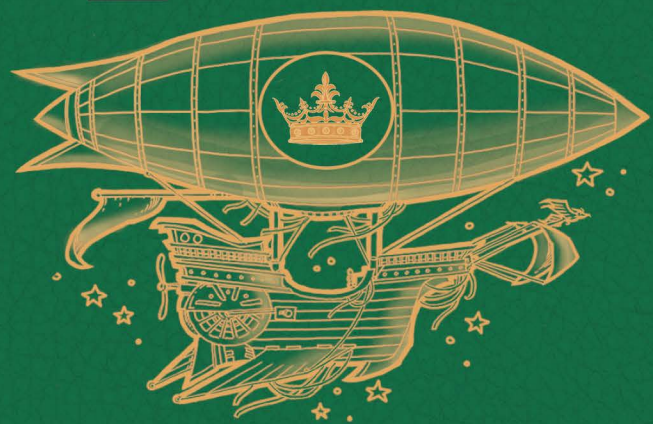



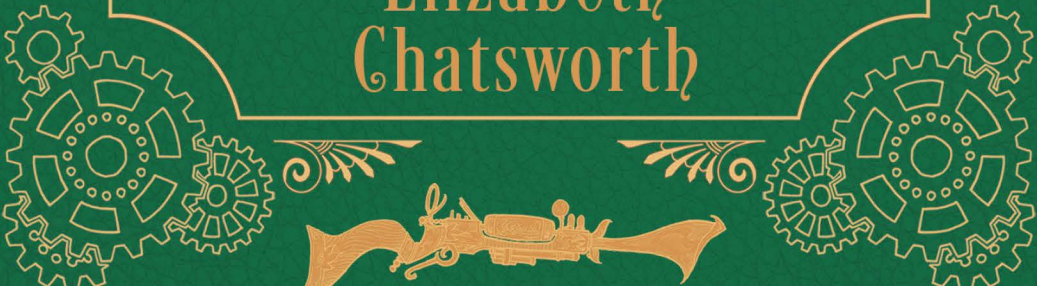


THE BRASS QUEEN II

# GRAND TOUR



Elizabeth  
Chatsworth



## PRAISE FOR THE BRASS QUEEN



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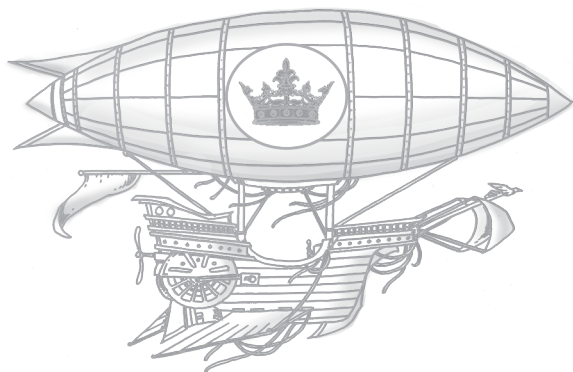
“You’ll find yourself cheering for this heroic cowboy and his unexpected love for a jinxed red-head who is dead set on saving the world (as well as finding her place in it) all before teatime, of course . . . Stocked with whimsical gadgets, sky pirates, weird science, and mustachioed villains this race-against-the-clock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

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Elizabeth  
Chatsworth

  
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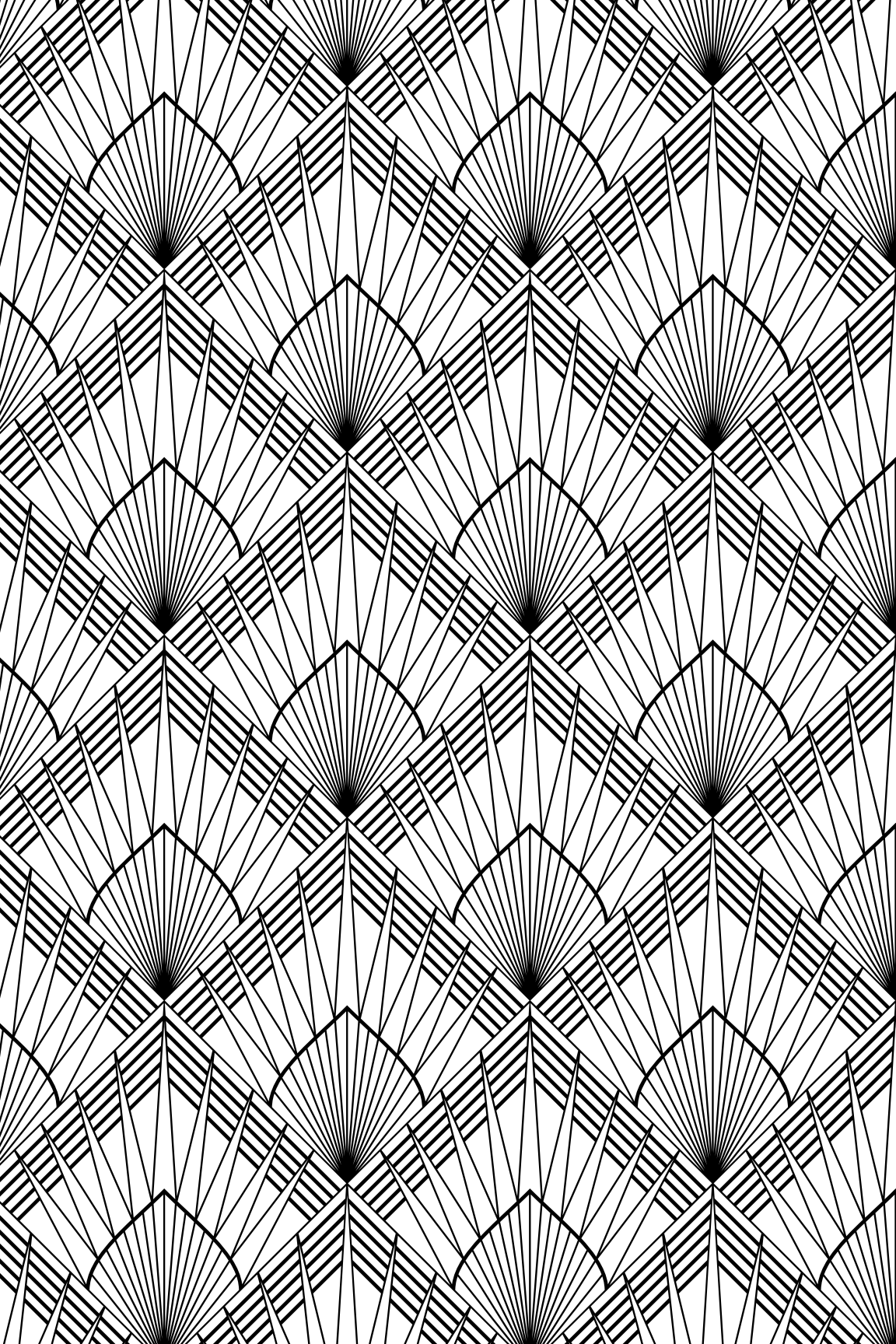
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***Dedication***

