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FLAME

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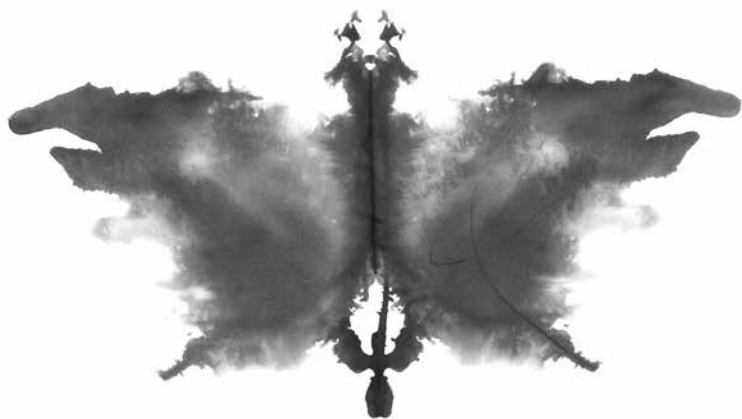
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Dear Reader,

If you are reading this you are already a time traveller, because this is the year 1894 and Queen Victoria is on the throne.

And if you are reading this you must be a friend, so I feel all right about sharing the secrets of the Butterfly Club with you.

Let me begin at the beginning. My name is Luna, and I suppose you would call me a time-thief. I live in a rather smart part of London with my Aunt Grace, who's been looking after me ever since my father disappeared. One Thursday Aunt Grace took me with her to her secret society, the Butterfly Club.

The Butterfly Club meets every Thursday afternoon in Greenwich, at the famous Royal Observatory, which is the Home of Time. It's called that because there is

a long brass line running through the courtyard of the observatory called the prime meridian, the point from which all time is measured.

Deep in the belly of the observatory is the Butterfly Room, a secret twelve-sided chamber where the Butterfly Club meet. It's called the Butterfly Room because there are butterflies on the walls - those dead ones pinned to little cards - in all the colours of the rainbow. The members of the Butterfly Club are the finest minds of Victorian society, people you might even have heard of in your time - people like Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin and Florence Nightingale.

And that's where I met my fellow time-thieves. You see, there are three of us.

Konstantin is from Prussia. He has loads of brothers who are all soldiers, and his father, Dr Tanius Kass, is a very clever inventor. Konstantin loves everything military, but because he was so ill when he was little, he couldn't be a soldier himself. But Konstantin is special in his own way, because he has a mechanical heart. His own heart didn't work so his father replaced it with a clockwork one.

The third time-thief is Aidan. Aidan is Irish, and he is a navigational engineer (or navy) who's been working on the railways since he was ten. Aidan knows everything there is to know about machines, and sometimes I think he loves them better than

people. And, like Konstantin, Aidan has a secret too, which he keeps very close to his chest.

The three of us are called time-thieves because we've been travelling in time, carrying out missions for the Butterfly Club. We use a contraption called the Time Train, which was designed by H. G. Wells, one of the club's members. We travel forward in time to collect inventions and treasures from the future. We never go backwards - no Tudors or Romans or even dinosaurs for us! The point is to bring back things which our age doesn't have yet, to speed up progress. Aunt Grace says our thieving is for 'the betterment of society'. I hope she's right. The Butterfly Club certainly seem to get a lot of money - and prizes - out of it.

Well, dear reader, Aidan, Konstantin and I have had quite a few journeys through the decades since the day we met, and we've faced many dangers. We've been to the freezing Atlantic Ocean in 1912 to try to steal a wireless radio from the good ship *Titanic*, and to the arid deserts of Egypt in 1922 to uncover the lost tomb of Tutankhamun. You can read all about our exploits in our earlier chronicles, *The Ship of Doom* and *The Mummy's Curse*.

I hope you enjoy this adventure too! I wonder where it will take us...

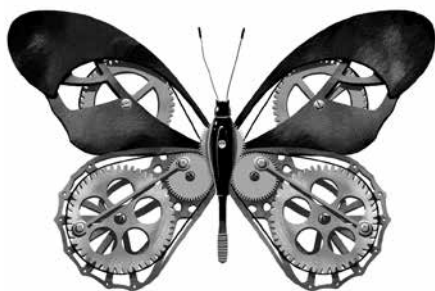
Yours until the end of time,

Luna Goodhart x

LONDON

5 FEBRUARY 1894





5 FEBRUARY 1894

9.15 a.m.

Aidan was the first to see the strange man walking down the railway track.

He was working with his father, Michael, and a gang of navies on the new railway snaking out of King's Cross Station – an iron way into the north which was to span rivers and burrow under mountains, a miracle of the modern age.

It was a bitter February morning. Aidan's breath smoked and his fingertips were numb. As much as he loved the work, and the music of the steel picks sparking on the iron rails, he couldn't help thinking of the arid sands and burning sun of Egypt. Even though to his father he'd been gone no time at all, in Aidan's timeline he'd spent months in the Valley of the Kings with Luna and

Konstantin, following the historic discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. Funny – when he was there, he'd have given anything to feel this cold, and now he'd give the Crown Jewels to be warm again. Aidan stopped work to blow on his fingers, and that's when he caught sight of the man.

He was an odd-looking fellow; a creature of contradictions. He was boxy and bow-legged and short in stature, but somehow impressive. He was wearing a frock coat and an opera cloak that bellied like a sail as he walked, as if he was moving unnaturally slowly: however, he seemed to cover the distance very swiftly. He seemed a man of importance, but as he came closer he looked no more than twenty. He had that crinkly hair that refuses to do as it is told. It puffed out on either side of his head like a clown's, but his face was serious, and his eyes had a strange silvery quality to their gaze.

