead folk and those soon to be dead. Anyone wanting to keep the blood inside his veins and the coat on his back would not be found alone in the streets after eleven o'clock. But Pikey didn't have a choice. He *needed* to find his patch.

After the fall of Wyndhammer House he had fled straight back to the square in front of St. Paul's. He had searched for hours, bent double, picking through the muddy cobbles like an old farmer seeding a field. He was on his seventh time now. The cold was sinking into his bones. His legs had

gone stiff as posts. But he couldn't find his patch. It was gone, taken away or trampled deep. When a gang of draft dodgers came, whooping and shouting into the square, Pikey ran off in a fright.

He limped toward the warren of alleys that led to Spitalfields, rubbing his hands to keep the dull ache of the cold away. He tried to stay in the shadows, darting from doorway to doorway, running whenever he heard footsteps. He didn't know what had happened at Wyndhammer House, but he would bet his boots it had something to do with faeries, and he was beginning to be afraid. What if someone had seen him there? What if they were following him, right now? He couldn't be caught like this. Not with his bad eye in full sight.

He tried to go faster. The city became a beast after dark; the streets were its throats and the graveyards were its bellies, and ever since things had started going rotten between the English and the faeries the beast had gotten hungrier. The leadfaces had appeared first, hired by Parliament to chase the faeries from the city and then gather soldiers to fight them once they'd fled. After them had come the highwaymen and gunslingers, the thugs and ruffians and faery hunters with their iron teeth and packs full of knives and nets. Since the Ban had been declared they had been popping up in London like mushrooms. They set about in the night, searching for any fay that had not already left. Sometimes they found one. Just last week Pikey had heard of a whole colony of nymphs and water sprytes discovered in the Whitechapel sewers, hiding in the green and stagnant water. Where they were now Pikey didn't know, but he did not want to join them.

He was just turning the corner at Glockner's Inn, shuffling along the edge of the gutter, when he saw the girl.

His heart stopped, just like that, as if it had frozen stiff.

She was standing about ten feet away, staring at him. But she was not in the street. Not with the cobbles under her feet and the houses and blackened chimneys of London at her back. Behind her were trees and snow. *Moonlight.*

"Wot the—" Pikey breathed. In all the time he'd had the clouded eye, he had only ever seen three things through it: a long wooden staircase with a guttering light at its top; a gray-and-peeling face, leaning close, leering with red-coal eyes; and snowy woods. There had never been a girl before. Never a child in only a nightgown, standing barefoot in the snow as if it were nothing.

The girl took a step toward him.

Pikey's brain made an odd, twisting lurch as it tried to grasp what was happening. She seemed to be above him, and he on the ground, looking up. For a second he was not sure if he was standing or falling.

He leaned against the inn's wall, head down, gasping lungsful of frigid air. When he looked up she was hurrying toward him, her nightgown flapping. She was so pale. She seemed to glow in the darkness. One of her nightgown sleeves was crumpled and pulled up her arm, and Pikey saw that the skin underneath was twined with red lines, like tattoos. He jerked back. She stooped down.

It made him sick all over again. His stomach lurched, and he shut his eyes as hard as he could. When he opened them, she was so close he could see every pore and vessel in her papery skin. She lifted one finger and brushed it over his clouded eye.

He tried to dodge her, scraping his back on the rough stones. He tried to swat her, to tell her to keep her bleeming fingers to herself, but his hand only swept the smoky air of the street.

She was just a child, he saw, even younger than he was. She had twigs for hair, and eyes so large and black they looked like drops of ink, and—

Oh no.

He knew what she was. Not a human child.

"Get out of here," he said, his voice strangled. "Shove off, before—"

Please, please don't let a leadface come now. …

The girl reached for him again. He could actually feel her thumb this time, flat against his eye. He lurched forward, fists swinging.

Her hand was still on his eye, but she was not there, not in London. She did not flinch at his onslaught, and though he moved forward several steps she was still in front of him. He gritted his teeth, shouldered toward her, tried to push her. She didn't even blink.

Then, somewhere behind her in the dark wood, Pikey saw movement, a silent rushing. The girl's face wrinkled with fear. Her other hand came up, little fingers reaching straight for his eye.

The moon vanished. So did the trees. He was alone again in a dark and empty street.

Pikey ran all the way back to the chemist's alley, ignoring the pain in his legs. He crawled into his hole and wrapped himself in his old blankets. The air was cold enough to freeze the skin off his cheeks, but he barely felt it. He lay in the dark, shivering and worrying. When he could bear to, he opened his clouded eye and looked out.