*Amor da minha vida.*









# Chapter 1:

## A Night at the Opera

**Saturday, June 5th, 1897:**  
**Paris, France. 7:15 p.m.**

THE GRASS WAS ALWAYS GREENER in another dimension. Miss Constance Haltwhistle imagined that in a parallel world, the tall, dark, and almost-handsome American cowboy, Liberty Trusdale, would be thrilled to attend a night at the Parisian opera by her side. He'd put aside his trademark attire of a black leather duster, battered Stetson hat, and clunky Western boots to wear a bespoke ensemble that precisely coordinated with her own.

His muscular six-two frame could only be enhanced by a top hat bedecked with shiny brass goggles, a white frilly shirt befitting a fashion-forward airship pirate, a green silk tailcoat embroidered with gamboling Yorkshire sheep, and the tightest calfskin jodhpurs his horseman's thighs could take without drawing indecency charges from the French authorities. She'd sent this outfit to his hotel room along with a note apologizing for accidentally electrocuting him atop the Eiffel Tower at lunchtime. The same note requested Trusdale to don his new outfit and join her in her carriage at precisely seven o'clock,

that she might sweep him away to the opera for a night of forgiveness and festivity.

So where the hell was he?

As the glass doors of the Grand Hotel du Louvre had yet to reveal a blue-eyed cowboy ripe for reconciliation, Constance drew back from the carriage door's open window and settled her bustle upon its plush bench seat. She heaved as deep a sigh as her cruelly cinched corset allowed, absently tracing her fingertips over the faint tear stains on the seat's gold silk cushion where she'd wept herself to sleep on her fourteenth birthday.

Her eyes closed, transporting her back through the years to the iron balcony that surrounded the rooftop observatory at Haltwhistle Hall. The setting sun had painted the heavens a dusky pink above the Hall's crenellated towers, manicured rose gardens, well-stocked stables, and vast airship hanger. The hanger stood empty, as it had ever since Papa flew the *Lady Penelope* airship off to foreign climes on yet another hunt for alien relics. His obsession with scientific curiosities had grown exponentially since the death of her mother, his grief turning passion into mania.

But now, as the Hall's clock tower rang its farewell to the day, an unknown vehicle approached her ancestral home. Young Constance gripped the balcony's iron handrail, holding her breath as the mysterious carriage approached. The estate's prize-winning sheep stopped chewing their cud, staring in alarm at the carved red-and-gold Japanese dragon that wrapped three times around the vehicle's gilded frame.

Seated within the dragon's gaping jaws, the estate's bald, green-liveried master of horse, Hearn, pushed the four chestnut Arabian ponies drawing the carriage into a trot. Only Papa would arrive in such monstrous style. For once, it seemed her explorer-father had not forgotten her special day.

She'd practically flown down the grand staircase to greet him, clambering up the carriage stairs without waiting for a helping hand from her aged retainer, Cawley. She'd flung open the door with a crash, breaking the latch that to this day would release itself at inopportune moments. A gloriously painted mural decorated the interior of the carriage. From floor to ceiling, an elaborate battle between two samurai armies raged across fields of gold-leaf splendor. The warriors' sacrifice stood as testament to the victories of the warlord empress who had originally commissioned the carriage to tour her newly conquered lands. Upon the golden bench seat, a note scrawled in Papa's own hand on a page torn from an etiquette book told her he might be home by next Christmas, maybe.

That was the last time she'd ever shed a tear for Papa.

Naturally, she'd claimed the carriage was her birthday present. None of her governesses, servants, or irregularly visiting family members were bold enough to challenge her on the point. When Papa returned two years later, he'd forgotten the carriage existed.

If a man could forget an Imperial dragon carriage, what hope could a mere daughter have of being remembered?

Constance bit her lip to stop it from committing a very un-British wobble and snapped her eyes open. The doorway to the hotel still lacked a square-jawed cowboy dressed for a night at the opera. It even lacked the selfsame cowboy dressed in his usual all-black Western garb, a gunfighter from every angle save for his lack of a six-gun.

Was she repeating the pattern of waiting for a man to grace her with his presence?

It was time to seize control of the situation to save both face and sanity.

Constance thumped the heel of her boot onto the floor of the carriage. She yelled to her driver, "Hearn, circle the hotel's immediate vicinity and return us to this very spot. We mustn't give the impression

that we're waiting. In fact, let's all concur that we're running late to pick up Mr. Trusdale, who will be standing here upon our return, devastated that we left without him."

