

• AN EXCERPT •

THE BRASS QUEEN



Elizabeth
Chatsworth



“Rollicking fun and sharp as a brass tack, this book is everything steampunk should be.”

— *Cat Rambo, Nebula Award winner*

“An intriguing alternate world, filled with sharply amusing dialog and lively characters. VERDICT: A delightful gaslamp fantasy that will please readers of Gail Carriger and Kate Locke.”

— *Library Journal*

“I loved *The Brass Queen*: hilarious, with a very tongue-in-cheek dry wit and delightful imagery. One of those books that you don’t want to put down because they’re just so much fun.”

— *Genevieve Cogman, author of the Invisible Library series*

“Razor-sharp wit and immaculate worldbuilding make this debut one to savor . . . a genre blockbuster.”

— *Leanna Renee Hieber, award-winning and bestselling author of The Spectral City*

“With a satisfying bite, this steampunk venture includes an insightful twist on the British Empire . . . Best of all, Constance stays center stage: a feisty, lovable heroine who is capable of rescuing herself, thank you very much.”

— *Foreword Reviews*

“At times wondrous, at times romantic, and very often gut-bustingly funny. Elizabeth Chatsworth . . . will be one of your new favorites!”

— *David Farland, New York Times bestselling author of The Runelords series*

“Elizabeth Chatsworth infuses her writing with humor, charm, and adventure . . . I can’t wait to read more.”

— *Rebecca Moesta, New York Times bestselling author and award-winning coauthor of the Star Wars: Young Jedi Knights series*

“A fun, frothy blend of fantasy and romance . . . Fans of humorous fantasy and headstrong heroines will be delighted.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“Simply a joy to read!”

— *James A. Owen, bestselling author of Here, There Be Dragons*

“Lush, exciting, and endlessly inventive, *The Brass Queen* is a grand adventure of manners and espionage—perfect for readers who like a little magic in their retro science escapades.”

— *Cherie Priest, award-winning author of Boneshaker*

“You’ll find yourself cheering for this heroic cowboy and his unexpected love for a jinxed red-head who is dead set on saving the world (as well as finding her place in it) all before teatime, of course . . . Stocked with whimsical gadgets, sky pirates, weird science, and mustachioed villains this race-against-the-clock adventure scratches the steampunk itch and leaves you wondering what will emerge from the aether next.”

— *A. L. Davroe, author of The Tricksters series*

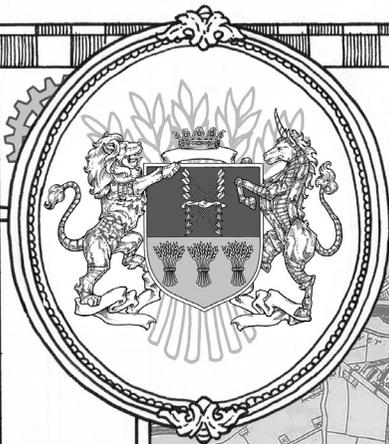
The
BRASS
QUEEN



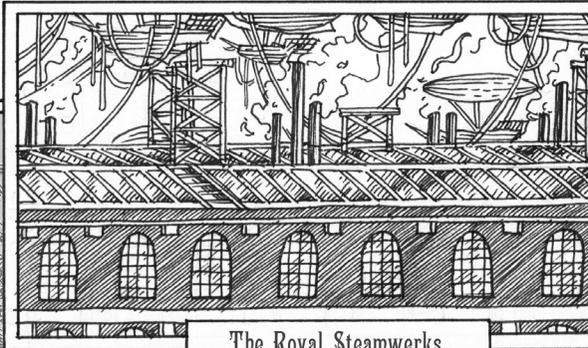
Elizabeth Chatsworth



CamCat
Books



SHEFFIELD



The Royal Steamworks



The Town Hall and City Center



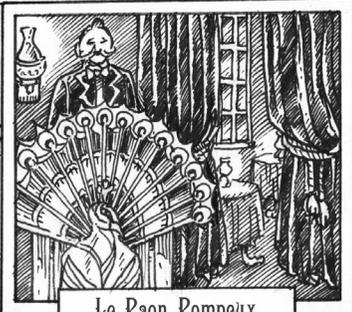
The Wiggle Room



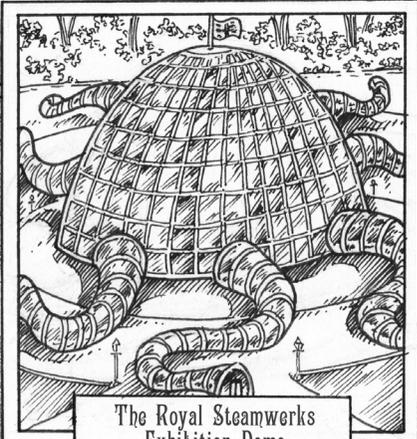
The Phyrro Club



Haltwhistle Hall

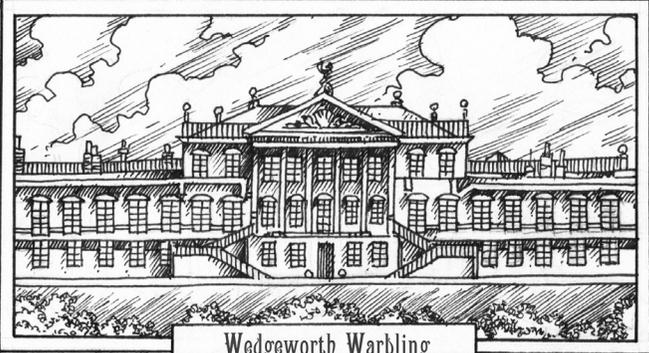


Le Paon Pompeux



The Royal Steamworks
Exhibition Dome

and the Royal Steamworks



Wedgeworth Warbling



Vulcan's Folly

PINDER'S
PRINT EMPORIUM
PINGSTONE STREET
SHEFFIELD
ENGLAND





Chapter 1:

A Night to Remember

Tuesday, May 18, 1897:

The Royal Steamworks Exhibition Dome, Sheffield, England

THE GRASS WAS ALWAYS GREENER in another dimension. Miss Constance Haltwhistle imagined that in a parallel world, she was actually enjoying her coming-out ball. A taller, less red-haired version of herself was waltzing in the arms of a dashing beau. Young noblemen, resplendent in white tie, were lining up for the opportunity to propose holy matrimony.

