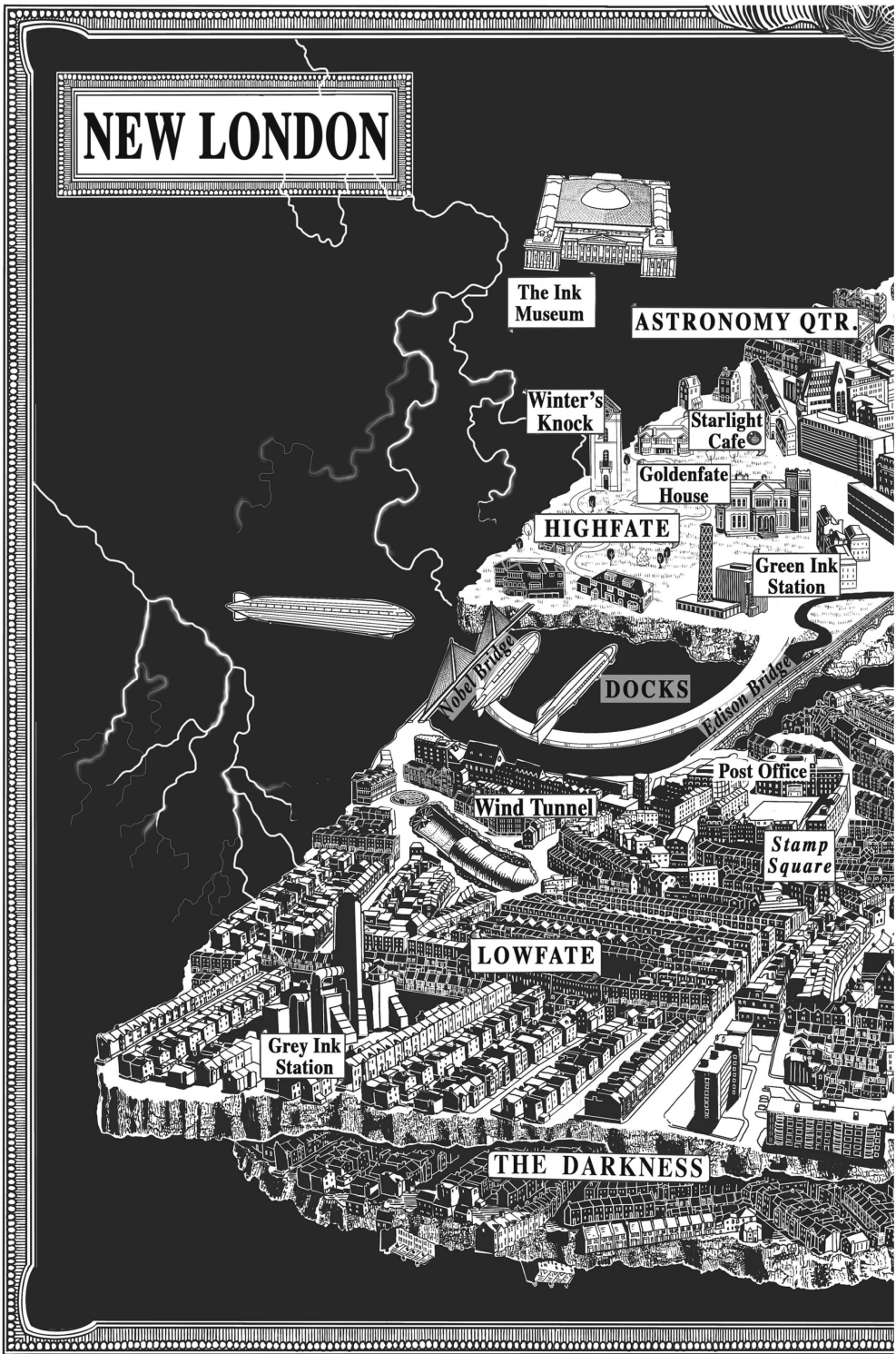


# NEW LONDON









# CHAPTER ONE

## Darkwell

**T**here was something wrong with Metty's ticket. She inspected it for the hundredth time while the train thrummed around her and snaked through the tunnels of the London Underground. She had to squint to read the letters at the top. *Darkwell*, they said in a dangerous purple shimmer.

But there was no such place!

Frowning, Metty turned the ticket over and checked the back. The small print was hard to decipher, not that it mattered. She'd spent hours poring over maps of the Underground, using her finger to trace all the colourful routes. She knew them by heart, and she'd never seen anywhere called Darkwell.

