

An Extract from Chapter Four – The Glass-maker

Later in the story, Lily has ventured out of the Tower, as the new apprentice and assistant to Doctor Theophilus. They have pushed their way through the crowded streets of Agora, and have arrived at the shop of Miss Devine, a glassmaker. But, as soon as the Doctor disappears into the back room, Lily discovers that Miss Devine has a sideline in quite a different business – the extraction, bottling and selling of people’s emotions...

Inside the room, the shelves were full of glass phials. Inside each one was something that shimmered in the half-light of an old lantern. The doctor and Miss Devine slipped behind the long, low counter, and went on into a back room that was lit by the flickering glow of a glass-blower’s furnace. Left on her own, Lily began to sweep her eyes across the shelves. Each miniature bottle had something written upon it, but in the gloom she couldn’t quite make out the words. She squinted closer, focusing on one deep maroon liquid. There was something scratched into the glass – a name: *Ambition*.

‘It’s a fine one, that.’

Lily jumped. A figure had emerged from the shadows. For a moment, she thought it was Miss Devine, but then she saw that this woman was younger and even thinner. Red curls, tangled and knotted, obscured much of her pale face, so all Lily could see were two large blue eyes, peering at her with a strange brightness. Lily noticed that she held one of the phials between her fingers – a pale yellow liquid that seemed to shake even though her hands held it steady.

‘Is it some kind of perfume?’ Lily asked, trying to be polite to cover her unease. She had seen something like this in the old dressing room of the tower, a relic from the Count’s mother.

The woman laughed. ‘Nothing but the smell of success there, young miss. That’s pure ambition, bottled for sale. Expensive, too. One of Miss Devine’s finest. They say she milks it out of servants in the old houses, keeping them docile for their masters. Makes everyone happy.’

Lily looked back at the bottle. This must be a joke, surely, but the woman spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Gloria!’ The sharp voice of Miss Devine, who had reappeared from the next room, cut across their thoughts. The woman looked up, smiling. Miss Devine gave a businesslike nod.

‘Your usual, I take it?’

‘Yes, Miss Devine,’ Gloria said hurriedly, holding up the phial of yellow liquid for inspection. ‘I wouldn’t dream of going anywhere else.’

‘Good girl.’

Lily watched as Miss Devine tore off a strip of paper from a long roll on the counter. She wrote with practised speed, dripping the wax and sealing it almost before Gloria had detached a small leather bag from her belt and placed it on the counter. Lily watched as Gloria fumbled with her signet ring, before plunging it into the wax, leaving her symbol, a pedestal within a wreath of leaves, next to Miss Devine’s stamp – a phial of liquid. The glass-maker took hold of the bag, opened it and gave a deep sniff.

‘I see the spice merchant on Aurora Road has been using your services again, Gloria. Fine wares, very useful.’

‘Is it enough?’ Gloria asked, twisting her long sleeves between her fingers.

Lily noticed that she had begun to rub her wrists together nervously.

Miss Devine smiled. ‘For today, Gloria. Since you are such a good customer.’

Gloria nodded gleefully and tucked the tiny bottle into her pocket. Smiling, she turned to Lily.

‘The best emotion in the city, miss,’ she said, as if imparting a great secret. ‘The very best.’ And with that she left the shop.

Miss Devine deftly rolled up Gloria’s contract and slipped it, along with the drawstring bag, under the counter.

‘Your master may be some time, girl. He is selecting alchemical equipment from my storeroom.’ The glass-maker stepped round the counter, resting one hand on Lily’s shoulder. It felt hard and dry. ‘How long have you worked for this physician?’

‘Not long, madam,’ Lily said, easing herself away from Miss Devine’s touch, while keeping her eyes respectfully lowered. There was no point in being bold with someone she didn’t know, especially when she seemed to have power over her master.

‘Are you prepared for your duties?’ Miss Devine took a strand of Lily’s dark hair and twisted it round her finger. ‘You’ve seen work, girl, I can see it in your hands. But have you seen death?’

Lily felt her stomach begin to churn. She had tried to keep that thought out of her head.

‘Only once, madam,’ she said. ‘When I took the doctor his lunch . . . down in his workroom . . .’ The awful blank stare began to rise before her and she shuddered.

‘A doctor’s assistant must see much death, girl. Wounds and sickness, and then there are the flies . . .’ Miss Devine smiled. ‘Forgive me, but you must be prepared. You look pale at the thought of it.’

‘I . . .’ Lily swallowed. She could feel her insides squirming.

It was stupid; she had always told herself that a dead person couldn’t harm her, but . . .