And no one had tried to kill her in weeks.

Her score for the evening stood at marriage proposals, none; embarrassing incidents, two dozen and counting. Dropping an ivory fan into the punch bowl had raised eyebrows. Wearing steel-toed ankle boots instead of dance slippers had drawn more gasps than she'd anticipated. And mistaking a cigar in an earl's pocket for a concealed weapon, then demanding he disarm himself before she damned well did it for him . . .

Alas, sometimes a cigar was just a cigar.

She strode through the crowd, recalled her need for an instant husband, and added a coquettish swing to her bustled behind. She glanced over her shoulder as laughter erupted from her aristocratic guests. Her unmarked dance card lay upon the parquet floor.

She'd missed her bustle pocket. Again.

Cheeks aflame, she scooped up the errant card and scurried into a forest of willowy debutantes. Each swan-necked beauty held the attention of at least three bachelors, none of whom spared Constance a second look as she made her way toward the center stage.

Mentally rehearsing her—hopefully crowd-pleasing—speech, she skirted the edge of the dance floor. Shoulders hunched, she snuck glances at her guests as they clustered in their favorite cliques. They posed and preened, blissfully unaware of the multiverse, ever secure in the knowledge there was safety in numbers.

Thanks to her portal-tripping mad scientist of a father, she, alone, knew better.

Perhaps in one of those alternate worlds, she was already dead? A pale corpse, slumped beside the dance floor, crimson life staining the parquetry as the orchestra played on. Or she was dying, cradled in the arms of a love-struck Adonis who dabbed her brow as she murmured, “No, really I’m fine. Do try the *vol-au-vents*.”

Oh, how he’ll miss me.

The dance floor teemed with euphoric couples gazing into one another’s eyes. Drunk on champagne and true love, they eddied like rose petals in a whirlpool. Constance stomped by, thoroughly regretting her choice of footwear. The floor trembled beneath her boots as three dozen formally attired couples waltzed to “The Blue Danube” with the precision of an infantry brigade. Heirloom tiaras glittered in the gaslight under the vaulted glass dome—a crystal bauble beneath infinite darkness, built by humans who reached for the heavens but fell short. Without the dazzling lure of the exhibition hall, she’d have

been a party of one, but the gallery's artistic display of military hardware had proven to be an irresistible draw for her two hundred guests.

Constance held her breath as she passed through clouds of cigar smoke tinged with lavender perfume. Her guests' fine silk gowns and waistcoats blurred into a pastiche of jewel tones and monochrome blandness as she weaved between the nobles. Her reclusive life on the family estate had not prepared her to sail through the starched sea of British gentry with the poise displayed by every other attendee. It was all down to her speech to prove herself worthy of their respect. *This is it, my one moment to shine. I'll make them all love me or die trying. Nothing and nobody will stop me from—*

Her face slammed into a muscular chest. She staggered back, clutching at her nose as tears welled, and blinked up between her fingers. A tall, dark, almost-handsome stranger gazed down at her. His eyebrows were raised over ridiculously blue eyes, bright as sapphires against shockingly tanned skin. Neatly trimmed sideburns and a square, clean-shaven jaw framed a nose that appeared to have involved itself in numerous brawls. Such a nose must assuredly belong to a ruffian.

Heart pounding, she brought up her fists, ready to punch the potential assassin.

The ruffian grinned.

Strike or smile? A decade of Mistress Ying's kung fu instruction kicked in. She swayed her weight onto her rear boot, leaving her front ready to smash his kneecap with as much violence as the situation required.

The trespasser raised his hands in surrender.

If he was an assassin, he was certainly taking his sweet time about it. And there didn't seem to be any telltale lines of hidden weapons beneath his clothing. But what odd clothing it was. The lone stranger was apparently unaware that a gentleman never wore a hat indoors.

Particularly not a black Stetson that seemed to have survived one too many cattle drives. His all-black ensemble would have suited a gun-fighter on the cover of one of Papa's dime novels, save for his leather gloves and lack of a revolver. Did he think this was a costume party?

"Are you all right, miss?" His voice resonated with a suspiciously American accent, deep and slow, conjuring images of deserts, mountains, and rolling plains bestrewn with bison. "It's a crowded spot for that level of speed. You got somewhere better to be?"

She narrowed her eyes at the inadequately armed gunslinger. "From your dialect, I'd venture you're from Texas, or Nevada, or Colorado, or Nebraska, or—"

"Do I get a say in this?"

"Wyoming?"

He shook his head. "That's five states down, forty to go. You some kinda language expert?"

"I read." Papa's thirty-two volume *Legends of the West* contained many thrilling tales, but none depicted uninvited cowboys invading white tie events in Yorkshire.

"If you must know, I was raised in Kansas. My mother was an army nurse, my father is a retired US Cavalry officer, and my siblings—"

"I don't need your life story, thank you very much." For heaven's sake, Kansas would have been her very next guess. Why couldn't he have waited for her to get there?

She scanned the crowd for quirked brows and dropped jaws at the cowboy's presence. Fortunately, the tiara-and-white-tie set was pointedly ignoring the stranger, as the British do when foreignness exceeds their comfort level to an unspeakable degree.

Or perhaps, they were pointedly ignoring *her*?