"Very good, miss," called back Hearn. The carriage lurched into motion as the four chestnut ponies out front surged into a spanking trot. The jolt caused the Yorkshire terrier puppy, Boo, curled into an impossibly small ball beside Constance's thigh, to awake with a startled bark. On the opposite bench, Lord Wellington Pendelroy fumbled his copy of the French court circular, *La Vue Royale*. The pink printed pages fell from his grip to scatter gossip and intrigue across the carriage floor atop the samurai warrior's heads.

"Wait, what are we concurring about?" asked Welli, tossing back his Byronic forelock with the panache that had earned him armies of admirers and scads of scandals, the latest of which were splashed across the court pages at his feet. After only two weeks in Paris, he was as sartorially resplendent as any continental count in his sky-blue silk tailcoat, pantaloons, and matching top hat so in vogue this season. He reached down to gather his fallen newspaper as Constance rubbed Boo's ears and cooed at her, sending the puppy into a tail-chasing whirl of joy upon the golden bench seat.

Constance grinned at the puppy's antics. "We're concurring that we're not waiting any longer for Mr. Trusdale. Except that we are, in a roundabout manner. Don't tell him that we circled the hotel. I know the two of you have become drinking companions as of late." There was a wistfulness she hadn't intended to share in her tone.

Welli quirked a perfectly plucked eyebrow at her. "Everyone I meet becomes a drinking companion at some point or another. Don't worry, you haven't missed out on any tasty details on our enigmatic cowboy. The man is more tight-lipped about his past than a burlesque dancer turned mother superior. I always seem to end up talking about myself when we're sharing a beverage or two." He held up one finger

as she opened her mouth. “And before you make any cracks about me constantly talking about myself, consider how much you want me to concur with your ‘we weren’t waiting for you, Mr. Trusdale,’ story.”

She chuckled, her heart lifting at her cousin’s irrepressible *joie de vivre*. “You know me too well, cousin. Hold on, we’re coming up to the hotel steps again.” She perched on the edge of her seat and peered out the carriage window. The hotel’s glass doors still stubbornly refused to expel a cowboy clad in a lamb-bedecked tailcoat. She heaved a dramatic sigh, then called out, “Once more around the hotel, Hearn, very, very slowly.” The carriage reduced its speed to a sluggish creep along the cobblestoned street.

Welli groaned. “Really? All right, third time lucky. If he’s not standing here on the next drive by, we head straight for the opera, agreed?”

She furrowed her brow. “You don’t think he’s coming, do you?”

Welli shrugged. “That outfit you created for him could well be the straw that broke the cowboy’s back. Impressed as I am that you managed to bribe a French seamstress into knocking up a gentleman’s version of this monstrosity”—he waved a hand at her attire—“what makes you think he would wear it in public?”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate the sentiment and care that I put into designing such an elaborate gift. As our complementary outfits evoke a landscape that is of great importance to me, I’m obviously telling him that he is important too, in his own special way.” She gazed down at her green gossamer ball gown, embroidered with innocent lambs and their ever-patient mothers on lush pastures enclosed by gray dry-stone walls. She could almost smell the moorland heather blooms that inspired the purple hue of her velvet hooded cloak, clasped by a blue-bell brooch. Her bespoke ensemble showcased the bucolic hills and dales of Yorkshire to Paris, and well might the French be grateful for the view.

Welli sighed. “And as usual, you’ve overthought everything to a ludicrous degree. Is there any chance I can talk you into changing out of this crime against fashion before we head to the opera? Paris isn’t ready for your sartorial gall, and Europe as a whole will no doubt be appalled by your unique brand of English eccentricity. I suppose I should be grateful that you didn’t persuade the seamstress to include pigs on your attire.”

No, those she’d saved to decorate her bloomers. Beneath her petticoats, a joyous tumble of pink piglets scampered through an apple orchard. Constance tilted up her chin. “It’s British pastoral chic, a style that I just invented. I thought I should make a grand gesture to Mr. Trusdale, given the electrical unpleasantness at lunchtime. I assume, given that he was raised on a Kansas cattle ranch, that Mr. Trusdale adores farm animals as much as I do.”

Welli chuckled. “Ah, Connie. It’s your assumptions that get you into trouble. Like assuming that creating a fashion-forward farm ensemble is somehow better than making a face-to-face apology. Didn’t you set the poor man alight with that ridiculous lightning gauntlet you’re working on? He passed me heading out of the hotel at lunchtime in search of good whisky and I can only assume bad company. I swear his duster coat was still smoldering from your unprovoked attack.”

She blinked at her cousin. “Trusdale told you about our altercation? First of all, you should know that it’s *our* ridiculous lightning gauntlet. Mr. Trusdale and I are working on the Perambulating Kinetic Storm Battle Mitten #004 together, as equal partners. He wanted to take the device back to the drawing board due to its perilous instability. But due process takes forever, and I decided to do a few quick experiments of my own, to see if I could fix the problems.”

“In other words, you kept working on it behind his back so that you could stun him with your brilliance.”

“Was that so wrong?” She reached up to massage the tension from the back of her neck. “After doing him the favor of fixing the battle mitten’s main issues, I decided the best way to demonstrate the new safety features was to take it to a potentially problematic location—”

“Such as the top of a thousand-foot-high iron landmark in a rain-storm—”

“Exactly. The Eiffel Tower in a sudden shower was the perfect place to prove to Trusdale that my clandestine tweaks to the battle mitten had solved all our technical problems. Cawley was carrying a large carpet bag that secreted a leg of ham which I intended to use for target practice. Once perfectly cooked by the electrical gauntlet, the ham would have taken pride of place in a lovely picnic luncheon atop the tower, with Cawley’s extra-large polo umbrella providing us with shelter from the rain. We’d have perfect privacy, as no one goes up the tower in a storm. You know how skittish the continentals about foul-weather picnics. Anyway, when I pulled back my lace sleeve to reveal the copper and brass glory of the battle mitten, the blasted thing went off and bang! Trusdale was blasted by a lightning bolt that shot him clear across the iron platform. Fortunately, he was only unconscious for a minute or so, and his leather coat saved him from any serious scorching. Once he regained the power to speak, he was perfectly fine, if a tad grumpy.”