The girl wasn't there anymore. Neither were the woods. All he saw was blackness and the occasional slash of light. He put his hand over the eye again and tried to think of stoves and hams and happy, smiling faces.

Finally he slept.

A sound in the alley woke him. For an instant a deep pit opened in his stomach and he was hearing the feet again, *tap-tap, tap-tap*, limping toward him across the cobbles. He smelled the frost and the moss and the haunting burned-sugar scent of caramel apples. He saw the blood. …

He shook himself and sat up an inch, careful not to knock his head on the boards. It was still night. He couldn't have been asleep more than an hour. Keeping his blanket around his ears, he peeked out of the hole. He slept in his clothes of course, in his cap and jacket and three pairs of socks. But he had been cold before he had even woken up. Now he was freezing. All the warm, foul-smelling air slipped from under his bedding in a flicker of steam.

He scanned the alley, shivering. The cobbles were slick with ice, the air clear and frozen. He waited, straining to see what might have woken him.

Suddenly the dark lantern swung over the chemist's door.

Pikey started. Something was there. Not slow and limping, but quick, moving in bursts of speed, a ragged shadow on the wall, then closer, at the newel stone of the shop.

He jerked himself back into his hole. He opened his mouth, ready to shout for the chemist, his wife, the lock picker up the lane, everyone in Spitalfields. But then he saw it.

It was the faery. The faery from Wyndhammer House. It came swooping up to the entrance of Pikey's hole, inky feathers flowing behind it. It paused, its head snapping to and fro, sniffing. Then it focused on Pikey, and its mouth opened in a smile that was all needle teeth and sickly black tongue.

Pikey sat bolt upright, and this time he did knock his head against the ceiling.

"Boy," it said. Not a question anymore. A confirmation. It had found him.

"What is it you *want*?" Pikey hissed, shooting a look at the chemist's door. The orange light was gone from around it. That meant the fire was out. That meant it was well past four in the morning. The chemist would be waking soon.

"Go away!" Pikey flapped his hands at the creature. "*Shoo!* If someone sees you here, I'm dead. We're both dead, and it'll be your fault."

He thought of the leadfaces. The chemist with his blunderbuss, and the faery hunters with their mouths full of spikes. A horrid panic began to tighten around his lungs.

The faery didn't move. It stood in the entrance to the hole, still smiling that ghastly, uneven smile.

"Look," Pikey whispered, backing up into his blankets. "I helped you at that big house and that's all fine now, all right? No debts. You don't have to be visiting." He lowered his voice even further. "A faery hunter'll come. If someone sees you, he'll come, and he'll put you through a meat grinder. Faeries are *banned* in London. Banned!"

The faery cocked its head, still smiling. Then it opened one thin-fingered hand and held something out to Pikey.

It was pitch-black in Pikey's hole. The lantern above the shop door had long gone out, but he didn't need it. Because the faery held in its hand a gem, large as a goose's egg, and it seemed to fill the freezing space with its own cold, gray light. Tendrils of silver filigree wrapped around it. Its insides were deep purple, veined and splintered. Its outside was smooth as glass.

Pikey stared at the gem. *Oh, that's worth a dozen pounds, that gleamer is. Or a hundred.* He could buy a caramel apple with it. He could buy a *bushel* of caramel apples. He could march right up to one of those pretty painted carts with the steam curling off it and the apples behind the glass, and he could buy the whole thing, aprons and all.

Pikey reached out and ran a finger over the stone.

"Boy," the faery said again, and this time it took Pikey's hand and wrapped it around the gem. Pikey looked from stone to faery and back again. His heart was making odd little bumps against his ribs.

"It's for me?" he breathed. He could already see it all: running away, finding someplace good, someplace where there were thick warm socks and a stove and people who didn't only kick at him and shoo him away when he walked too close, and—

Coach wheels rattled in Bell Lane. Iron horseshoes hammered the cobbles. The faery's smile vanished. It looked at Pikey an instant longer, its mirror-eyes wide and limpid. Then it whirled, black wings sweeping, and disappeared down the alley.

Pikey watched it go, the gemstone heavy in his hand. The gem was very cold. But it was solid, too, reassuring like nothing he had ever held before. He wanted to laugh, holding it. He wanted to whoop and yell and dance up the alley, and tell all the few people he knew that he was richer than them and the landlord put together. He stared at the gem a second longer, cupping it in his hands and watching his breath cloud around it. Then, with a start, he realized what he was holding and clutched it to his chest. He looked sharply up the alley. He wriggled into his hole and wrapped himself in his blankets, the gem hard against his heart, like a piece of good luck.

