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Opening extract from

Fire Spell

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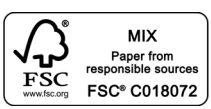
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And others came . . . Desires and Adorations,

Wingèd Persuasions, and veiled Destinies,

Splendours and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations

Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies;

And Sorrow, with her family of Sighs,

And Pleasure, blind with tears, led by the gleam

Of her own dying smile instead of eyes,

Came in slow pomp; – the moving pomp might seem

Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais,* canto 13)

Prologue

Fire

The witch burned. She tossed in a sea of blankets, dizzy with heat. It was fever, not fire, that tormented her, fever and the nightmares that came with it.

She opened her eyes, breathing hard. There was no smell of smoke, no crackle of flame. Her doom had not yet come.

A brass monkey with a hideous face hung on a cord above her head. She curled her fingers around the monkey's body and jerked. The bed curtains opened. Outside them, the candles in the wall brackets burned steadily. Cassandra was glad of that. Now that she had reached the end of her life, she was a child again and feared the dark.

She heaved herself out of bed and stumbled to the washstand. She splashed herself with cold water, drenching the front of her nightdress. Her fingers went to the filigree locket and the gold chain around her neck. She wished she could take the locket off and cool it in the water.

But the clasp of the chain was tiny and her fingers were

swollen. Cassandra heaved a great sigh and sank on to the stool beside her dressing table.

It was the stone within the locket that burned her. She kept it caged inside the gold filigree: a fire opal the size of a crow's egg, blood red, veined with ribbons of changing colour. For seventy years she had cherished it. Now it fed upon her, burning her and sapping her strength.

In former times, it was called the phoenix-stone –

Cassandra's head jerked up. The room was empty, but the words were as clear as if the speaker stood at her elbow. It was the voice of Gaspare Grisini, her fellow magician.

You have no idea how dangerous it is. You possess it now, but in time it will possess you. It will burn you alive. In former times, it was called the phoenix-stone –

Cassandra dragged her fingers through her matted hair. Grisini had been in her dream; that was why she seemed to hear his voice. She had dreamed of a dark city, a labyrinth of steep houses half drowned in fog: London, she supposed. Grisini had been there, smiling at her through the gloom.

The strange thing was that he had not been alone. There were two – or were there three? – shadowy figures by his side. Small shadows . . . children? Why should there be children? Once again, she seemed to hear Grisini speak: *Like the phoenix-bird, it erupts in flames. I have studied its lore and found out its secret history. Its fire will consume you unless –*

Unless. He had spoken the warning nearly forty years ago, in Venice, but Cassandra recalled every word of their quarrel. She had spun round to face him, shouting, 'If the stone is accursed, why did you try to steal it from me? Gran Dio, but I will punish you –'

She had punished him. He had studied the Black Arts, and she had not, but she was at the height of her power and her

magic was stronger than his. By the time she was through with him, the floors of the palazzo were sullied with his blood. Late though the hour was, she had rung for the servants and ordered them to remove all traces of it, but to no avail; Grisini's blood seeped into the pale marble and left a stain. She had sold the palazzo the following month.

Its fire will consume you unless –

Cassandra sighed. She wished now that she had let him finish his sentence. In her mind's eye, she seemed to see him as he looked then. Thirty-seven years ago – dear God, but he had been young! She had been forty-six and he had been twenty-three, maddeningly handsome, with his keen hawk's eyes and teasing smile . . . Her frown deepened. Grisini had not been young in her dream. He had looked every day of sixty: a ruined, seedy scarecrow of a man.

What if her dream was a true seeing? What if she had seen him as he was and where he was, in London? If her dream was to be trusted, she might send for him, and he would have no choice but to come to her. She could force him to tell her what he knew about the phoenix-stone. At the thought of seeing him again, her heartbeat quickened and she felt a tug in her belly that she recognised as hunger – not hunger for food but for something far more shameful and dangerous: love.

She recoiled at the thought. Love Grisini? She hated him. She had cursed him, and she was glad of it. Rather than ask for his help, she would burn alive. Better to let the fire opal consume her –

Unless she could destroy it.

A wild hope seized her. Perhaps tonight she might do what she had never succeeded in doing before. Her fingers shook as she pried open the filigree cage and set the jewel on the dressing table.