Welli’s eyebrows grazed the brim of his top hat. “Only a tad?”

“Perhaps a little more than a tad.” She rubbed her throbbing temples as the headache she’d suffered for much of the last week pounded anew. “I can’t see why he was so upset. I’ve accidentally electrocuted myself with the gauntlet at least two dozen times this week, and does anyone hear me complain?”

Welli’s eyes widened. “Good lord, were those your shrieks that echoed around our floor at the hotel every afternoon? I assumed Hearn had found himself a vocal new girlfriend—”

She tut-tutted and pointed toward the driver's box at front of the carriage, where Hearn and Cawley were no doubt eavesdropping on their conversation. This sensible precaution against being surprised by an aristocratic employer's latest whims allowed British servants to maintain the stone-faced demeanor they were famous for the world over.

Such impassivity in the face of chaos and mayhem was a quality that Constance appreciated more than most.

"Hearn's affairs are no business of ours. The point is, some of us are stoic when we're electrocuted, while others seem to take such things personally. Which clearly they shouldn't. I'm sure Mr. Trusdale would acknowledge that, if he took the time to consider the situation more deeply."

Welli sniffed. "Not that I'm one to give relationship advice, but perhaps you shouldn't electrocute a man you clearly want to impress."

Heat flamed across her cheeks. "Who said I was trying to impress anyone?"

"You did, not one minute ago. You literally said that you wanted to impress him with all the wonderful improvements you'd made to your dangerously faulty lightning glove."

She folded her arms. "For the record, Miss Constance Aethelflaed Zenobia Haltwhistle, also known to a select few as the high-end weapons designer the *Brass Queen*"—she paused to give her cousin the opportunity to recall the pride he himself should feel at counting himself amongst that elite few—"has no one to impress but herself, and that's a difficult enough job without wondering what some itinerant cowboy thinks of me. Two weeks ago, Mr. Trusdale may have inadvertently saved my life, but I've also saved his. We're utterly even in terms of who is impressing whom, or not, as the case may be."

Welli snorted. "How *passionate* you are about not impressing Trusdale. What do you think, Boo? Doth the lady protest too much?"



Boo yapped enthusiastically and snuggled into her mistress's side, dissipating Constance's irritation instantly with her inherent cuteness. Constance tickled the puppy's belly, drawing happy grunts from the terrier puppy. "I simply believe that Mr. Trusdale could show a little more gratitude that the Brass Queen herself is collaborating with him on designing this nonlethal gauntlet. My arms-dealing ancestors are turning in their graves as I step away from the family business to build a future that doesn't involve hurting anyone."

"Except, it seems, our poor Mr. Trusdale." Welli raised an imaginary champagne glass in the air. "Well, here's a toast to your good intentions, Trusdale's tolerance to electrical shocks, and your desire to escape from a centuries-old arms business run by a long line of blue-blooded rogues, villains, and thieves. Cheers." He downed the nonexistent fluid in one gulp and smacked his lips appreciatively. "Mmm, delicious. And speaking of you turning your back on your nefarious ancestors, I'm delighted to inform you that according to page thirteen of the French court circular"—Welli tapped the toe of his boot on one of the printed pages littering the carriage floor—"after four years of being lost in the Congo, your father has been declared by the British court system to be legally dead."

It felt as if her heart might well burst through her corset, land on the lacquered floor, and flop there like a scarlet jellyfish. Constance pressed both hands against her chest as if to hold in the errant organ. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your father's been missing for so long that the high court has decreed that he's shuffled off this mortal coil. I'm sorry to inform you that in the eyes of the law, Connie, you're now an orphan. You have my deepest sympathies." He doffed his top hat and gave her a cheeky wink. "On the upside, this very week, Queen Victoria declared that women can now inherit both property and titles, just like men have for centuries. Who would have thought we'd see such egalitarianism

in our lifetimes? That said, I do believe this magnanimous act was a direct response to your very public petition on this matter to her majesty before thousands of spectators at Endcliffe Park.”

“I was only trying to—”

“Change the world as we know it, apparently. I can’t believe that you, of all people, are now officially a baroness. That is, as long as your father doesn’t show up from whatever foreign drinking den he’s actually been holed up in for the last few years. I’m sure even death doesn’t want to start a fight with Henry Haltwhistle unless it’s absolutely necessary,”

She cradled her head in her hands as the carriage seemed to spin around her. “I’m taking Mama’s title? Baroness Haltwhistle? It doesn’t seem right. I’m no lady.”

“Tell me about it. But the high court says otherwise, Lady Haltwhistle. Welcome to the upper echelons of the blue blood club. You can wear a baronial crown and an ermine cloak if that’s a look you think you could pull off. At least it would be an improvement on your current getup.”

She did so love a fancy hat and cloak. She cleared her throat. “Actually, to start my ladyshipness off on the right foot, I have a small confession to make. Papa’s intercontinental pub crawl with occasional excursions to raid hidden tombs and temples for treasure might, in fact, have been an *interdimensional* excursion powered by pilfered alien technology.”

Welli refilled his imaginary glass and downed another drink. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth indecorously. “Sorry, it seems I need a stiff one before sailing my yacht over the edge of this conversational whirlpool.”