He did not dream of apples that night, as much as he would have liked to. He dreamed of the branch-haired girl. The huge dark trees surrounded her, leaning down. Her flimsy nightgown flapped in the wind. She was walking, bent and weary, straight toward him, but she never seemed to get any closer. And she looked so sad. So sad and alone under those soaring black trees.

CHAPTER IV
The Merry Company

IN a shadowy castle at the edge of a sounding sea, a figure sat in a chair where four halls met. Water and starlight splashed through unglazed windows, but none of it touched him. The chair was high, and its back was turned so that you could not see the figure sitting in it unless you stood on tiptoe and peeked around its edge.

Nettles and Grout would not have dared peek around its edge for anything in England or the Old Country. They waited nervously, shuffling their feet, and all they saw of the figure were his long, pale fingers, toying with something glinting like glass.

"Mi Sathir?" said Nettles at last. "*Mi Sathir*, we did as you told us. The illusion in Wyndhammer House? All done, just the way you wanted it."

The pale hands fell still.

"Yessir," said Grout, trying to sound brave. He nudged Nettles in the ribs. "Very satisfactrilly, too, if I daresay. There weren't a fellow in the room what weren't afraid of his own shadow. And all them generals and lieutenants in *Her Majesty's Army* …" He spoke the words with exaggerated contempt. "All standing there gawping. Oh, they'll make a sight on the battlefield. They'll be too frightened to lift a gun against you, *Sathir.* Won't be much of a fight."

The figure in the chair laughed, a high, clear sound, like a bell. Then he spoke, his voice soft and lively. "No. It won't be, will it. They will not fight because half of them are dead, yes? You killed them when you let my little Milkblood open her door under Wyndhammer House. She's dead, too, by the way. The leadfaces found her body under the rubble." The figure laughed again, quietly, to himself.

The goblins exchanged looks, and if their bark-brown skin could go pallid, it did. Nettles tried to say something, choked.

"Sathir," he stammered. "*Sathir*, we didn't, we—"

"You were supposed to frighten the English," the figure in the chair said. "That is what I told you to do. A parlor trick to give them a taste of what was to come. I did *not* tell you to fuel the patriotic fires of the entire country by blowing up half their aristocracy. You've rather ruined everything."

He sounded as if he were smiling, as if he found it all unbearably droll.

Grout's eyes darted to Nettles. Then he began to jabber. "No, *Sathir*, oh no, we didn't fuel no fires! Leastaways, *I* didn't. It was Nettles here as did. *He* was being horrid to the old Peculiar, called her all sorts of awful names. Oh, *Sathir*, it weren't me, I swear it weren't!"

"Go away." The figure in the chair laughed, and the sound echoed down the four halls, chilly and gray. "Go away, I've heard enough."

His long fingers snapped together. At the end of one of the halls, two women materialized, richly dressed and wearing beaked masks. One had six pale arms. The other had a key protruding from her back. They glided forward without a sound.

"What shall we do with them, *Sathir*?" they said, and the voices that came from behind the masks crackled like sparks.

Another laugh. One slender white hand lifted the glass object again, spinning it idly. "I don't know. What does one do these days with people one doesn't like? Something ghastly, I hope. Something truly ghastly."

Hettie and the faery butler stayed in the cottage for what felt like a very long time. Hettie couldn't decide exactly *how* long. There were no clocks in the Old Country, or train schedules, and even if there had been, Hettie suspected they wouldn't have made any sense. Time in these woods seemed to run a different path. Every night Hettie would go to sleep, and every night she would wake up and wander through the house, and watch the sky go from black to very black, but it didn't really *feel* like days were going by. Outside in the forest, the seasons never changed. The snow was always on the ground, and no new snow ever fell. Hettie could still see their tracks whenever she looked out a lead-paned window. The labyrinth of tracks going round and round to nowhere.

Ever since the fight with the gray-faced creature, the faery butler had become very silent. The first day they had set foot in the cottage he had propped himself up against the wall just inside the door. He had barely stirred since. To begin with, Hettie had stayed with him, close to his knife and his pale sinewy arms. But as the days went by and all he did was creep out to drink snow and eat the gray mushrooms from the cracks in the trees, Hettie decided *she* ought to do something else. Bartholomew would come for her eventually, but until he did she thought it would be better to be busy. And she might as well be busy exploring the cottage. The thing that had lived here was dead, after all. It was a heap of ash a hundred steps away and perhaps already completely carried off by the wind. There was nothing to be afraid of.

So one morning, while the faery butler was outside, Hettie went to the end of the passage. It was beam-and-plaster of the sort one would find in a regular cottage. At the end were two doors and a steep wooden staircase leading up. One door was painted blue. The other was painted red.

