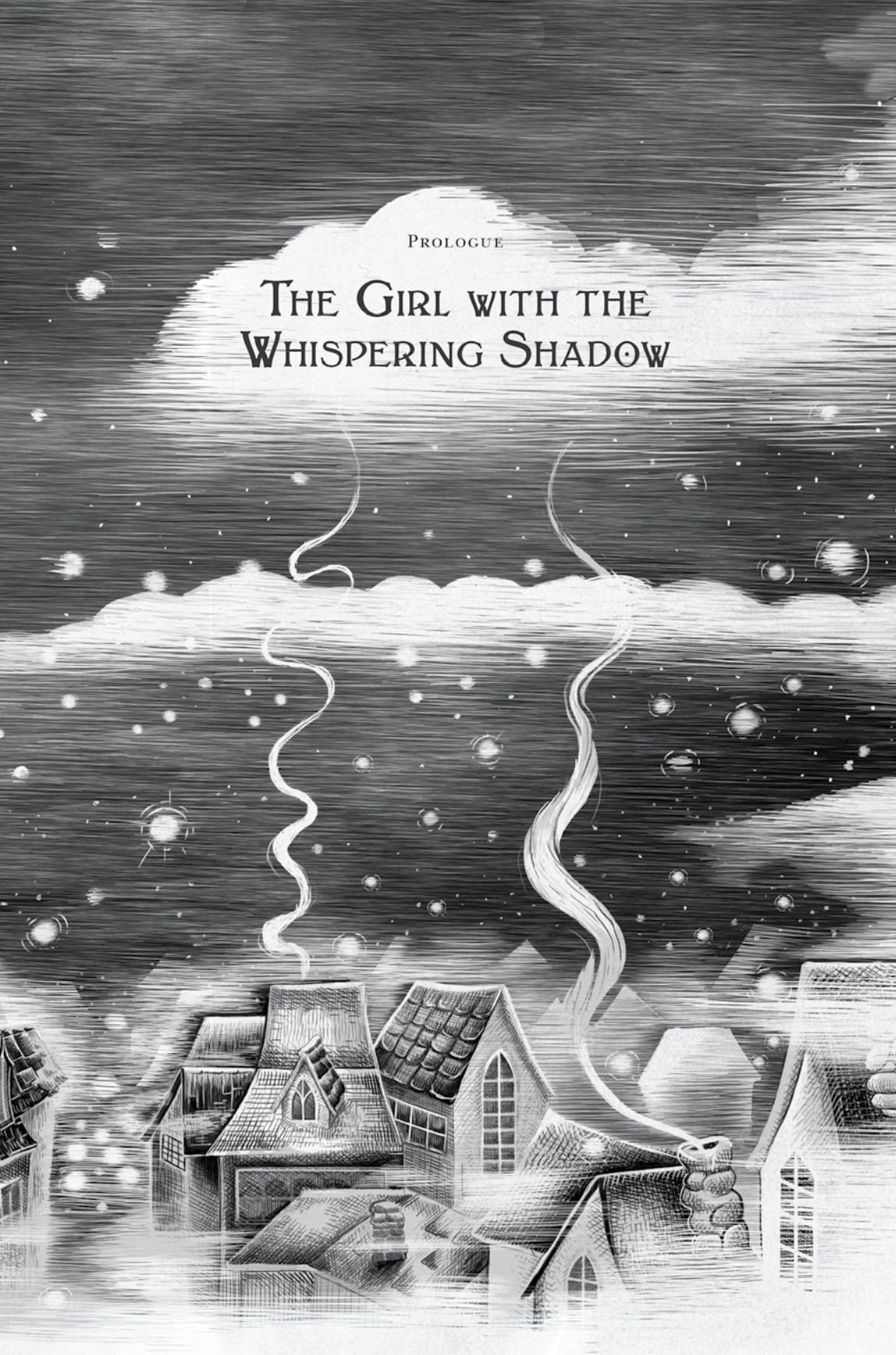


PROLOGUE

THE GIRL WITH THE WHISPERING SHADOW



THE air in Belzebuthe was so thick with magic that she felt as if she had to force her limbs through the atmosphere, especially when she had been gone a while. It always took a few days to adjust and the feeling never failed to surprise her, to say nothing of the ever-present chill in the air. The cloud cover was as thick as ever, further disguising and protecting the Town, but it seemed to be colder than usual for early summer. All hairies were at rest, and the only light was from the low-hung stars particular to Belzebuthe. Even those did nothing to lighten the girl's confusion. This town had been kept hidden by more than a dozen spells, including one forbidding the mention of its name, the name a key to finding the Town itself, for generations.