'It must be Christmastide already,' murmured Aidan's father, who always had a joke ready. 'The pantomime's on.'

As Aidan and his father were working nearest to the station, the man arrived at them first and stopped. 'You are naffies?' he said in a strong accent which Aidan recognised, from his travels, as being from somewhere in the east of Europe.

‘Navvies,’ confirmed Michael O’Connell. ‘Navigational engineers.’

‘You haf chins?’

Instinctively Aidan put his hand to his face.

‘Strong chins?’

It was an odd question. True, Aidan’s jawline was not quite as masculine as he would like, but Da’s chin was covered in a glorious black beard. ‘I suppose so,’ said Da, leaning on his pick and pointing to his beard. ‘One here and one there. We have cheeks and noses too.’

‘No, no,’ said the odd little man, with a chuckle dry as tinder. ‘*Chins.*’ He performed a little mime, circling his forefinger and thumb on each hand and locking them together. Aidan and his father found themselves watching his hands. They were extraordinary – uncommonly white and delicate compared to their own rough working hands, and they moved in an exceptionally fluid way, graceful and swift.

‘Chins,’ the man said again. ‘One link, two link, three link...’

‘Oh *chains,*’ said Aidan, light dawning. ‘You want chains.’

‘Yes, zat is what I said,’ said the man patiently. ‘But they must be *strong* chins.’

As if he was addressing a Martian, Michael O'Connell said, 'How long?' He held out his hands like a fisherman boasting of his catch.

'Oh, not long, not long,' said the man. 'Only long enough to tie pair of feet together and dangle grown man over water tank.'

Aidan and his father exchanged a glance. They had uncannily similar blue eyes. They were both, separately, convinced that the stranger was, in fact, a Martian.

'Come with me,' said Aidan to the stranger. Then, to his father, 'I'll show him the offcuts.'

He beckoned to the stranger, who followed Aidan, picking his way over the tracks in his shiny black shoes. In an overgrown siding Aidan showed the little man various lengths of chain, left lying beside the tracks. Some had links as big as a man's fist; some had links as small as a thumbnail.

The stranger looked down at them speculatively. 'Are they strong chins?'

'None stronger,' said Aidan. 'Good Sheffield steel. These large-gauge ones...' He pointed to the biggest. 'They can pull a locomotive.' He mimed the pistons of a train with his arms, and made the sound of a train's whistle for good measure.

The man nodded with satisfaction. 'I take those.' He pointed to the length of chain with the biggest links. Then he fished out his pocketbook. 'I pay you for chins.'

'No, no,' said Aidan, goggling at the sheaf of banknotes. 'These are offcuts. Scrap.'

The man looked confused.

'Chain too long for purpose,' said Aidan, doing a little mime to explain. 'Spare bits cut off. Throw away. You take.'

The man smiled for the first time, a rather charming expression which transformed his serious face. 'I am very much obliged to you.' He got ready to pick up the chains, first donning a pair of gloves to protect those exceptional hands.

Aidan looked at him doubtfully. He didn't think his new friend had the muscle to carry the chains away. 'They're pretty heavy,' he said. 'I'll help you to carry them.' He coiled the chain expertly and heaved the bundle into his arms. The steel was so cold, it leached the warmth from his body and burned his hands. He led the stranger back down the track and through the bustling concourse of King's Cross Station. The cloaked stranger and the young navy carrying a huge serpent of chain caused the fine ladies in their crinolines and the city gentlemen in their

bowler hats to stare. Outside on the street a hansom cab was waiting. The man got into the carriage and Aidan passed the chain up to the driver, to travel beside him on the box.

The stranger put his arm on the windowsill and leant out. 'You are very kind boy,' he said. 'What is your name?'

'Aidan O'Connell,' Aidan replied.

The stranger looked at Aidan. His eyes were curiously intense, and seemed to have a light all of their own, almost as if they were made of mirrors. 'You come to the Egyptian Hall tonight. You know it?'

'*Do* I?' said Aidan. 'It's the big fancy theatre in Piccadilly.'

'The very one,' said the man. 'Come at seven o'clock. Bring some friends. I put your name on door.' He reached behind Aidan's ear and brought out a shiny new sixpence. 'You will see quite a show.' Then he tapped on the roof to signal the driver to go.

Aidan stood for a moment, looking at the coin the man had dropped into his hand. Then he went back through the station and trudged back along the iron track to rejoin his father.

'What was all that about?' asked Michael O'Connell, when Aidan reached him.

‘He’s in the theatre business, far’s I can make out,’ his son replied. ‘Works at the Egyptian Hall. Maybe he needed the chains for security – to lock the doors at night or something.’ Aidan picked up his shovel. ‘Must be doing well, though. Fella had more money than sense. Pocketbook full of fivers, he had.’ He didn’t mention the magic sixpence.

Michael O’Connell brought his pick down on the pinion with a ringing spark. ‘Must be nice.’

Aidan shovelled some gravel to shore up the sleeper. ‘He wants me to go to his play tonight, and to bring a couple of guests. You want to come?’

His father laughed. ‘You know me, son. I’d rather be inside a coffin than a theatre. Besides...’ His blue eyes twinkled. ‘I can think of company you’d much rather take – two young folks you’ve been panting to see again like a dog on a hot day.’