She tried the blue door first. It opened into a little room that probably ought to have been a kitchen but was utterly bare. There was a stone fireplace, which explained the chimney, and nothing else. The floor was perfectly swept. The walls, though cracked and pitted, were whitewashed. Not even the flat Hettie had lived in back in England had been so bare. At least there had been *things* in it, bottles and bowls and Mother's wash wringer and Mother. Even just a spiderweb in a corner. But not here. Hettie hadn't seen a spider since the day she had arrived. Not even a beetle. Not even a bird in the iron gray sky.

Why would such an ugly faery have such a very neat house? Hettie wondered what it had done for a living.

She walked around the room several times, looked out the window, peered up the chimney, and satisfied that it really was a bare, empty room, went back into the passage. She tried the red door next. It opened into a low, filthy room, as black as the inside of a chimney. Rubbish lay heaped in

the corners. The light that forced its way through the grimy window barely penetrated the dark at all, and the air was close and foul. It smelled of moss and brackish water.

She took a few steps in. She could dimly make out a wooden chair in the middle of the room, in front of a wooden table. She took a few more steps, and looked back over her shoulder to make sure the door was still open. It seemed suddenly very far away. She approached the table. Tools covered it, and it dripped with what looked like seaweed. Hettie's eyes narrowed. There were hammers and pliers and odd hooked instruments, and many pieces of thick, wrinkled old paper. A gust came through the door suddenly, rustling the papers, and Hettie saw that they were scrawled with writing and pictures. Pictures of eyes, eyes from all angles, whirls of ink, the veins and nerves like gnarled branches. They seemed to watch her, frowning and glaring and weeping. Hettie shivered and pushed all the papers into a heap and fled, closing the red door tightly behind her.

She didn't go into that room after that. She would have gone into the blue room often. She asked the faery butler to come in and build a fire. He didn't. She sat down next to him in the passage and told him he might build some chairs and a table, too, but he never answered.

Hettie didn't mind. As long as the red door stayed closed, she was all right on her own. The necklace she had picked from the gray face's remains was always inside her nightgown, flat against her skin, and it reminded her that the thing that had lived here was gone and would not appear suddenly in a corner or hurry down the shadowy staircase. Sometimes, when the cottage felt particularly lonely and the faery butler wouldn't say a word, or even look at her, she took to clutching the pendant to keep from being frightened.

The metal was always cold to the touch, but the stone … It was always warm.

Hettie found the light when she went to the top of the stairs. At least, she felt fairly certain it was the light she had seen. She had first spotted it in London, in the warehouse. The light had been twinkling in the cottage's front window then, only a few feet above the ground. Now it was at the top of a long, winding stair, in a window that looked down onto the forest from what seemed like a hundred feet up. The light had come from a candle and something had blown it out.

The candle was yellow and greasy looking. Reddish veins ran just under its surface. Hettie wondered what would happen if she lit it again. She thought of having the candle downstairs to keep the night away.

She reached out to touch it.

And then she heard a sound. *Bells.* Bells, ringing in the woods.

Her eyes went wide as teacups. "Someone's coming," she whispered. And in a wink she was running for the stairs, down, down into the cottage.

"Someone's coming!" she shouted, leaping the last five steps. The faery butler was still propped against the wall. He didn't move at the sound of her voice. She barreled past him.

Barthy. It has to be Barthy. He's had weeks and weeks to find me. …

The bells were nearer now, almost in the clearing. She heard the sound of hooves, crunching through snow, and voices, and high and windy laughter. She slid back the bolt and opened the door a crack.

Not Bartholomew's voice.

She peeked out.

Not Bartholomew.

A company of riders was coming through the trees toward the cottage. They looked all black-and-white at first—black riders on white steeds, or white riders on black steeds—and with the dark branches interlacing behind them and the snow beneath their hooves, it was as if they were a living extension of the forest itself, like stitchery in a pillowcase.

Hettie hadn't seen much during her short life in Old Crow Alley, but she knew how horses were supposed to look, and it was not like that. These steeds had four legs and long necks, *almost* like

horses, but their bones were more delicate and their faces sharper, and their manes and tails seemed to be made of water or seaweed or molten glass.

Pale, pointy-faced people sat on their backs. Some were tall and lean like the faery butler. Some were small like Mr. Lickerish, the wicked Sidhe gentleman who had turned her into a door back in London.

The men wore black waistcoats and black overcoats just like English gentlemen did. The ladies wore gowns of dewdrops, or dresses made of open, flutter-paged books. One, a wizened old woman, was wrapped in so many swaths of black that she looked nearly swallowed up. Her head was bent and her hands were knotted tightly through the mane of her steed.