She looked around for an object with which to smash the

stone. Her eyes fastened on the silver hand mirror. It was heavy and the back was adorned with raised flowers: small, tight rosettes and pointed leaves. The tips of the rosebuds looked sharp enough to puncture the stone.

With one movement, she swept the dressing table clear of everything but the fire opal. A thin glass bottle broke, filling the air with the scent of roses. Cassandra snatched a handkerchief out of the drawer. She crumpled it, making a nest for the opal, so that it could not roll away. The gem seemed to dilate and pulse, like a beating heart.

The witch got to her feet. She set her left hand flat on the dressing table, bracing herself to strike the blow. With her right hand she grabbed the mirror, raising it high over her head.

Her muscles locked. For almost a minute, she stood frozen. Once the stone was destroyed, she would be powerless. She was old, and soon she would die. She knew she would die alone.

But not by fire. And she would die without asking for help from Grisini. That one humiliation she would be spared.

Cassandra clenched her teeth. Her arm cut through the air, slamming the mirror downwards.

But the muscles of her arm betrayed her. The silver mirror changed direction. It struck Cassandra's left hand with such violence that the mirror glass cracked. Four bones shattered and the back of her hand began to ooze blood from a dozen cuts.

Cassandra dropped the mirror. The pain was so great she could not breathe. She curled inwards, rocking, unable to utter a sound.

The fire opal flashed like the eye of a phoenix.

Part One

Fog

LONDON
Autumn 1860

Chapter One

Clara

Clara came awake in an instant. She sat up in bed, tingling with the knowledge that it was her birthday. On this very day, the puppet master Grisini would perform at her birthday party. If all went well, she would have tea with Grisini's children.

The room was dim. The curtains were drawn tight against the November chill. Clara gazed at them intently. If it was very foggy, Professor Grisini might not come. Everything would be ruined; her twelfth birthday would be like all the others, with a trip to Kensal Green in the morning and presents in the afternoon. Clara loved presents, but she dreaded the ceremony of opening them. It was ill-bred to show too much excitement, but if she wasn't grateful enough, she ran the risk of hurting her mother's feelings. Clara thrust the thought aside. This year she would do everything exactly right.

She flung back the coverlet and tiptoed across the nursery floor, noiseless as a thief. If anyone came in, she would be scolded for walking barefoot.

She reached the window and slipped her hand between the curtains. There were two sets between herself and the outside world: claret-coloured velvet on top, frilled muslin next to the glass. The muslin was sooty from the London fogs; though the windows fit tightly, the fog always found its way in. Clara leaned forward and peered through the peephole she had made. Her face lit up.

The view that greeted her was dismal enough. The trees in the square had shed their leaves, and the city was dark with grime. But the sky was white, not grey; there was even a wisp of blue sky between two clouds. It was a rare clear day. Professor Grisini would surely come.

Clara let the curtains fall back together and turned her back to the window. She padded past her sisters' dollhouse and her brother's rocking horse, which she was not supposed to touch. Close to the toy cupboard hung her birthday dress. It was covered with an old sheet so that it would stay clean, but she could see the shape of it, with its puffed sleeves and billowing skirt. It was a beautiful dress but childish; next year, when she was thirteen, she would wear longer skirts and a whalebone corset. Clara wasn't looking forward to that. Her present clothes were constrictive enough.

Footsteps were coming up the back stairs. It was Agnes, the housemaid. In an instant Clara was back in bed. She hoisted the blankets to her shoulder and shut her eyes.

The door opened. Agnes set a pitcher of hot water on the washstand and went to stir the fire. 'Wake up, Miss Clara.'

Clara sat up, blinking. She could not have said why she felt she needed to hide the fact that she was awake. Her secrecy was chronic and instinctive. She put her hand over her mouth as if to stifle a yawn. 'Good morning, Agnes.'

'Good morning, miss.'

'Agnes, I'm twelve.' The words came out in a joyful rush. 'I'm twelve years old today.'

Agnes knew it. No one in the Wintermute household had been allowed to forget that November the sixth was Clara's birthday. The servants had cleaned the house from top to bottom and decorated the dining room with white ribbons and evergreen boughs. Seventeen children had been invited to Clara's party, and their mothers would come with them. There was to be a lavish tea: sandwiches and ices and a four-layer cake.