Constance dropped her fists and adopted a nonchalant pose. He didn't appear dangerous. For now, it was best not to make a fuss and further disrupt the party.

The American warily lowered his hands and bowed. “Justice Franklin Trusdale, at your service. You can call me J. F.”

Her hasty reading of *Babett’s Modern Manners* on her way to the party suggested otherwise. “I’ll do no such thing until we are introduced by a mutual acquaintance, or by letter. Have I ever written you a letter?”

“I don’t think so, Miss . . . ?”

“If I tell you who I am, that would be an introduction, which I cannot do without—”

“A letter. Got it.” A generous grin spread across his rugged face.

Her heart drummed a little faster than was seemly for a well-bred lady. But she didn’t have time to consort with cowboys. She leaned toward Trusdale. “Look, do you mind moving out of my way? I’m heading to the stage.”

“Aha! That explains it. You’re the entertainment.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your crazy getup, the chain mail corset.” He nodded toward her neckline.

Sure enough, the velvet ribbon she had stitched along the top of her gown had slipped to reveal her chain mail undergarment, her last defense against the knives of her family’s enemies. She groaned. “Oh, for goodness’ sake.”

Constance grabbed the metal links and tried to wriggle them back down inside her gown, keeping her eyes on Trusdale. The cowboy’s grin widened, but he raised his gaze to the ceiling. He studied the stars twinkling through the glass dome as Constance swore softly at the unruly links. “This place must be somethin’ to see from up there.”

“The locals call it the crystal octopus, presumably because of the display halls that splay out from the dome. The glow of the lamps can be seen from over a mile away.” A violent shimmy sent the offending links below the velvet ribbon.

Trusdale glanced down at her with a smile. “Consider me impressed.”

She tugged the ribbon high, wincing as stitches snapped.

He chuckled. “Interesting armor. Boy, I sure do love carnival acts. So, tell me, are you a fire-eater, or do you have a partner who flings knives at you? Is there a rotating wheel involved?”

She gasped at the very thought of such theatrics. Admittedly, the chain mail had stretched her green silk ball gown to the bursting point over her prominent bosom and cruelly cinched waist. The tautness added a burlesque flair to what should have been the most stylish ensemble of her life. But a fire-eater? *Heavens, no.*

“Sir, I’m no entertainer. As you’re clearly not an invited guest, I suggest that you leave before the authorities are called.”

“No need for that, now. I’m here with—”

“You’ll find the exit to your left, sir.” She fixed him with her sternest stare. The one that made her stable boys stop playing cards and saddle her horse in record time.

He blinked and stepped out of her way.

She swept by the interloper. She’d have words with the security staff about letting in undesirables. It would be unusual for a professional assassin to don a Stetson. In her experience, hired killers tended to be rather dull in their choices of hat, seeking to blend in rather than stand out.

She’s certainly had her fill of assassins over the last few weeks. It was such bad timing that one of her oldest arms clients had decided to terminate her contract, and her with it. As if planning a ball wasn’t demanding enough, she’d had to deal with inept thugs at every turn. All this, for nothing but a simple shipping mix-up? Admittedly, King Oscar II of Sweden had lost a war when his globally prohibited armaments had been accidentally sent to Scunthorpe instead of Stockholm, but still. Such administrative misunderstandings could surely be resolved without bloodshed. *Why can’t everyone be reasonable, like me?*

Beside the raised stage, Dr. Maya Chauhan—who happened to be her *favorite* arms client—winked mischievously. Maya was happily plump and perfectly comfortable in a voluminous gold sari that could double as a sail in the event of high winds. The gray-haired, Delhi-born genius was the Empire's most celebrated military scientist and head of the Royal Steamwerks, Britain's war laboratory. Maya was a prominent example of Queen Victoria's realization that intelligence and innovation were not solely limited to those born within a day's ride of London. Victoria might be a despotic, parliament-disbanding, mass-hanging-of-opponents type of queen; but she knew talent when she saw it.

Maya's grin stirred memories of childhood science classes filled with laughter and learning. Papa had signed young Constance up for the Steamwerks' classes, ignoring her cries that she'd learn more by his side in his lab than from any dull tutorial. But she'd soon grown to love Maya's warmth, her intelligence, her decision to allow eight-year-old Constance to roam unsupervised through the Exhibition Hall to play with automatons and tie together visitors' shoelaces.

But Maya didn't know, *couldn't* know, that Papa had absconded to another dimension to live with an alternate version of Constance's late mother. Maya would no doubt find the technology used intriguing, but she was duty-bound to share such secrets with her Royal employer, and that would never do.

Constance winked back. Maya beamed and downed a glass of champagne with impressive gusto. Beside her stood her two long-time colleagues, bespectacled Dr. Zhi Huang and lanky Dr. James McKinley. Both men gazed at Maya with undisguised admiration. Constance suspected the duo had been locked in a silent battle to win their supervisor's heart for decades. At their current rate of progress, all three scientists would reach their seventies

without a word spoken on the topic of love. Constance resolved to kickstart the potential love triangle at her earliest opportunity. It was the least she could do to thank Maya for her use of the Exhibition Hall.

Maya swiped a fresh glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and raised it to Constance. "How is the belle of the ball? Has a handsome prince plighted his troth amid all this finery?"

"No troths yet, and I've spent half my dowry on this wretched event. The bachelors here are so flighty. I discuss the weather, then casually mention that I need to wed by Friday noon. Wouldn't you think that at least one man would find my candor refreshing?"

"Your candor, dear girl, could kill an elephant at ten paces," said Maya. "Have you considered subtlety and guile?"

"I just don't have the time. Uncle Bertie's lawyers are determined to declare Papa deceased *in absentia*."

McKinley snorted. "I'm surprised it took this long. With all due respect, Miss Haltwhistle, four years is quite a long time to be missing, even for a gentleman scientist. Most botanists only get lost for a year or two at the most."