At the head of the company sat a small faery lady with a strange smile on her face. It was not a happy smile, but it was very wide. The lady wore a dress of fish bones, sewn together with what looked like spiderwebs, and as the riders came into the clearing and halted to dismount, Hettie was a little bit afraid all the threads in the lady's dress would snap and the whole costume would unravel at her feet.

Nothing like that happened.

The faery lady did not dismount. Instead, her steed shrank beneath her, bones grinding and re-jointing, until in its place stood a tall, mischievous-looking youth with sharply slanted eyes. He held the lady in his arms and then placed her daintily on the snow. The other steeds did the same.

The lady in the fish-bone dress looked about briefly, chin tilted to a haughty angle. Then she strode toward the cottage.

Hettie spun away from the door. "They're coming here," she whispered, hurrying back to the faery butler. "Get your knife! Get your knife, do something, they're *coming*!"

Still the butler did not move. For a moment Hettie thought he was pondering something, but then she saw his face. His skin was stretched and ashen. Little muscles twitched in his cheek, and his green eye was wide and dull. He wasn't going to move, Hettie realized, and her heart dropped. He was frightened out of his wits.

She glanced back at the door. Through the crack, she could see the hem of the faery lady's dress sweeping forward across the frozen earth. She gave the butler one last angry shake. Then she slipped down the corridor and up the stairs.

She heard the faery lady knock on the open door, three sharp raps. "Belusite Number 14!" the faery called. "We come to collect." The hinges protested.

Hettie ran, up, up toward the window and the candle. Below, feet tramped. She could hear voices everywhere suddenly, under the wooden treads, floating up the stairs after her. Doors slammed. After a few seconds the voices turned to angry shouts.

They wanted the person who lived here. And the person was not here.

At last Hettie came to the high window and scrambled up onto the sill. She looked down through the black branches at the scene below.

The faery lady had come out of the cottage and was swirling here and there, as if she were at a garden party and not in the middle of a vast, dead forest. Three gentleman-faeries were standing behind her, all in a line, not moving, and as far as Hettie could tell, not speaking. The old, old woman in her shawls and wraps was hunched against the roots of a tree.

And the faery butler …? Two horse-people had him by the jacket and were dragging him out of the cottage, his long legs trailing in the snow.

Hettie gasped. *Why didn't you run?* she thought desperately. *You could have hidden! You could have hidden* somewhere*!*

The horse-people threw him to the ground. One held him in the snow with a bony, sharp-toed foot, and the other kicked him, right in the stomach. Hettie heard the scream, saw blood spatter the whiteness.

She didn't wait to see more. Whirling, she ran from the window and down the stairs. The treads flew by beneath her feet. She didn't like the faery butler. Usually she hated him. But he was the only

thing she had left of England and home, and she wasn't going to let him die. She reached the beam-and-plaster passageway. She crashed through the front door.

"Stop!" she shouted, leaping out into the clearing. "Stop, leave him be!"

Twelve pairs of black eyes turned to stare at her. She froze. The faery butler lifted his head. A flicker of green, almost like surprise, passed behind his clockwork eye. Then the lady in the fish-bone dress strode up to Hettie and looked her in the face. She was only a bit taller than Hettie, and she resembled a pompous little child.

"English." It was a statement, spoken with a faint, precise accent that no English person would ever use.

"Yes," Hettie said, her boldness fading a little. Her hands went to her nightgown, and she looked down, suddenly shy.

"Are you an accomplice to this faery?"

"I—No. But I don't want you to hurt him. What are you going to do with him?"

"This faery"—the lady said, waving a hand in the butler's direction—"has been found guilty of murdering one of His Majesty the Sly King's most valued servants. He will be put to death, of course. Drowned in a bog, I think."

"Oh," breathed Hettie.

"And you?"

"Yes, miss."

"Who *are* you?" The lady punctuated the *are* with one sharply raised eyebrow.

"I'm not anybody."

"Yes, I can see that, but what sort of nobody? You are the strangest-looking faery I've ever seen. And no hair, or I'd think you simply a particularly ugly human."

Hettie knew better than to tell her she was a changeling. The daughter of a human mother and a faery father. Something in-between. English people didn't like changelings, but she had always been told faeries liked them even less.

"Oh, I *am* a faery, miss. Only … See, I come from England and I've lived there my whole life, and—well, I s'pose I picked up a bit of their looks."

Twelve pairs of eyes met across her head. There was a long pause in which the frosty air seemed to fill up and become heavy with all sorts of unspoken words and laughter.

Then the lady in the fish-bone dress let out a high, musical laugh that set everyone else to laughing, too, and the horse-people laughed, and the old woman laughed, and even the silver bells seem to tinkle with their own merry notes.