'Many happy returns, miss.' Agnes twitched the corner of the counterpane. 'Now, get up. None of this lying about in bed.'

Clara had no intention of lying about. She wanted the day to begin. She drew back the covers as Agnes knelt by the bed and held out her slippers. Clara slid her feet into them and lifted her arms so that Agnes could put on her dressing gown. As the maid started to make the bed, Clara went to the washstand. She washed her face carefully, brushed her teeth and checked her fingernails to make sure they hadn't turned grimy overnight. 'Is it fine today, Agnes?'

Agnes left the bed to draw the curtains. 'Fine enough to have your party. Your Mr What's-his-name'll come with his puppets.'

'Grisini,' Clara said obligingly. 'The Phenomenal Professor Grisini and His Venetian *Fantoccini*.' She had memorised his handbill three weeks ago, the day she first saw him.

Agnes made a noise like *mffmp*. She had once been nursery maid to the Wintermute children, and she felt it gave her certain privileges – among them, the right to make noises when she felt Clara was being spoiled.

'I don't see what you want with foreign puppets, Miss Clara. English Punch and Judy is good enough for most children.'

Clara looked meek, but she objected. 'The *fantoccini* are different from Punch and Judy, Agnes. You'll see when Professor Grisini gives the show. They work with strings – only you don't see the strings. They're like fairies.'

Agnes gave the curtains a final twitch. Clara held out her comb, appealing for help. Clara's hair was as wild as Clara was sedate, and only Agnes could subdue it. Armed with skill and patience, Agnes could turn Clara's thatch of dark curls into twenty ringlets, ten on either side of a centre parting.

Agnes accepted the comb and went to work. Clara took her prayer book from the dressing table and opened to the section for morning prayers. She locked her knees and held her head still as Agnes dragged at the knots in her hair. Clara had once heard her mother's maid say, "There's many a grown-up lady that doesn't hold still like Miss Clara. Miss Clara's as steady as a rock."

Clara liked that. Most of the time when she eavesdropped, she heard about how spoiled she was. She supposed it was true. She made extra work for the servants, and her parents cosseted her, worrying endlessly about her health. Her father inspected the nursery weekly, using his pocket handkerchief to check for draughts, and the nursery fire was kept burning even in summer. Clara's birthday frock had been made by the finest dressmaker in London, and she knew her presents would be many and expensive.

What she hadn't expected was that her father would allow Professor Grisini to perform at the party. Since the moment Clara first saw the puppet caravan – and the children who worked the puppets – she had thought of little else. She had come upon the puppet stage in Hyde Park. It was a tedious afternoon, grey and chill, with patches of heavy fog. Her governess, Miss Cameron, had stopped to talk to a nursemaid from the other side of the

square. The two women gossiped for half an hour. Their conversation was so dull that Clara gave up trying to follow it. She waited stoically, trying not to fidget. Then she glimpsed the caravan, shining scarlet though the fog.

She asked Miss Cameron if she could watch the puppet show and gained permission. She hurried down to the miniature stage, only to realise that she was watching the show from the wrong side.

It was even more interesting than watching from the front. She was seeing what no one was meant to see. She noted the two racks set up behind the stage, each hung with puppets, and the black curtain that covered the puppet workers' heads. At intervals, the puppet master would reach back without looking and nip a new puppet off the rack. The master's apprentice was so small that he stood on a wooden box. He was skinny and his trousers were ragged, but he was as deft as his master. Even from the wrong side of the stage, Clara could sense how skilful he was.

The third member of the party was a girl in her early teens. She was the only member of the company whose face Clara could see, and it was an interesting face: pale, pointed and wistful. The girl had long red hair and carried herself with the grace of a dancer. She provided the music for the show, switching back and forth between a flute, a tambourine and a small violin. From time to time she glided up to the backdrop and handled one of the manikins. The three puppet workers worked together seamlessly. Clara was fascinated. She wondered what it would be like to spend her days in the streets and parks of London, instead of learning lessons in a schoolroom.

She watched until the show came to an end. The audience applauded. The red-haired girl picked up a brightly painted box and went to collect the coins from the crowd. Clara fumbled in her

purse until she found a half crown. She wished it was a sovereign. The red-haired girl accepted it with a little curtsy. She met Clara's eyes and smiled.