As she made her way down the familiar cobbled streets, she felt as if her shadow were pulling her back, stretching behind her. She shivered: Her elaborate feathered gown was drenched and clung to her legs. As she reached the door of the home where she grew up, she realized that she didn't have her trunk or anything else with her. No key. She lifted her hand and heard a warm and welcoming voice inside before she could knock.

"They're home! And so early! I'll get the door!"

The door was thrown open and Easel Leelangraf enveloped his daughter in his loving arms. Only when he peered around her did his enthusiasm fade to a questioning look.

"Where's your brother?" he asked, his thick brow rising. "Is he all right? I thought you'd be on the morning cabby together."

Easel ushered in his only daughter, back from her first year at the Halls of Ivy, into the warm foyer lit by aging hairies in rusty sconces. She dropped the hood of her periwinkle cape, and her long, black, curly hair tumbled down over her deep-caramel skin.

"We heard about the Ball," Easel said. "How frightening! I'm just so glad, so-so-so glad, you're safe. And your brother?"

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“He’s fine. Everyone’s fine, only a few broken chandeliers and some waterlogged furniture. Nothing a little magic can’t fix.” The girl made light of the disaster on purpose—still no one knew what to make of the reclusive Dark Queen’s appearance at the Masquerade Ball. No one seemed to remember exactly what had happened, only that a boat had defied logic and become lodged in the ballroom. Her thoughts went to her dream of a ship crashing through a wall. Her dreams had become more and more strange as of late. Forcing herself back in the moment, in her father’s warm embrace, she said, “He’ll be arriving tomorrow. He stayed back to sort out a few things with his friends—probably his little club thing. He told me to tell you not to worry. I just—I just wanted to be home.”

“Oh, how we’ve missed—ooof!” Easel had nuzzled his daughter under his chin then jerked his head back quickly. “What is that, that awful smell? A mix of sour fruit and pond water?” Only one thing in his experience as a matteler smelled like that. “I know that everyone has been in her presence... I just didn’t think that the smell of the Dark Queen would be so strong on you.”

Her mother interrupted, “Never mind your father, dear. He just got home from a moon-long exploit. Still got his head, rather his nose, on the job. And he’s off on another the day after next!”

“Do you have to go already?” she asked sadly, talking to her father while accepting her mother’s warm embrace. She had always been a daddy’s girl and didn’t want to think about having only a few moments with him before he went off again. He was a lead investigative matteler, a scrivenist appointed to keep order in the world of scrivenry.

“Duty calls, darling. Let’s make the most of the time we have—malts at the Melted Milkshake tomorrow afternoon? Your favorite.”

Her mother smiled softly. “And for now, Easel, how about

some tea around the fire? And let's get you, my dear daughter, into something dry."

Sybel's well-used quill danced, letting loose a flurry of sparkles, and the girl's dress dried as she spun in a circle. Her dress went from soggily clinging to her legs back to its fluffy, twirling silhouette of gray tulle and feathers.

"That's better," Sybel remarked.

"You wouldn't happen to have any of the cranberry cake left over, darling Sybel, would you?"

"Despite your best efforts, there is cake left," Sybel smiled wryly.

As her mother left for the kitchen, the girl and Easel settled in the living room. The cramped space was warm and cozy, decorated in greens and dark yellows. The bay window let in only starlight, but the warmth of the fire was enticing. Dried herbs hung from the woodwork of the ceiling, giving off a familiar scent of sage and rosemary and who knows what else. Easel created his own herb blends to aid his keen sense of smell, all for his job. He could sniff out a spell or potion like a wolf did dinner. His uniform—a midnight purple, almost black—and matching military cap with the matteler insignia—was in the closet as he made himself comfortable in his robe and slippers.

Easel drew up a footstool opposite the aging velvet couch where his daughter sat and asked in a low voice, "Now what happened at the Ball, my dear? I want to hear it from you."

She faltered.

"Something is troubling you."

"It's just—you ask how the party was, but the truth is I didn't attend." It was true; she had every intention of going but, once dressed, was too tired to go.