Constance glowered. "Papa's far more than an amateur botanist. He's an inventor, a relic collector, an explorer of unseen worlds. And he's not missing; he's merely misplaced."

"You're quite right, Miss Haltwhistle," said Huang. "Misplaced is a perfectly normal state for a man of science. I'm confident your father does what he can to keep in touch. Sadly, continental postal services aren't as efficient as the Queen's Royal Mail. Apparently, they don't hang their mail carriers for a late delivery. But perhaps you've received at least one or two letters that prove the Baron is alive and well—?"

"Of course I have. My hope chest is stuffed with missives overflowing with praise for the marvelous way I'm handling the estate. Do you know, I thrust a handful of them at the lawyers, and they

had the cheek to suggest they might be forgeries! And I know Papa's handwriting better than anyone. I've been signing his name on documents for years."

Maya squinted at her. "People are so untrusting these days."

"And I'm sure you've responded to the Baron's letters and informed him of your plight," said Huang. "No doubt, His Lordship is racing back to England as we speak."

Constance's stomach clenched. Fat chance. Why risk the dangers of portal travel back here when his other England was so perfect? He'd found his parallel paradise. He was selfish, pompous—but Lord, how she missed him. "If, by some mischance, Papa fails to appear at the court hearing, how am I going to tell the staff that I've lost the estate? Two hundred farmers, shepherds, milkmaids, and servants look to me for a roof over their head and shillings in their pocket. It's their home, too. Where will they all go?"

Maya blinked at her. "Well, I—"

"For that matter," Constance said, placing her hands on her hips, "why do I have to be married to remain in my own home? What in my biological form declares me to be less deserving of respect than a male heir? Who decided that a single woman can't inherit property? Oh, I'd like to give *him* a piece of my mind, make no mistake."

Huang and McKinley stepped back, mouths agape.

Constance stomped her boot. "For heaven's sake, we have a woman on the throne. Why on earth doesn't Victoria make the laws more female-friendly?"

Maya paled as the surrounding crowd went silent. The scientist gave a nervous laugh. "Oh, Miss Haltwhistle, you and your jokes. Why, you'll be the death of me."

The partygoers, apparently satisfied that high treason had not been committed, returned to their chitchat.

Constance bit her lip. “Dr. Chauhan—Maya—I’m so sorry. This has been a very trying evening. I do realize the Royal Steamwerks is hardly the place to comment upon the Queen’s—”

Maya held up her hand. “Please, let’s change the topic, I beg you.” She leaned in and murmured, “The redcoats can be . . . *overzealous* in their search for royal detractors. You don’t wish to be branded a rebel, do you?”

Constance gasped. “Heavens, no, I . . . speaking of redcoats, don’t you usually travel with a platoon of guards? I don’t see a single scarlet uniform in here.” She added loudly, “Incidentally, I adore the troops’ stylish new double-breasted overcoats. Those brass buttons are so debonair. The effect is intimidating, yes, but delightfully so. Why . . .”

Maya tapped her arm. “Don’t overdo it, my dear. Now, if you must know, the platoon was forming up when I suggested to the sergeant that we could safely walk here alone. After all, it’s barely a quarter mile down here from the lab. We brought along a new engineering consultant who I wanted to have a chat with away from the guard’s ears.”

“A new—?” Constance surveyed the elegant crowd for a stranger in a lab coat, or even worse, oil-spattered coveralls.

“Yes, I hope you don’t mind. Anyway, to cut a long story short, whilst the sergeant was filling out forms in triplicate asking his superiors for permission to consider the matter of whether we could leave, we slipped away. We’ll be back before he completes the paperwork. Until then, we’re sipping the sweet succor of freedom, aren’t we, boys?”

The boys were staring at Constance’s neckline.

Her hand flew to her chest. Sure enough, the chain mail had made another appearance. She shoved down the offending rings, wriggling and puffing. Huang and McKinley turned their backs as she struggled with her gown.

Maya scratched her ear. “Dear girl, if you’re in need of protective underwear, I could run you up an armored corset back at my lab. Bulletproof, knife proof—”

“Invisible? That’s what I need.”

McKinley spun on his heel and stared at her. “What did you say?”
“I said—”

Clucking her tongue, Maya said, “That’s enough discussion of lingerie. My poor boys are getting all overheated.” She beckoned Constance closer and whispered, “Should I worry that I’m about to lose my favorite secret weapons designer?”

Constance pursed her lips. “Do you have more than one?”

Maya laughed. “No, one’s more than enough. You’re an inspiration, a true genius. You’ll be pleased to learn that your latest flame-throwers are going directly to the Queen’s personal guard. Some women collect hats. She prefers a nice incendiary weapon.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Naturally, I’ve kept your name out of the official reports.” Maya gestured at the chain mail. “Dare I ask again about your armor?”

“It’s a temporary precaution against a disgruntled client. I have everything under control. Mostly.”

“It’s the ‘mostly’ that concerns me. I’m not one to interfere, but this rush to marry is unlikely to end well. My dear, as grand as it is, Haltwhistle Hall is only a house.”

“As Buckingham Palace is only a house, or the Vatican is only a church. The Hall is history, it’s heritage, it’s all I have left of Mama, of—” Her lip trembled. Constance bit it firmly into submission and tilted up her chin. “If you’ll excuse me, Doctors. I’m afraid it’s time for my speech. Duty calls, and all that.” She turned away from the scientists and walked up the steps to the oak stage as if it bore her gallows. Solitude broken by the odd knife-wielding assassin she could handle, but public speaking? She shuddered.