It was an extraordinarily friendly smile. Clara was struck to the heart. Improbable as it might seem, this girl – who was graceful and clever and older than she – liked her. Of the seventeen children who were coming to her birthday party, there was not one, Clara felt, who really liked her. They were the children of her parents' friends, who lived in Chester Square. Clara thought them dull, and she suspected that they pitied her and thought her queer. But the red-haired girl liked her. Of that Clara was sure.

She had scarcely had time to tell the girl how much she had enjoyed the show before the puppet master sidled over. He bowed before Clara, a florid showman's bow: knee bent, wrists cocked, toe flexed. A dirty handbill materialised between his fingertips. He stayed frozen in his jester's position until Clara ventured forward and took the handbill. There was something unnerving about the fixed grin on his face. Clara felt that in drawing near to him, she was being a little bit brave.

That night, she gave the handbill to her father and begged to have the puppets at her birthday party.

Dr Wintermute refused. Professor Grisini was a foreigner; foreigners were invariably dirty and often ill. Clara pleaded. Dr Wintermute said that the whole thing was out of the question. Clara, accepting defeat, did not argue, but she wept. That settled matters. Spoiled or not, Clara did not cry often. When she did, she generally got her way.

Thinking about the children coming made Clara forget to be as steady as a rock. She twitched, shifting her weight to the balls of her feet.

'Hold still, Miss Clara!' snapped Agnes.

Clara stiffened. She lowered her lashes and raised the corners of her mouth, so that she didn't look sullen. Neither Agnes nor her governess had any patience with sulking. Clara had, in fact, practised her present expression in the mirror. It was a neutral expression, a coy mask of a smile. Over the years, it had served her well.

'Your mother wants you dressed and ready to go by nine o'clock,' Agnes said after completing another ringlet. 'She said you should wear the blue cashmere and your sealskins. It'll be cold at Kensal Green.'

'Thank you, Agnes,' said Clara. The expression on her face was sweetly placid. No one must ever guess how much she hated going to Kensal Green.

'Cook's been busy all morning, decorating your birthday cake' – Agnes brushed another ringlet around her finger – 'and your mother had so many presents to wrap, she asked the maids to help her. I don't know what a little girl can want with so many presents.'

Clara hesitated. 'Agnes, do you know–?'

The words hung fire. Agnes gave one shoulder a shove. 'Out with it.'

'If she bought presents for the Others?'

Agnes took in her breath and let it out again. 'If you mean your brothers and sisters, yes, she did, Miss Clara, and there's no point in you staring down at the floor and pouting.'

'I'm not pouting,' Clara protested softly. She lifted her chin and resumed her doll-like smile. Her cheeks burned. She didn't want the Others to be part of her birthday. She was ashamed, but she couldn't help herself.

'You know how your mother is, Miss Clara,' Agnes said

firmly. 'It's like that going to Kensal Green. It don't change, and it won't change.'

Clara lowered her eyes to the prayer book. For a moment or two, she was silent, apparently reading. Then she raised her head. 'Agnes,' she said tremulously, 'there's something I want you to help me with. Something I want dreadfully.'

Agnes exchanged the comb for the brush. 'I'm sure I don't know what it could be, miss. I don't suppose Princess Victoria had as many frocks as you have, nor such toys, neither.'

Clara's stomach tightened. Once Agnes got started on how lucky she was, she was likely to go on a long time. There wasn't time to waste. She spun around. 'Please,' she begged, 'please –'

Agnes dropped the brush. Clara dived for it and held it out to her.

'What is it?' demanded Agnes.

'I want to give tea to the children,' Clara answered. 'Professor Grisini's children. You see, Agnes, that's why I wanted the puppet show so much – because of the children. There's a girl and a boy. The boy works the *fantoccini*, and the girl can play the flute and the fiddle. She was ever so nice.' She caught hold of Agnes's hands. 'I want to talk to them – just them – with no one else about; no grown-ups. They're so clever – they must know so many things I don't. Think of it, Agnes. They earn their own living!'

Agnes's mouth twisted. At Clara's age, Agnes had been a scullery maid. She saw no romance in earning a living. 'You know that's wrong, miss. Your mother wouldn't like it a bit. And what would your little friends think, having to take tea with common children like those Greaseenies?'