She grimaced. “Do forgive my reticence, but until recent events, I was concerned that if I had told you that Papa had used alien artifacts to rip apart reality so that he could go and live with an alternate

version of my deceased mother in another dimension, you'd have had me committed."

"Please, I could never deal with that level of paperwork." Welli steepled his fingers together as he considered her curious confession. "I have to say, Constance, this really burns my breeches. A fortnight ago, I watched in shock as you maneuvered Haltwhistle Hall through a giant swirling aether portal to save it from being burned down by Prince Lucien's troops. It didn't occur to you then and there to mention that Uncle Henry had previously taken the same route to live with an alternate Auntie Annabella?"

"And her red-haired son, Constantine, who's apparently a male version of me. Papa finally got the son he always wanted instead of a mere girl. I hope they're all very happy together in their mirror world." Even she could hear the bitterness behind her words.

"A male you? Does that mean there's a female version of me out there? Ooh, I'm sure she's positively stunning. I'd love to meet her," smirked Welli.

She wrinkled her nose. "I won't ask why. Since father absconded, he's chatted to me occasionally through the use of a small-scale interdimensional portal, but our communications were, well . . . rather utilitarian. He had me ship him all his prized possessions through the tear in reality, but he never wanted to come back to visit me. And I had the estate staff to protect, so I couldn't go to him—not that I wanted to, as he's a selfish, pompous . . ." Her body trembled as the emotional dam inside her crumbled. If the British courts had declared Papa dead, surely Constance herself should relinquish any lingering hope that he might return? The tears she'd held back for so long flooded down her cheeks in a salty torrent of anguish. "Oh, Welli, why wasn't I good enough for him to want to stay home?"

Welli was beside her in an instant, his arm clasped tight around her shoulders, pressing a perfumed handkerchief into her hand.

She blinked down at the delicate lace square. “Dear lord, is this yours?”

“A token from a lady admirer. Or perhaps a male one with exquisite taste in accessories? It’s not important. My dear, sweet girl, I’m so very, very, sorry. Your father’s an absolute cad. Always has been, always will be.”

“On that we agree. But I still miss him. What does that make me?”

“Human.”

A smile haunted her lips. She trumpeted her nose into the handkerchief and tried to hand it back to him.

“Ah, no, that’s yours to keep. Connie, I’m absolutely furious at Uncle Henry. How could he do this to you?” He gazed out the carriage window, lost in thought. She followed his stare, admiring the elegant marble-clad apartment buildings that Paris was famous for inching by the window. It seemed Hearn had taken her order to drive without haste to a pace that would make a snail impatient.

Welli stroked her hair softly as he murmured, “You know, when you were about ten years old, I questioned your father about the brutal training regime in martial arts he put you through, and his explanation was that you had to be strong enough to continue the Haltwhistle legacy. I asked him why he thought you were a blade that needed to be tempered. You were his daughter, not his weapon. He had no answer for me. But I can’t tell you how much I regret not taking a stand against his lunacy.”

She rested her hand upon his. “Had you stood up to him, he’d have cut you out of my life, and heaven knows how wretched I would’ve become if you hadn’t kept visiting me after Mama died.”

Welli wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. “It broke my heart to see you out there every Sunday, rain or shine, laying fresh flowers on her grave. I always thought it was bizarre that your father made us bury a casket filled with rocks. He said he thought it

was important that you had something concrete on which to focus your emotions. He claimed the Egyptian authorities wouldn't let him transport a person who died from malaria, but I know now that such bodies are transported all the time. I—"

She pushed him away, blinking up at the emerald eyes that mirrored her pain. "What do you mean, empty casket?"

Welli paled beneath his forelock. "Heavens, Constance, I'm sorry. I thought you knew. Not at the time, of course, you were a child, for heaven's sake. But since then, I assumed the servants had . . . I mean, surely Hearn or Cawley . . . or perhaps they didn't know?"

"They'd better not have known. I have more than enough liars in my family tree. I don't need my trusty retainers keeping things from me too."

The silence from the driver's cab was deafening. The carriage crawled on, drawing ever closer to the hotel steps and one more man who might let her down. What were the odds that Trusdale was any more noble than her carriage companions? *Trust no one*, as Papa used to say.

Welli reached once more for her hand, but she pulled it away. He said, "Come to think of it, the servants probably weren't in on the secret. Only the pallbearers knew for certain that something was amiss. That included myself, Father, and . . . well, who can remember back so far?"

She blinked up at him. "Are you telling me the truth, or are you covering for Hearn and Cawley so that I feel less betrayed?"

He cast his eyes down onto the floor, his cheeks as pink as the pages of the court circular. "Don't ask questions you don't want answered. I'm sure everyone on this carriage loves you in their own way, most of the time."

She pushed herself away from him on the seat and raised her voice so that the servants could hear her loud and clear. "Could we suppose,

in honor of my new status as a baroness, that everyone in earshot will become a little more trustworthy? Is that too much to ask?" Mumbled affirmations from Hearn and Cawley seeped through the dragon's gilded walls.

Welli bowed his head. "Fair enough. If it helps, I'm sure if your mother were alive and well, she would have found a way to return to you."

Constance balled the handkerchief in her palm. "Or she abandoned me altogether, just like Papa did."

He shook his head. "That's not the Annabella I knew. She was caring and compassionate, with a kind word for anyone who crossed her path. Even your father. It takes a special soul to love an eccentric genius. She saw something in him none of us ever could."

Constance relaxed her grip on the handkerchief. She rolled it into a damp ball between both palms and said flatly, "I have so little of her left. Even my memories are fading with time. When I was young, she taught me to waltz, to sing, to shoot an arrow as straight and true as the goddess Artemis herself. All my happiest moments were spent with her."

She reached back into her hidden bustle pocket and pulled out her travel edition of *Babett's Modern Manners*. The bookplate inside the front cover declared in florid script that this edition belonged to Lady Annabella Pendelroy. She gently traced Mama's maiden name with her fingertips, the letters worn almost invisible through the years.