"She is so exquisitely funny," the faery lady said.

"Ex-*quisitely*," one of the horse-people mimicked, and that set them all to laughing again.

The fish-bone lady's mouth twitched. Her eyes went a little blacker, and her brows seemed to become even sharper. Then she laughed again, too, louder than anyone.

"John?" she said, turning to a horse-person with white hair and white skin that glittered as if with frost. "John, let her ride upon you. We shall take her with us."

"What?" The creature named John looked perfectly horrified. "That *thing*? On *me*?"

"Oh, no, I—" Panic gripped Hettie. It wrapped around her throat, made her breath escape in little gasps. "Please, I mustn't—"

They were all staring at her, all those black eyes, sparks of amusement in their depths, sparks of malice. She couldn't go with them. She couldn't be taken away from these woods, or the cottage. This was where the door had opened and where she had arrived, and this was where Bartholomew would find her when he came for her. *But what will he do if I'm not here?*

The thought made her sick.

"Please, miss," she said, taking a step toward the faery lady. "Please don't make me leave."

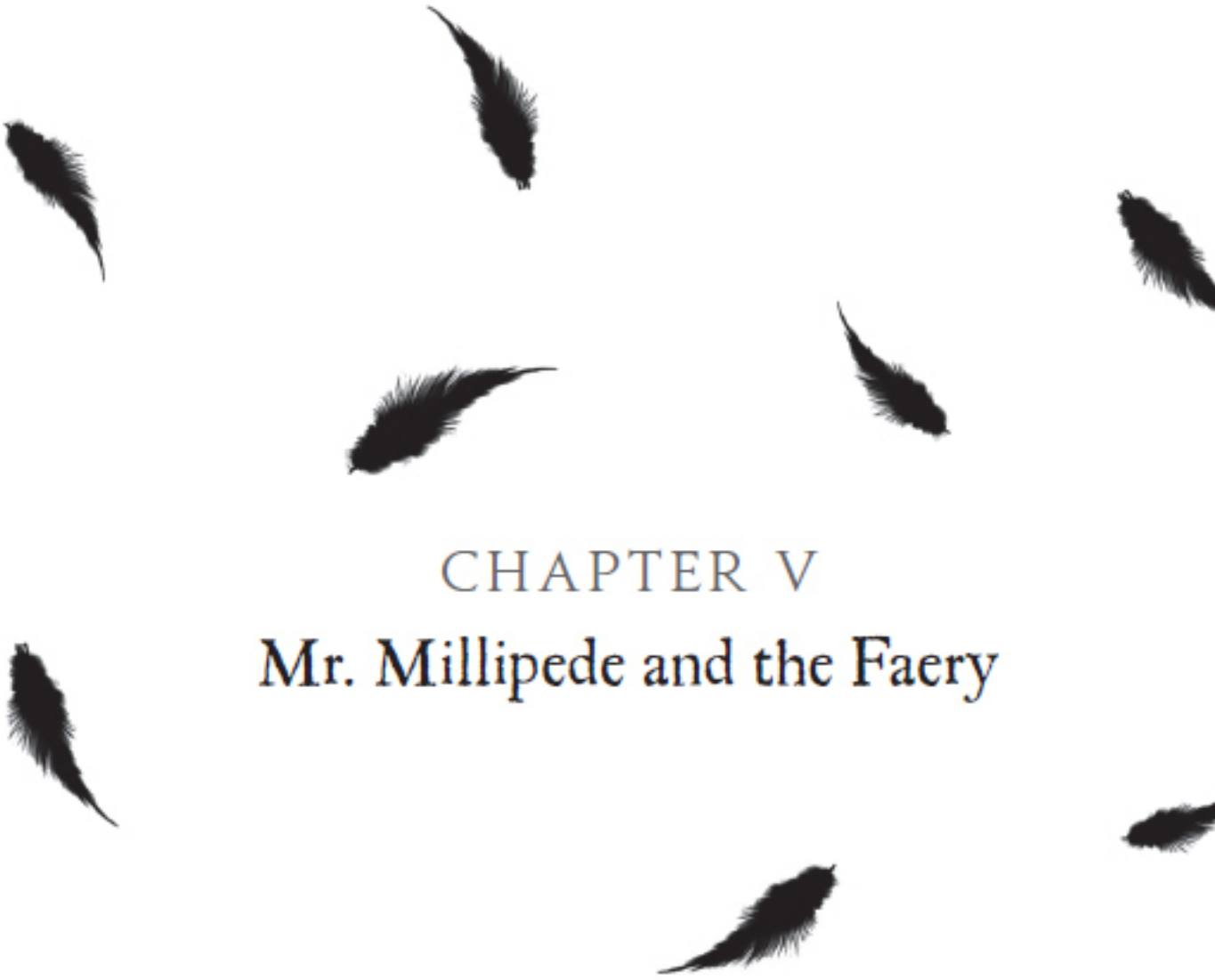
The faery lady did not even look at her. “You must. You will be my Whatnot. Or I will snip out your tongue. Don’t be tiresome.”