Clara shook her head. 'Oh, I don't mean that! Of course it wouldn't do to have them with the other children! But we could

have tea before the party, if you'll help. You see, Professor Grisini will be here to set up the stage at two, and the guests won't come till three. I thought perhaps – if the professor was given a hot drink in the kitchen, I could have a tray for the children.' She tugged at Agnes's hands. 'Please, Agnes! Just toast – and tea – and jam. And then, I've made them both a little parcel to take home – oranges and sweets. Please, Agnes!'

Agnes jerked her hands out of Clara's. 'I don't know what you'll take a fancy for next, Miss Clara. Taking tea with dirty foreigners?'

Clara sidestepped the question. 'They're not dirty,' she pleaded, which wasn't true; the girl had looked clean, but the man and the boy were very dirty. 'And they're not foreigners. The professor is, but the girl is as English as I am, and she talks like a lady. *Please,* Agnes.'

'Miss Cameron won't allow it,' Agnes said. She expected this argument to clinch the matter – there was no chance that Clara's governess would approve of Clara's mingling with common children – but Clara was ready for her.

'Mamma gave Miss Cameron a half day,' she answered. 'She's going to visit her sister in Islington and won't be back until three.'

Agnes tried another tack. 'You know how your father feels about people tracking dirt into the nursery –'

Clara interrupted her. 'They needn't come up to the nursery. We could take tea in the drawing room, where they set up the stage. I could watch them set up. Oh, please, Agnes!'

Agnes snorted. 'You're stagestruck, that's what you are.'

Clara switched tactics. 'If you're too busy,' she said daringly, 'I could carry the tea tray myself. I could put my pinafore over my birthday frock and creep down the back staircase and ask Cook –'

'You, miss!' exclaimed Agnes. 'Carrying trays! I'd like to see you, going up them steep steps with your hands full! Why, you'd drop the tray – and ruin your dress – and tumble downstairs!'

'I shouldn't mind if I did,' Clara said recklessly. 'I shouldn't – not one bit – if I could have tea with the children. Oh, Agnes, please help me!' She caught the maidservant's hands in hers. 'It's the thing I want most in all the world! And it's my birthday!'

Agnes pulled her hands free.

'Now, that's enough, Miss Clara. I suppose I can manage a tray around quarter after two – only it'll be for you, mind you, not for them. If you choose to share your tea with 'em, that's none of my business – and you're not to say more than you have to, if anybody should ask.' She put her hands on Clara's shoulders, barring Clara's embrace. 'I said, that's enough. You know your mother wouldn't like you hugging and kissing the servants.'

Clara didn't answer. Her ears had caught the sound of footsteps on the front stairs. The nursery door opened. 'Clara, dearest!'

Clara went to her mother. Mrs Wintermute was tall, shapely and dressed in black. Her face was youthful, though her light-brown hair was turning white. Clara embraced her tenderly, careful not to crush her mother's dress.

'Clara, dear, aren't you dressed yet?'

'No, Mamma. It's my fault, Mamma. Agnes told me to hold still so she could arrange my hair, but I wouldn't.'

Mrs Wintermute smiled forgivingly. 'I expect you're excited.' A faint crease appeared on her brow. 'You're rather flushed, dear.' She placed the backs of her fingers against Clara's cheek and then her forehead.

'I'm very well, Mamma.'

'It's the excitement, madam,' added Agnes.

Mrs Wintermute relaxed. 'Of course. Clara, dear, your papa was called out this morning, but he hopes to be home in time for the party. I hope you're not disappointed. We planned to give you your special present at breakfast.'

'I don't mind waiting, Mamma,' Clara said earnestly.

Mrs Wintermute held up her right hand. In it was a velvet box. 'Papa said we needn't wait – that I might give it to you now. We thought you might want to wear it to the party.'

Clara raised her eyes to her mother's face, received a nod of permission and took the box into her hands. It was round and soft, a desirable object in its own right. Carefully she slid her fingernails under the lid and opened it. 'Oh!'

Inside was a locket: a golden oval with a band of deep-blue enamel, a circle of seed pearls and a sapphire in the centre. Clara gasped with wonder. She tilted the locket and watched the sapphire flash; it was a deep, mysterious blue, almost black.

Mrs Wintermute smiled with her eyes full of tears. 'Open it.'