From her elevated position, the view was outstanding. Within forty yards of the stage, scattered like battlefield wreckage amidst a sea of guests, loomed the dome's prized exhibits: an airship turret gun, five mechanical warhorses, and three towering infantry exo-suits. To soften the exhibits' threatening appearance, Constance had draped pastel streamers around the turret gun, festooned the steam-powered horses' articulated necks with pink rose wreaths, and topped the twelve-foot-high bronze-and-brass exo-suits with polka-dot party hats.

Even the jauntiest hat wouldn't disguise the exo-suits' deadly design. With a bulbous similarity to undersea diving suits, their chest cockpits were protected with a bubble of bulletproof glass. A burgundy velvet pilot's seat and a mahogany control panel added a genteel touch to the giant suits of armor. Each held a brass Phoenix F-451 flamethrower in its massive hands. The weapons had been repurposed as beverage dispensers for the ball. Any guest who dared to pull a flamethrower's trigger was rewarded by a squirt of champagne from its polished barrel.

Constance's pulse quickened at the sight of the weapons' deadly beauty. Hidden on the barrel of each Phoenix was her maker's mark, a crown on a cogwheel. The stamp was an assurance that you were holding an armament of superlative quality. Constance's secret life as an elite arms smith swelled her chest and shamed her soul. For a typical noblewoman, *any* career was unladylike.

And she'd at least appear to be a true lady tonight, even if it killed her.

Alone at center stage, she signaled the orchestra to cease.

All eyes turned to her. Hopefully, this was due to her regal bearing, not her provocatively tight gown or, heaven forbid, the chain mail.

She smiled. "My lords, ladies, and scientists. I am come amongst you at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved,

in the midst of these battle machines, to present you with an evening of fine wine, delicious hors d'oeuvres, and the good company of your peers.”

She paused to allow her audience to applaud her humorous purloining of Elizabeth I's famous battle speech to her troops, so fitting for the martial setting.

Silence reigned.

The orchestra conductor coughed and rustled through his musical score.

A waiter dropped a silver platter with a decidedly unmusical clang.

Is it hot in here?

Constance fanned her glowing cheeks with both hands. Trapped in the amber of the moment, she stuttered, “Um—well—that is to say, it's a truth universally acknowledged, that a single woman in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a husband. Could all interested parties please line up—”

The ceiling exploded with a thunderous crash.

Shrieks pierced the air as shards of glass showered nobles and servers alike, sending them scrambling for cover. Constance snapped back her head as a huge iron cage plummeted straight toward her on a winch chain. Far above, a black airship was silhouetted against the stars. She froze, staring up with the dispassionate clarity that comes when a large metal cage is about to crush your skull, and your body refuses to move, convinced the entire incident is a figment of an overactive imagination.

What the dickens—

A heavy body slammed into her chest, propelled her backward off the stage and shielded her as the cage smashed it into splinters. Her spine thumped against the floor and she lay, breathless, sprawled upon the parquet.

A warm weight lifted from her as J. F. Trusdale pushed himself up to stand. He offered her his hand. “My apologies, miss.”

Winded but unhurt, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. She scanned the cowering crowd, fearing the worst. By some miracle, the debris seemed to have caused no more than minor lacerations and a need for stiff drinks all round. Peers and servants helped one another to stand, momentarily equals in shared adversity.

Thank heavens no one was seriously—

A clanking hiss from the champagne dispensing exo-suits drew shrieks from her guests. Despite the vacant pilot seats, the three exo-suits shuddered into life. Black smoke belched from their exhaust pipes as supra-coal ignited in their backside furnaces. Their brass control sticks moved as if possessed by ghosts.

The suits of armor turned to face the ruined stage and took their first steps as the nobles scattered, screaming.

It must be a trick. Someone was using strangely faceted mirrors, or piano wires, or—

The giants holstered their flamethrowers in the gun clamps attached to their backs. As one unit, the polka dot-hatted mechanicals strode toward the iron cage.

Constance turned to her inappropriately-dressed savior. “The suits are being stolen!”

The cowboy nodded. “I reckon so. Best stay out of their way.”

Such common sense beneath her, she reached under her tiara and drew out her six-inch stiletto hairpins. She flicked off the tiny cork protectors that stopped the sharpened steel pins from damaging her scalp. But how could she use them to stop the suits?

The bronze behemoths took a sudden left and advanced toward Maya, Huang, and McKinley. The three scientists gawked up at their monstrous creations. With surprising speed, the suits grabbed their elderly prey, tossed them over their metal shoulders, and made a beeline for the cage.

Constance raised her hairpins. *What if I stab one of them in the . . .*

Trusdale yelled, “Hey, leave the lady alone!” and sprinted behind the suit that held Maya captive. Constance’s jaw dropped as the cowboy flung himself onto the back of the exo-suit. He hooked his left arm around the suit’s gun clamp, dipped his right hand into his coat pocket and drew out a knuckle-duster. He punched at the suit’s shoulder seam, splitting it open to reveal a tangle of lubrication tubes. Trusdale yanked the tubes loose, spraying oil over the parquetry. The exo-suit stuttered and slowed.

Ah, the joints are the weak spots. Constance darted between the two functional suits as they clomped up to the cage. One pulled open the door and tossed Dr. Huang unceremoniously inside before entering. The second suit followed the first, holding McKinley on its shoulder.

Maya drummed her fists uselessly against her captor’s armor plating. As Constance raced to help her, the scientist grabbed Trusdale’s hand and held it. She muttered something incoherent as the exo-suit shook like a wet dog to throw off Trusdale. He fell from its back as Constance rammed her hairpins deep into the suit’s knee seam. Hot steam blasted into her chain mail corset from a punctured cable and she yelped more from shock than pain.

The exo-suit dropped to its knees but still managed to lean forward enough to clamp a bronze hand onto the cage door. Chains clanked, and the makeshift prison rose into the air with the exo-suit dangling.

“No!” Constance leaped for the bars. A strong arm grabbed her around the waist. Trusdale dragged her back to earth as the cage shot up through the gaping hole in the great glass dome.