Hettie closed her mouth with a plop.

“Now,” said the faery lady, whirling away. “Vizalia? Send a dispatch to the King. One of his Belusites has been killed. The wrongdoer has been dealt with. Nothing was found. You needn’t say anything of my little bauble.”

And the next thing Hettie knew, she was on the back of a white horse with hair like wisps of snowy wind. Everything was confusion, stomping hooves and whispering cloaks. Her steed began to gallop, away into the woods. *The faery butler.* Hettie looked frantically at the other riders. *Where is he? He isn’t here!* With a little shiver, she glanced back over her shoulder.

Three figures had stayed behind in front of the cottage. The faery butler was on the ground, kneeling, his chin on his chest. Two horse-people stood over him, their faces strangely thin and hungry. And just before the company went over a rise and the cottage was lost from view, Hettie saw the horse-people begin to change again and their teeth grow long as needles and their eyes glow red as they looked down on the faery butler. Then Hettie was over the hill, riding away into the shadows and the snow.



CHAPTER V

Mr. Millipede and the Faery

PIKEY was able to avoid the chemist and the chemist’s wife and almost everyone else for two long, cold nights. His luck ran out on the third, as he was returning from Fleet Street. He was

slinking down the alley, past the shop door, soft as a shadow, and then the nails in his boots clanked against the stones and the sound echoed all the way up to the chimneys.

He winced.

"Oy! Whozat? Pikey?"

Orange light flickered around the door.

"Yeh." Pikey's voice was rough as bark. He dashed toward the hole under the shop, his hand tight around the gem in his pocket. "Yeh, it's me, Jem."

The bolt scraped. Pikey pulled in his feet and lay still.

"Oy!" the chemist said again, when he found the alley empty. He had a deep voice, but it was sloppy and wet now, and Pikey knew Jeremiah Jackinpots had been in his bottles again. Jem wasn't a bad man. Pikey liked him more than most folks. But he was slow-brained and weak, and gin did nothing to improve his wits.

"So quick into yer mouse hole, boy?" Pikey heard Jem take a few heavy steps toward the hole. Then a hacking spit. "No words for me? No talk? What 'ave the oil of earthworm prices gone to? Has the war started yet?"

Pikey remained perfectly still. "I don't know," he lied. "I didn't hear. Weren't no one around to tell me nuthin'." He *had* heard. The town crier had been on Fleet Street as always, reading the news and the prices to the illiterates that flocked around him. Pikey had been there, too, poking his head between the dirty waistcoats. He went every day to Fleet Street to listen and make sure the herb-and-root sellers didn't cheat Jem when they came to the shop. It was why Jem let him stay in the hole, why the aid ladies hadn't come by in their black bonnets and hoop skirts and taken Pikey to the workhouse. He hoped Jem would forgive him, just this once. *Just one more day.*

"I'm dreadful tired, Jem," Pikey called. "I'll tell it all in the morning, promise my boots, I will."

Jem grunted. There was the clink of a bottle and the smack of lips. Then grumbling as he staggered back toward the shop. The door banged. The alley became silent again.

Pushing himself as far into the hole as he could, Pikey wound himself into a ball, all arms and legs and rank-smelling wool. He was pressing his luck. He knew he was. Tonight Jeremiah Jackinpots was too sullen and too drunk, but he wouldn't be in the morning. In the morning Pikey had to be gone.

Sell the gemstone, get an eye patch, leave the city. I'll go southward. Away from the war. Away from leadfaces and cities and bleemin' faeries.

He had been repeating it like a spell the last three days, hour after hour until he fell asleep. Though it *had* changed a bit since that first morning. Then it had been more like, *Buy a caramel apple. Then buy lemonade and ginger-rocks, and six—no,* seven *meat pies. Then go back to the caramel apples and buy the whole lot.*

He would still get that caramel apple. But he was more practical now.

He shivered and stuffed his blanket down the front of his jacket to keep out the chill. His hole was set inside the foundations of the shop, flat on the dirt. Four feet long. Half that high. Above him, through the floorboards, he could hear Jem and his wife snapping at each other. He had to pull in his knees and bend his neck to fit, and the winter could come right in at the door.