He looked at her quizzically. "And where did you go, if not the Ball?"

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“To sleep. I was... I was tired.”

“And your clothes? All wet because...?”

The girl just shook her head in confusion.

“Hmmm...”

“Not that I’ve been getting very restful sleep these days—I’ve been meaning to send a mendlott and ask if you have any remedies for a sound sleep. Dormdaze tea doesn’t seem to cut it anymore.”

The sound of teacups rattled from inside the kitchen.

“That is strange. Concerning. I’ll look into it, love. Don’t tell your mother; she’ll worry.” He sighed and pressed his hand to his daughter’s forehead, checking for fever. Nothing. “Just—just take care of yourself.”

She was barely making it through her strange days lately, on sleep that felt like it depleted rather than restored her. *I don’t have enough energy to take care of myself.*

Sybel joined them and the three sat at the hearth. The girl held her mug of blue tansy tea, letting it warm her hands. Peering into the mug, she saw the indigo liquid bubbling softly.

“How did you find the party?” her mother asked, a much lighter conversation than her father’s. “Did you dance with any boy in particular?”

“Mother,” she ducked the question bashfully.

Her father gazed intently out the window, his mind wandering like thick drifts of fog.

“What? When I was your age, I met your father—”

The girl made for a quick change of subject. “Catch anything on your latest hunt, Father?” Her father’s stories of daring chases after evil always thrilled her.

“Tell her, Easel. Tell her what you were tracking!”

“What was it?” the girl asked, her dark-brown eyes widening.

“Shades.”

“What’s a shade?” she curled in her chair, knowing that if her father’s team of mattelers was dealing with it, it had to be terrible.

“A shade of life. Not quite human. No blood. Composed of water. The terrible thing is that we don’t even really know what they are exactly or where they’ve come from.” He took a long breath in. “They’ve been appearing and then vanishing in Belzebuthe, like they’re being hurled from the heavens. Then they dissolve, probably due to one of the Town’s elimination spells. But the very idea that they can get through the barriers even for a moment is quite disturbing.”

The fire dimmed, the room darkened, and an eerie chill drifted through the room, even with the window closed.

“They seem to be related to the strange disturbances in the cloud cover. How it’s been colder overall this year, even now with the summer moons. The snows have not gone away.” This made the girl shiver in her seat.

Sybel interrupted in a hushed tone, “There’s been talk of the Dark Queen manipulating matter in the clouds above Belzebuthe and trying to find the Town itself. Oh my stars, what if the time in which we scrivenists may practice magic freely is over?”

“Now, Sybel, don’t scare the poor girl. The Dark Queen still has no access to our town. I’d smell it from a mile away if she did.” But his wife caught him flaring his nostrils at their daughter, breathing her odor in again.

“Well, the agreement to not broach the Halls uninvited has been broken, hasn’t it? Who knows what’s next?”

“We are working on the mystery of the shades. We’ll know what they are and what they mean soon enough.” He motioned to her cup. “A sip of that tea—careful, very hot—should help you sleep, darling.”

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By the time she made it up to her room, she was too tired to change and fell into a deep sleep at the foot of her tiny, fluffy bed.

Deep and long, but far from restful.

She awoke with a start, a shrill, urgent voice ringing in her head. The words were incomprehensible, but the voice had the feeling of being too close, like it was eavesdropping on her inner world. Her mind was full of dark dream images; she needed to sketch them before the images slipped away. Still in her ball gown that had never been to a ball as far as she knew, the girl grabbed her favorite pen and proof pad and hastily drew upon the pages.

The sketches had a frantic feel about them; if she hadn't watched her own hand do the work, she wouldn't have thought she could have conjured such images. She had no recollection of ever seeing such things: a windowless corridor with a blocky spiral staircase, liquid-filled glass enclosures framed with brass, a candle held aloft casting terrifying shadows.

She shivered. Why couldn't she have nice dreams and draw pictures of hairies twinkling or pretty stones? *Ugh*. She looked to the timepiece on her wall and something on her narrow windowsill caught her eye.

A quill. *A quill?* It rested ever so peacefully.

The quill was jet black and had the texture and sheen of fine satin. It was obviously not hers, as she had only finished her first school year. She examined it without picking it up. Not her father's—too long. Not her mother's—hers was scarlet. She was sure she'd never seen this quill before.