She wrestled herself from Trusdale’s grip as the airship sped away with the cage swinging beneath it. The damaged suit hung by one arm from the open door as Maya flailed upon its shoulder. The black airship soared silently toward the stars, almost invisible against the night sky.

Constance barely restrained herself from running right out the door after the airship. The debutante Miss Haltwhistle would *not* bolt from her own coming out ball, scrambling over hedges and ditches to follow a ship in the night.

No. Miss Constance Haltwhistle would tend to the wounded, would wait for the constabulary to arrive, and would give a detailed report of the theft of her dearest friend.

Her alter-ego however . . .

Constance placed her hands on her hips, jaw set.

Fly while you can, villains.

I'm coming for you.

No one crosses the Brass Queen.



Chapter 2:

One Lump or Two?

RAIN TAINTED WITH SOOT BLEW in through the broken glass of an iron-barred window at the Sheffield Police Station. The grimy water trickled down brick walls painted an uninspiring institutional green to pool on the flagstone floor. Trusdale's teeth chattered as cold, damp morning air seeped through his black shirt and waistcoat to settle on his skin. Rumbles of thunder outside were echoed by the protests of his empty stomach. He sat on a three-legged stool as Detectives Barnard and Chester applied their phrenology expertise to his aching skull.

For seven hours, the detectives had taken great care to ensure his skull matched one of five phrenology profiles. It was a matter of departmental pride that any suspect brought in for questioning could be scientifically assigned to the correct criminal category. This was achieved primarily through the application of heavy objects to the suspect's head until its bumps matched the charts. After a night of applied phrenology, Trusdale had been officially profiled as a cat burglar.

He was no longer a fan of the scientific method.

Shoulders slumped, he studied the cracks in the stone floor, sneaking the occasional glance up at his two captors. The brown bowler hat of authority sat heavily upon the detectives, as did the white shirt of self-righteousness, and the pinstriped pants of due process. Barnard's ginger horseshoe mustache was beaded with sweat on a face red with exertion. The portly detective held a white phrenology bust over Trusdale's throbbing head. At three pounds, the life-size bust was the department's heaviest interrogation aid.

Detective Chester frowned at a stack of profile charts clutched in his meaty hand. Pulled down tight, his hat pushed his ears out at ungainly angles. An earthy odor of last night's beer was his chosen cologne. "You know, we could move him up from 'cat burglar' to 'anarchist agitator' if his benevolence lump wasn't quite so large."

Barnard tapped Trusdale's skull with the bust to see if a new lump would help.

It didn't. Trusdale winced and swayed back on the stool, so the next tap wouldn't hit in the exact same spot.

Barnard snapped, "Stop fidgeting, or you'll be back on your knees on the floor."

"I told you a stool was too good for the likes of him. We should save stools for the locals, not some heathen cowboy from the back-end of beyond," snarled Chester.

"I'm an Episcopalian." Trusdale pulled aside his shirt to show his bone crucifix, hanging on a leather thong.

Chester's nostrils flared. "Episca-whatever isn't the Church of England, now is it?"

"Actually—"

"As I said, you're a heathen, with a penchant for jewelry. Now pipe down, or else." Chester flipped open a notebook as black as his bushy beard. "Right, let's review the notes." The officer cleared his

throat. “Point number one. Prisoner is suspiciously large and refuses to fit stature to size required by profile charts. Prisoner is two inches taller than chart limit of six foot.”

“I can’t help—ow.” Trusdale flinched as the bust thudded into his temple.

“Shush,” said Barnard. “We are being procedural.”

“Point number two,” continued Chester. “Prisoner has been suspiciously pleasant throughout the interview. Prisoner has stated that he understands that we are ‘just following protocol’ and that he knows we ‘have to be thorough.’ Said reasonableness was delivered in a resonant baritone malignantly designed to inspire trust and confidence in the attending officers. Prisoner has stated that he served as an army engineer in his own country of Kansas.”

“That’s true. Well, Kansas isn’t a country, but I did serve as a captain in the US armored cavalry. If you send a telegram to my former commander, Lieutenant Godfrey Gillingham, he can verify—ow.” Stars lit Trusdale’s eyes as the bust tapped him again.

Chester said, “Being a former member of a foreign army isn’t exactly an endorsement in these parts. Now, shut your trap.”

Trusdale bit his tongue. All he had to do was stay polite and reasonable, and at some point, they’d have to let him go. *No one in their right mind would believe I masterminded a kidnapping the same day I rode into town.*

Chester continued, “Point number three. The prisoner trespassed onto Steamwerks property and invited himself into a hoity-toity party at which the top scientists in England got yanked up into the night sky. This led to the arrest of said prisoner upon the request of the party hostess, a woman named Constance Haltwhistle.” Chester frowned. “Now, she wouldn’t be any relation to that Baron Haltwhistle, would she? Rumor has it that he got captured by headhunters in the jungles of Peru.”

Barnard scratched his chin. “I heard it was pirates off the coast of Burma.” He glared at Trusdale. “Do you possess any pertinent information on His Lordship’s whereabouts?”

“I can honestly say I don’t have a clue where he is, and I sure don’t know any of his relatives. The only person I met at the party last night was a sharp-tongued fire-eater who wouldn’t tell me her name.”

“I’m adding ‘fire-eater, suspected collusion with,’ to the notes,” said Chester. “Point number four. Prisoner offered eyewitness testimony to the kidnapping of the esteemed scientists and several armored suits of death. Prisoner stated that he believed the airship used in the attack was a short-range transport ship, possibly an R78 model, and that the cage was of a type used to contain livestock. As the cage was approximately twenty feet high, prisoner suggests that we look into exotic animal air transport for zoos and circuses.” He glowered at Trusdale. “Zoos and circuses? In Sheffield? You must think we’re idiots.”