"This etiquette book is one of the few items I have left to physically link me to Mama. Papa decided to give it to me so that I might learn how to navigate social situations with a modicum of her civility and grace. She's the only Haltwhistle who possessed either virtue. Her other belongings were lost when I blasted the Hall through the aether portal."

Welli gave her the gentlest of smiles. “At least you know the Hall survived because of your actions. And if something can be lost, it can be found. Even a stately home in another dimension.”

Constance dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief. “Or perhaps I need to let the Hall go, lock, stock, and treasure chambers. I don’t know what my parents wanted for me in life, but I can do my best to seize the opportunity at hand. If the battle mitten is a commercial success, then I’ll have the resources to live a somewhat normal life, a life beyond the Hall.”

Welli shrugged. “Normalcy is overrated. Then again, I’m struck by the fact that you believe developing a nonlethal electrical weapon somehow makes you normal. Perhaps I should attempt an admittedly belated education in what it means to be a woman in the age of Queen Victoria? Have you ever considered taking up knitting? Or you could push the boat out and start collecting woodland ferns? Perhaps a nice seaweed scrapbook could set your heart alight?”

“Or maybe I could hold a séance or take up taxidermy? All lovely hobbies for ladies to pursue, I’m sure. But what if a single female, in search of a delectable fern, finds herself being followed by a ruffian through the woods? She could turn upon her pursuer, hold out her opera-glove clad arm, and demand the fellow state his business. Should his designs upon her be unsavory, a simple clench of her fist will ignite the battle mitten hidden beneath her glove and a net of pure electrical energy will fly forth to land upon the villain. Shocked into submission, the scoundrel will lay comatose at our lady’s feet, allowing our heroine to set off once more in search of the perfect fern. No one is seriously harmed, and the miscreant will think twice before attempting to intimidate a lady in the woods.”

Welli’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Am I to understand that you have identified poor Trusdale as an unsavory ruffian? Is that the real reason you zapped him into submission this lunchtime?”

Heat seared across her cheeks. “I told you that was an accident. And I certainly didn’t expect him to be angry that I’d worked on the battle mitten alone. Heaven knows what he’d say if he found out about the extra special experiments I conducted in the midnight hours.”

His eyes narrowed. “Oh lord. What kind of experiments? Nothing illegal, I hope?”

She shrugged. “Not in my book.”

“You weren’t shocking the servants, were you?”

Constance shook her head. “That would have been more convenient than my current strategy, but no. Hearn was game, of course. All those years of bare-knuckle boxing toughened Hearn up quite marvelously. It would take five electric battle mittens to bring down one so big, beefy, and brawny. I would have better luck attempting to take down a prize bull than flooring Hearn.” She could practically hear the coachman beaming through the carriage walls. She lowered her voice, “But Cawley—”

“Must be a hundred years old. Tell me you didn’t even think of shooting him with a lightning bolt.”

“Only once. He hoped the jolt might help him with his arthritis. It did, but he also belched sparks for the rest of the day. We decided that I should formulate a new weapons testing protocol, which I duly named Plan ‘V’.”

“And what does the *V* stand for?”

*Vigilante*. But there was no reason for Welli to know all her secrets. Particularly the ones that could require plausible deniability to the constabulary of the reigning French monarch, King Louis XVIII. Rumor had it that British tourists were not currently the flavor of the month with Parisian law enforcers, given Queen Victoria’s recent rumblings that she might well raise arms against France. Like mismatched lovers, the French and the British had an on-again, off-again relationship that had persisted through centuries of common sense



and diplomacy. The two autocratic monarchies had much in common, a fact that neither the self-proclaimed Sun King nor his great-aunt Victoria could admit. Because of this royal tension, English aristocrats always started their grand tours of Europe in Paris. Not only was the city delightful, but the level of animosity shown toward tourists was an excellent barometer for the likelihood of a war, which could put a crimp in even the best-laid travel plans.

She wagged her finger at her cousin. “V stands for ‘Very Top Secret, So Don’t Ask Me Again.’ And all my experiments were for a good cause, namely, scientific progress. Sadly, that progress didn’t stop the battle mitten from misfiring today, or you, me, and Mr. Trusdale would already be enjoying a lovely night at the opera. Hopefully, he’s decided to accept my heartfelt written apology and my carefully crafted gift and he’s waiting for us as we speak.”

The carriage trundled up to the steps that led up to the Grand Hotel du Louvre’s glass doors. The lack of a cowboy caused Constance’s heart to sink lower than the pages of the court circular.

Welli grimaced. “I hate to break it to you Connie, but I doubt Trusdale is coming. I thought perhaps he was pondering whether he was smitten with you enough to overcome his natural aversion to wearing farmyard beasts in public. But this goes much deeper than that. You owe him nothing less than a formal in-person apology for blasting him with electricity. And a second apology for working on this mitten behind his back. That’s not exactly an equal business partnership, is it? Plus a third and final apology to apologize for leaving him an apology note rather than facing him yourself.”

Constance gasped. “I’m sure I don’t owe him an in-person anything. According to page fifty-seven of *Babett’s Modern Manners* here, a well-crafted note is more than enough to smooth over any misunderstanding between friends, partners, or potentially, most countries. Mr. Liberty Trusdale should accept my thoughtful gift and . . .” She

trailed off as Welli's words hit home. "What do you mean, was he smitten enough? You don't think Liberty is romantically interested in me, do you?" An odd flutter in her heartbeat caught her by surprise. "I mean, now and again, he looked at me a little too long, as if I had custard on my cheek that he desperately wanted to wipe off, but he never said or did anything to indicate romance was on his mind. Not so much as a single poem or a bunch of roses passed from him to me. And I must have told him at least ten times how much I loved poetry and roses. Not that I was dropping any hints, you understand."