But it didn't matter. He was leaving. Things would only get worse in London once the fighting started in the North. And anyway he didn't *want* to stay here, in a hole in Spitalfields. Someday he wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere green perhaps, with plums and pies and the voices he had dreamed about, the loud, happy voices.

Pikey fell asleep, and dreamed of them all over again.

The next morning, he made himself a badly sagging patch out of one of his socks and tied it over his bad eye. Then, pushing the gem deep into the one pocket that still had all its stitches, he wriggled out of his hole.

The foot with only two socks instead of three noticed its diminished state almost at once. It went numb, then unfeeling. Pikey felt sure it did so out of spite. But better a frozen foot than holding a hand over his eye all day like a simpleton, and so he ignored it and hurried up the alley toward Bell Lane.

The chemist's door creaked as he passed it. The bolt scraped, then the hinges. Pikey knew who it was before she even stepped into the alley. Not Jeremiah, this time. Worse.

"What you got there, laddy?" Missus Jackinpots could coo like a dove to her little one, but to everyone else she was worse than a crow.

"Nuthin'." Pikey's hand tightened around the gem in his pocket. He took a few more hurried steps, his frozen foot jarring against the ground.

"Jem says he's seen not hide nor hair of you for almost three days. Where's the news? What are the prices at? You know the deal, and you oughta keep it. Prices and news six times a week, else there's no point keeping *you*."

Pikey turned a little, his glance skipping over Missus Jackinpots for the briefest instant. She was a small, buxom woman with a stained, flowered handkerchief tied over hair like stringy black joint oil. There were smudges under her eyes. Pikey looked at the ground.

Missus Jackinpots didn't. She eyed him steadily, hands on hips. "Jem's too soft, he is. I'd have 'ad you out from under our shop the moment we found you, and off to the workhouse, make no mistake."

You didn't find me, Pikey thought. Anger rushed up suddenly, hot behind his ribs. *I lived here before you did. The old chemist* let *me stay here. It's my* right. He gritted his teeth.

"What's the matter? Goblin ate your tongue? Look at me, boy!"

"Old Marty said I could stay here," Pikey said. His voice was dull and sullen. "And so did Jem." He focused on a sickly thread of grass pressing up between two cobbles. He didn't want to look at the hard, flat face staring at him, the smudges under her eyes.

"You call him *Mister* Jackinpots," she hissed, taking a step toward him. "Or sir. It's his place now. Old Marty's dead. He's dead, and don't you forget it."

Blood, dripping between the stones.

Pikey stumbled toward Bell Lane, but Missus Jackinpots lunged forward, blocking his escape.

"Come on, ma'am, lemme go," he said. "I ain't got nothing."

Missus Jackinpots was looking at his pocket. "Oh, you've got something. What're you hiding, boy? Bloody *roses*, if you're keeping things from me, I swear I'll—" Suddenly she froze, and such a rage came over her face that Pikey felt his own anger evaporate. He took a step back, startled.

"That eye patch," she said slowly. "Let me see that. That ain't yours. It's my Jem's sock, it is. On your filthy *face*! I knitted that! My own hands knitted that and you've been *pinching*—"

Pikey shoved past her and pelted into Bell Lane, ignoring her screams as they bounced up the houses behind him. He didn't stop running until he was halfway to Ludgate. Then he stooped down under the window of a tailor's shop and felt in his pocket for the gem. His hand closed around it and he let out a sigh.

Away from the war. Away from leadfaces and faeries. Away from horrid people like Missus Jackinpots.

He was going to do it. He was going to get out of here and he was never coming back.

The walk from Spitalfields to anywhere respectable was a long one. He trudged for miles, out of the slums and along the slow, greenish river toward the wide streets and straight-backed houses of St. James's. One hand he kept under his arm, trying to stop his fingers from cracking off. The other stayed in his pocket, clamped tight around the gem.

Every time he thought of it there he felt a little thrill, a pleasure at its weight. It would turn into so many shillings and sovereigns for him. A whole stack of them. He would sell it and fill his pockets, and then he would leave London behind him once and for all.

An hour later he was in the part of the city that folks called Mayfair, on a big, noisy street full of shops and carriages. He walked along, darting around bicycles and the frozen brooms of the mechanical street sweepers. The horses and gas trolleys meant that the air was somewhat less icy than in the more old-fashioned parts of the city, but it was still cold enough to make Pikey's teeth chatter. A squadron of soldiers marched by, real grown-up ones in splendid red-and-blue uniforms. They stomped in formation, and a whistle at their head played a jaunty tune. Pikey watched them as they passed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.