Trusdale studied the floor and said nothing.

Chester leered. “Cat got your tongue, has it? I’ll tell you right now, Johnny Foreigner, you’ve managed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The crown judge has a fondness for handing down fast sentences to out-of-towners. Mark my words, you’ll be dangling from a noose by noon. We like a good hanging around here, don’t we, Barnard?”

“Grand day out for the whole family.”

“Even better than a circus, wouldn’t you say, Barnard?”

“That I would, Chester. So much better. Almost as good as a zoo.”

Cold sweat trickled down Trusdale’s spine. Whatever the scriptures said, there was no such thing as justice here on earth, only good luck or bad. He should’ve known he was due for a dive, after convincing Dr. Maya Chauhan that he was—

He shifted uncomfortably on the stool.

The role of his own late brother, the esteemed electrical engineer J. F. Trusdale, was not one he had ever wanted to play. Every agent needs a cover story, but this one hit too close to home. He was getting hanged for all the wrong reasons. Hang him because he was a US spy. Hang him for believing that the British Empire wasn't doing the world a whole lot of good. Hang him for impersonating his late brother in what would have been the highlight of J. F.'s career. But to be hanged for going to the wrong party?

He whispered, "It just ain't right."

Barnard leaned close. "What's that now? Did I hear a confession?"

Chester closed his notebook with a snap. "That's grand news, Detective. I reckon we might make it to the pub by lunchtime after all." He leaned down close to Trusdale's face. "You ever seen a hanging, son? Nasty business. Very, very, nasty."

Chester wasn't wrong. Trusdale could almost feel rope fibers tightening around his throat. An angry mob of locals surrounded him, jeering up at him on a makeshift wooden stage. He balanced on the same stool he now sat on, waiting for the moment when the executioner kicked it from beneath him and he fell, jerking his neck, but not quite breaking it. A short drop to eternity, punctuated by a lingering death. The crowd hooted and hollered, taking bets on how long his legs would kick, how long 'til his eyes bulged and his lungs gave out.

He could barely remember the idealist he'd once been, before the Military Intelligence Corps turned him into a man who watched, listened, and betrayed; a man forever caught in twilight. The MIC brass told him it was his duty to serve, but he had little to show for his sacrifice. No shiny medals, no wife to hold him, no children to carry on his name.

Damn, I'm almost ready to tie the noose myself, just to get it over with.

Chester snickered. Clearly, extinguishing all hope in the condemned was a favorite amusement. He said to Barnard, "We might get this cowboy sentenced by eleven if we get a move on."

The iron door to the interrogation room flew open with a force that made all three men jump. A blue slab of sergeant stomped in. Behind him trailed an elderly male servant with the air of a depressed stork. The silver-haired retainer wore an emerald tailcoat cut in a style that had been popular in the 1830s. Gold buttons, an ivory ruffled shirt, mint-green silk pantaloons, pristine white stockings, and black buckle shoes completed his archaic ensemble. The servant carried a silver tray that bore Trusdale's black frock coat, leather wallet, silver fob watch, and beloved Stetson.

A lump formed in Trusdale's throat at the sight of his hat. He could almost feel the sun beating down as he rode alongside his brothers on the summer cattle drives. Forty ornery steers, dust in your eyes, and wolves on your heels. Papa yelling that the herd was heading too far south, J. F. grinning like a cat, saying he knew a faster route to the next watering hole. He always was the brains of the family, caught up in his imaginings, a practical dreamer.

Maybe, somewhere, there was a world where J. F. spotted the runaway carriage bearing down on him and didn't freeze. Maybe he jumped out of the way, dirt flying up in his face, half-crying, half-laughing for the close call on his life. Maybe he'd traveled here, to England, instead of dying a senseless death in a New York gutter.

What Trusdale wouldn't give to live in such a world.

The sergeant and the servant stepped aside as the curvaceous fire-eater from last night's party swept into the room in a fountain of white lace cinched with a scarlet corset. A glint of metal through the delicate lace covering her décolletage suggested that she still wore armor next to her pale skin. Her waist-length red hair flowed over her shoulders like molten lava. Atop her tresses perched a ruby bowler hat set at a jaunty angle. Trusdale swallowed hard and smiled at his green-eyed visitor.

She surveyed the room with undisguised distaste.

“Her Ladyship here,” said the sergeant gruffly, “is considering dropping the charges against—”

“I would only be ‘Her Ladyship’ if I were a married woman and my father had died in the night. Unless you can produce for me both a husband and a corpse, the correct form of address is ‘Miss Haltwhistle.’”

The sergeant threw Trusdale a sympathetic glance and backed out of the room.

Detectives Barnard and Chester snickered, but stopped when Miss Haltwhistle fixed them with a glare. Both men became momentarily fascinated by their shoes.

Trusdale frowned. *Charges? She’s the one aiming to get me hung? But, why?*

Miss Haltwhistle stalked up to Chester and held out her palm. The detective reddened and handed her the black notebook. She flicked through the pages, brow furrowed.

Trusdale drew in his breath deep and slow, just as he’d been trained to do. It was nine years now since he’d passed out of West Point, seven since he’d graduated the MIC. Keeping relaxed under pressure was the most useful skill he’d picked up along the way.

He exhaled and flashed his warmest smile at the redhead. “Pardon me for asking, miss, but am I to understand that you asked these fine gentlemen to arrest me?”

“It was a private party. You were trespassing.”

So much for the calm and charm approach.

Miss Haltwhistle turned to Chester. “A cat burglar? Really? Look at the size of him. He’s as big as a steam engine. What makes you think a man of his bulk could climb drainpipes and slide through skylights?”

The detective stammered, “W-well, he has been talking a lot about circuses, and there was a mention of a fire-eater, so maybe he’s in league with a gang of acrobats—”

She clucked her tongue. “Ridiculous. Did his paperwork check out?”