"Heavens forefend." Welli clutched his imaginary pearls.

She mused, "Then again, perhaps he's intimidated by my British accent? Americans can be so peculiar about a properly inflected verb. Or the fact that I'm a member of the landed gentry, despite that land mostly being a large hole in the ground where the Hall used to stand. Or maybe—"

Welli held up his hand. "Or maybe he's looking for a companion who doesn't deceive him, shoot him, and then try and dress him as an accessory to an assault on fashion?"

*Could it be that Welli has a point? Oh dear.*

He continued, "And as pleased as I am that you're determined to chart a new course through life, switching one type of weapon for another, no matter how benign, doesn't sound like the sort of career that leads toward an upwardly mobile marriage to a member of the landed gentry. Flirting with foreigners aside, you don't want to be the last of the Haltwhistle line forever, do you? I hate to sound like our ill-tempered godmother, the Dowager Countess of Benchley, but—"

"Now I'm a baroness, even Auntie Madge might be persuaded that I don't need to marry the first chinless wonder who proposes matrimony. Not that I'd dare say this to her face, but I intend to surpass everyone's expectations for me. I'll become more than marriage material, more than a weapons expert, more than I can possibly begin

to imagine. The world is my oyster, and I intend to swallow it whole in one salty gulp.”

Welli winced. “And there’s an image I don’t want to dwell on. My dear, sweet Connie. I know that’s it not easy for a bright, idiosyncratic woman to find a role in this world where she can thrive and not just survive, but perhaps you should just take a breath and pause for a moment? You’ve misplaced your childhood home, you’re starting a new business with a man who’s a virtual stranger, and your fashion sense seems to be going from bad to worse. How about setting aside your ambitions and enjoying all that Paris has to offer? Must everything be do or die the very moment you think of it?”

Constance scowled and thumped the heel of her boot against the carriage floor. She yelled, “Hearn, please take us directly to the opera. Mr. Trusdale has missed his chance to join our party.”

“Very good, miss,” called back her stalwart driver. The golden dragon carriage surged like a British dreadnought toward Queen Victoria’s foe *du jour*.

As Welli hung on to his armrest for dear life, Constance said, “There you go, dear cousin. We’re heading out to enjoy the night. Happy?”

“Not as happy as I’d be if you were dressed in the latest fashions. I’m certain the patrons of the Opéra Garnier aren’t ready for this level of lamb at their chic event,” grumbled the young lord.

Constance threw back her head and laughed. “Then the opera house had better gird its loins, because ‘Miss Adventure,’ as Trusdale likes to call me, is determined to have a bloody good time tonight. With or without him. Mark my words, Welli, this is the start of night to remember.”

“And suddenly, that’s what I’m most afraid of,” said Welli as Bou-dicca yapped excitedly and bounced upon the silk cushions. Constance chuckled and stood to lean out the carriage door window to take in the Parisian air.

The most romantic city in Europe beguiled with its cherry-tree-lined walks, lush, manicured parks, elegant stone and iron buildings, bustling boutiques, and terraced cafés. Fine wine flowed, laughter drifted on the breeze, and the citrus perfume of pink peony flower beds mingled with the scent of fresh-baked goods from a thousand fine patisseries.

The sweet fragrances almost overcame the tang of horse manure that carpeted the streets of the world's prettiest capital. Along the paved sidewalk, besotted couples and their chaperones promenaded between stately matrons out for their evening constitutional and drunken aristocrats caught in the eternal circle between theater, restaurant, bar, and poker game.

Constance leaned out as far as she could over the carriage door, taking in the sights and sounds, reveling in a city that was almost as lovely as her hometown of Sheffield. Throw in a few extra fountains, and Paris might even rival her favorite soot-stained center of British industry.

Squinting, one might almost imagine the Seine to be as glorious as the River Don, glimmering in the soft evening sunshine that painted the city gold until the gas lamps were lit at ten.

Her breath caught beneath her corset. There, in between families strolling beside the river, a tall man in a black duster coat and a Stetson ran as if the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels. "What the—?"

Constance blinked, then roared, "Hearn, forget the opera." The carriage juddered to a halt in the middle of its lane, causing French coach and hansom drivers to share their opinion of Hearn's driving with raised voices and whips.