‘It’s blood. It makes me feel sick . . . It . . .’ Lily faltered. She didn’t know the word for what she felt.

‘Don’t worry. Lily, is it?’ Miss Devine said, walking back behind the counter. ‘Disgust is natural, one of the prime emotions. Of course –’ she leaned forward, resting her arms on the counter, a motherly smile on her face – ‘it is also quite a valuable commodity.’

Lily looked up, startled, as Miss Devine continued.

‘Useful to people to have a little extra disgust sometimes. It works wonders as a slimming aid for society women, while a touch of repulsion helps people to take a more balanced view of their business. I do quite a brisk trade in disgust. And a child’s disgust is the freshest, of course, before we become hardened to the world.’

Lily looked up. All around her, the shelves stretched up to the ceiling. On them, the tiny bottles clustered together, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. And each one, every one, contained part of someone, some piece of their mind, boiled down and ready for sale. She shuddered.

‘Miss Devine . . .’ Lily stopped. It seemed unnatural; her feet itched to run away, to wait for the doctor outside. But then again, what use was disgust? Fear kept her safe, anger gave her drive, but disgust? She could have done without that when they served food at the orphanage.

‘In payment for some of that glassware that your master is choosing, shall we say?’

Miss Devine pulled forward another length of paper and cut it off with a blade of glass. Lily watched as the contract formed before her. Three pieces of alchemical equipment in exchange for her disgust. She felt dazed, still not quite able to take it in. Her heart was beating in her mouth. But then, out of her churning thoughts, a practical voice asserted itself. She would be able to help the doctor without flinching; he could continue his research. It would solve so many problems.

She pressed her ring down into the warm wax.

Miss Devine rolled up the paper and drew aside a curtain in a corner of the room. Beyond it, a dark chamber filled with a large and tangled shadow greeted Lily’s eyes. As Miss Devine brought in the lantern, the light gleamed off

a web of glass tubing curling round in a labyrinth of globes and beakers. In the far corner, a mass of pipes fed into a large, squat device covered in cogs and pistons. In the centre of the apparatus, beneath the largest of the glass spheres, there was a leather chair.

‘Sit down, Lily. It will only take a moment.’

Lily moved forward, her footfalls resonating through the apparatus. As she sat in the chair, a feeling of unease stole over her. Miss Devine lowered a mask of smoked glass from the middle of the machine. Lily opened her mouth to speak, but her words were stifled as the glass-maker covered her face with the mask. She could feel tubes spiralling out from it as it pressed down over her eyes, nose and mouth.

‘Don’t move, my dear,’ Miss Devine called out, as she scuttled across to the machine in the corner.

Lily lifted her hand to move the mask, deciding to speak, to say that perhaps this wasn’t a good idea.

There was a deep hum. The machine was on.

For a moment, Lily felt nothing. Then she became aware of a rushing behind her ears, as though wind was howling through the pipes above her. The noise grew louder and louder. Her head was filling with air and the wind was reaching down, deeper and deeper . . .

Then, rising inside her, Lily felt happiness, sadness, fear, elation, horror, indifference: each flashed through her more intensely than ever before, bubbling up from within, passing into her head and then, with a rush, out through her eyes and mouth. Dimly, she saw a rainbow of fizzing, glowing gases escaping up into the tubes above her, spinning faster and faster round the web of glass beyond.

Lily was numb. She sat dully, watching the colours whirl. Somewhere above, she saw a thick, black gas separate from the others, saw it sink down, condensing, dripping into a flask beside her – her disgust. She felt emptied out, hollow. Then there was another noise. Lily turned her eyes. The doctor had pushed his way into the room. He was shouting something, but she was too tired to listen, too sluggish to move her head. He pulled one of the controls.

With a rush, the machine shuddered into reverse. For one awful moment, the coloured gases hovered above her. Then they all fell at once, streaming into her. Lily gasped, clutching at the mask, trying to tear it off her face as every emotion she had ever felt forced its way into her head. Laughing and crying, screaming and smiling, she leapt up from the chair. Behind her, she heard the wrench of glass and then a crash. The mask flew from her face, shattering on the ground.

She looked up as the doctor loomed towards her, his face full of rage. She had never seen him angry before. Even as she looked, Lily felt another surge of emotion, but just one this time – fear. Overwhelming, petrifying fear of that face. She turned and ran.

She ran through the shop. She ran out into the streets. She kept running, faster and faster, running until her legs ached and her lungs screamed for rest. But it was not until the fear faded, until her overwhelming panic settled again into the back of her mind, that she stopped and sank to her knees, gasping from exhaustion.

She lay down in the filth and mud, and closed her eyes.