“Ah, well, he didn’t have any documentation on him, save for a return steamship ticket to New York with a sail date of Saturday. Or is it steam date? Anyway, in four days’ time this blighter was set to abscond from the scene of the crime. Slowly, like, on a ship. But it’s still absconding. He said any other paperwork that could prove his identity were stowed in his suitcase at his place of lodging.”

“So, you sent someone to retrieve these documents?”

Chester shook his head. “No need to, miss. We’re relying upon the scientific principles of phrenology. You don’t need paperwork when you’ve got science on your side.”

Trusdale kept his voice steady. “Not to belabor the point, Miss, but didn’t I save your life last night?”

“I believe the technical term for pushing a person off a stage is ‘assault.’ I have no doubt I could have sidestepped the falling cage without your interference.”

“You know that ain’t true.”

Her glare burned with such ferocity, his toes curled. “What I know, Mr. Trusdale, is that you were not on my invitation list and you stopped me from pursuing the kidnappers.”

“With all due respect, Miss, I stopped you from dangling off the leg of an exo-suit as it flew away to Lord-knows-where on the orders of heaven-knows-who. Did you think you could defeat all three suits with a couple of hairpins?”

Miss Haltwhistle sniffed. “I’m sure I would have thought of something.”

The silver-haired servant quirked an eyebrow at her.

She balled her hands on her hips. “I would, and that’s that. Now, Mr. Trusdale, what prompted you to attend my coming-out ball?”

Chester coughed. “Actually, Miss Haltwhistle, we—”

“Are interrupting my investigation. Kindly desist, or I shall report you to the Lord Mayor for wasting my valuable time.”

The detective blanched. Miss Haltwhistle turned her attention back to Trusdale. “This is the last time I shall ask. Why did you invite yourself to my—?”

“I didn’t. Dr. Maya Chauhan invited me to tag along with her. Seems she, McKinley, and Huang thought I would enjoy this shindig of yours. It was my first day working as an engineering consultant to the Steamwerks, and they thought I’d like to meet the locals. Let me assure you, I haven’t. Not one damn bit.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh. That’s . . . gosh.”

The servant sighed.

Constance tapped her chin. “But if you’ve started a new job, why do you have a steamship ticket?”

“In case the job didn’t work out.”

“Hmm, very well. In light of this new information, I will drop the trespass charge, for now.” She turned to her footman. “Cawley, please return to Mr. Trusdale his valuables.”

The retainer approached him with a low bow and proffered the silver tray as Miss Haltwhistle retired to the doorway.

A fresh start. Hope on a silver platter.

After a long night of police procedure, Trusdale was stiffer than a winter oak. He stood slowly, stretching out his big frame with a crack of his neck joints. He kicked the stool behind him, smashing it against the wall.

Chester and Barnard took a wary step back.

Trusdale ignored them. He reached down for his Stetson, casually running his fingers inside the silk lining. His fingertips brushed the secret pocket he used to smuggle items through customs checkpoints. The pocket had carried codes, maps, and skeleton keys, but until last night had never held a mysterious artifact.

Through the silk, a tingle of electricity nipped at his hand. The source was the one-inch metal triangle Maya had pressed into his palm as she was dragged away by the exo-suit. She'd whispered simply, "Hide it." From who or what, he had no idea.

Her trust gnawed on a conscience he didn't need. He'd bluffed his way into the Steamwerks to reconnoiter her work, not to feel dread at what might be happening to the gray-haired genius with the impish grin. As for Huang and McKinley, they weren't exactly the evil scientists he'd anticipated. More like classics professors with a taste for weekend alchemy.

Why did they have to go and get themselves kidnapped, anyhow?

There was nothing he could do to help them. He had his own problems to solve. With a sigh, he pushed his hat firmly onto his bruised head, swung on his frock coat, and headed for the open door.

Miss Haltwhistle stepped in front of him, but he pushed by her with a terse, "Miss," and the barest tip of his hat. He ignored the sweet scent of orange blossom and roses emanating from the devil in a bustle. He wasn't a man given to rage, but the threat of hanging did not dispose him kindly toward her.

She said, "I think I may owe you an—"

He strode out of the cell without a backward glance.

❧ END OF EXCERPT ❧

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About the Author



Elizabeth Chatsworth was born in the city of Sheffield in Yorkshire, England. After gaining a degree in English Literature, she traveled the globe until she finally settled in Connecticut, USA. Her home is shared with her husband and their rambunctious Yorkshire terrier, Boudicca.

Elizabeth loves to write of rogues, rebels, and renegades across time and space. A winner of the Writers Of The Future contest in 2020, she is also a Golden Heart® finalist, a Pitch Wars alumna, and a member of the SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America).

When she's not writing, Elizabeth works as a voice-over actor. There's a rumor she possesses the world's best scone recipe. Contact her at www.elizabethchatsworth.com to see if it's true!

CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
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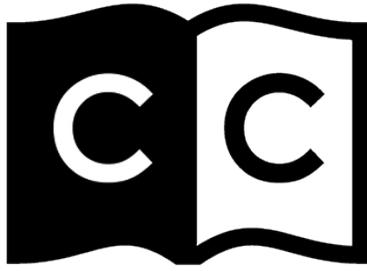
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Hardcover ISBN 9780744300093
Paperback ISBN 9780744300109
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744300369
eBook ISBN 9780744300123
Audiobook ISBN 9780744300130

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020937704

Cover design by Lena Yang
Cover art and chapter illustrations by James A. Owen
Book design by Olivia Croom Hammerman

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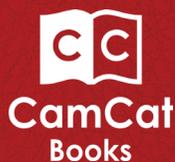
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Cover Illustration: James A. Owen
Cover Design: Lena Yang &
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\$26.99 USD

ISBN 978-0-7443-0009-3

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