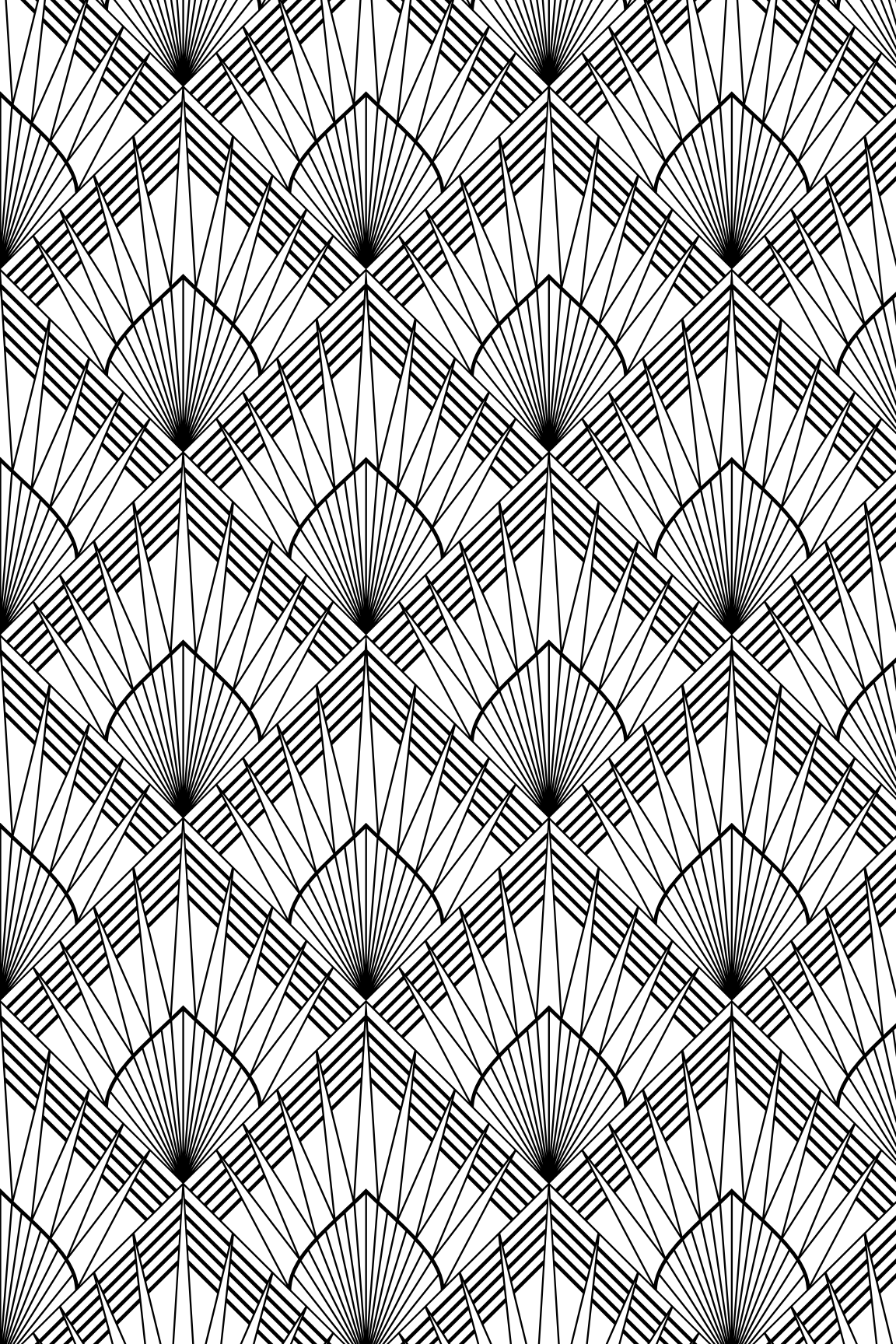
Welli peered through the window. "Good heavens, is that—?"

"Let's find out." She bellowed to the driver's box, "Hearn, follow that cowboy!"

Welli gaped at her.

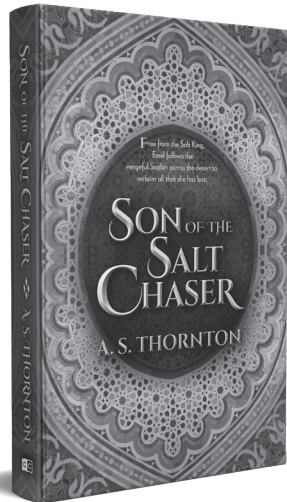
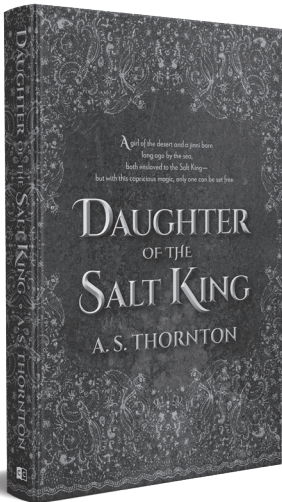
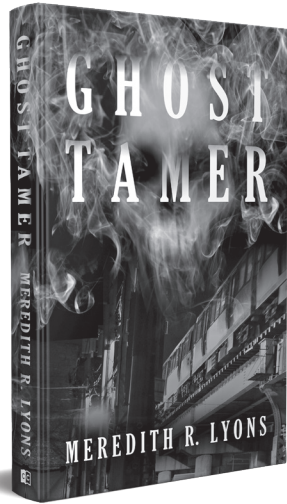
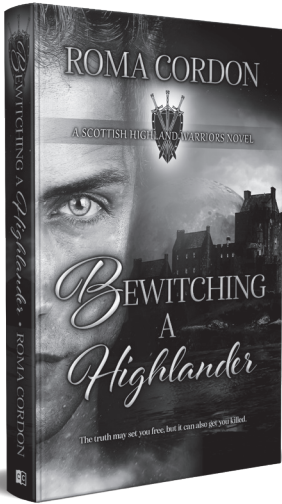
“Discreetly,” she yelled. “Very, very, discreetly.” She grinned at her cousin and leaned back out of the window, aware that this cautious approach was not one that would have occurred to her old impulsive self of an hour ago. The new, improved Baroness Haltwhistle was certainly full of surprises.

Constance couldn’t wait to find out what she’d do next . . .



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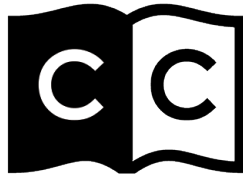
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# The grass was always greener in another dimension.

In a fantastical steam-powered world, eccentric aristocrat and secret arms dealer, Miss Constance Haltwhistle, has been blackmailed into stealing alien artifacts from the crown heads of Europe. Only the shady but annoyingly handsome US spy, “Liberty” Trusdale, can help her execute her perfect palace heists. As Constance creates chaos and mayhem across the Continent, monstrous creatures are plotting an interdimensional invasion of Earth. Will Constance and Trusdale stop bickering long enough to end the war of the worlds before it starts?

If you enjoy stories inspired by HG Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, you’ll love this gaslamp romp across an alternate 1890s Europe where our bickering heroes may just be the bad guys.



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