And now their train was racing towards the end of the line. They were fast running out of stations.

Metty jumped as the captain let out an almighty snore, drawing disapproving looks from the other passengers. She glanced at her father. He was slumped against the window, fast asleep, with his arms crossed and a trilby hat pulled low to cover his eyes.

Anyone would think he hadn't rested in days, but the captain always seemed exhausted. Their housekeeper said he'd spent too many years in the navy, being rocked to sleep by the churning ocean, and that he'd forgotten how to live on dry land.

Metty was about to prod him when a speaker crackled above her head: *'The next station is Aldgate, where this train terminates. Please take your belongings with you when you leave.'*

'Captain,' she whispered, jabbing her father. 'Captain, wake up!'

He snorted awake, sitting up so violently that he almost lost his hat. His deep brown eyes, puffy with tiredness, swept over the carriage, then found Metty beside him. 'What happened? Are we there yet?'

'We're at Aldgate,' she said as the train chugged into the station. She hitched up her eyebrows, giving him an exasperated look. 'It's the end of the line.'

'Not for us.' The captain yawned and settled back again.

'But the voice on the speaker said . . . Look, everyone's getting off.'

'Don't worry about what they're all doing. None of them are going where we are.'

'You mean Darkwell Station?' Metty said in a doubtful voice.

'That's the one.'

'But there's no such place.'

'How do you know?' said the captain, eyeing her thoughtfully.

'Because I've never seen it, and it's not on any maps.'

A smile stretched across her father's face as he sat up again and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. 'Fact is, my darling, the most interesting places never are. And I can see that upsets you terribly.' He chuckled and bumped Metty under the chin. 'Now hold on to your seat. Tightly.'

'Why?' she said with a twinge of nerves.

'Because I believe we're about to set off.'

Metty had only just grabbed the nearby pole running from the floor to the ceiling when a metallic squeal echoed outside, followed by a rumble that sent shivers through the entire train. It sounded as if something was tearing up the tracks in front of them. Metty winced and hunched her shoulders towards her ears, willing the noise to stop.

At last, the rumbling faded, and she twisted round to look through the window. She couldn't see anything apart from the platform and a set of stairs leading up to the street. All

the other passengers had disappeared, leaving just her and the captain inside the train.

The speaker whirred above her head again: *'The next station is Darkwell.'*

Her father grimaced, as though bracing himself for something unpleasant. 'This bit always makes me want to throw up,' he said. Then, seeing Metty's horrified expression, he added, 'Don't worry – I'll try to avoid you.'

'But what's about to . . .?'

The question slid back down her throat as the train lurched and rolled forward on the tracks. They were suddenly tilting like a cart at the top of a rollercoaster about to plunge down a terrifying slope. There was a click-clacking sound as the wheels of the train turned faster and faster, picking up speed.

And then, before Metty could even scream, they dived into a pitch-black tunnel that must have opened in front of them.

Blood roared in Metty's ears, making her dizzy. The carriage lights flickered off, and there was nothing but blackness in the descending tunnel, thick and gloopy like an ocean of tar. Her insides felt as if they'd turned to soup, sloshing about as the train dropped through endless darkness. At last, they screeched to a stop, drawing level with a new platform.

Metty looked queasily at her hands. She was gripping the

pole so tightly that her knuckles had turned chalky white. The captain's arm was stretched across her chest, pinning her to the seat. She hadn't even noticed him reach out during the chaos of flying downhill.

*'This is Darkwell,'* declared the speaker in a bored voice, *'where this train terminates. Please take your belongings with you when you leave.'*

'There,' said the captain, getting shakily to his feet. His face had lost its normal ruddiness and looked sickly. 'That wasn't so bad, was it?'

Metty observed him in frosty silence.

She glanced around as she followed her father off the train and out of Darkwell Station, holding the sleeve of his coat. They appeared to be in some kind of cave. The ceiling was a shelf of black rock brightened by rows of twinkling icicles. Crammed beneath it, and stretching away from the station, was a short, cluttered street.

Metty counted twenty buildings altogether: big Gothic townhouses, mysterious shops, strange little cafés and a theatre with a flashing sign. There was something old-fashioned about the place, like stumbling into a street from the 1920s. Halloween was coming up in a week, and the residents of Darkwell had decorated accordingly. Pumpkins leered in front of the tall houses. Cobwebs were draped all over the lampposts alongside huge rubber spiders, enchanted to twitch



their spindly legs. Metty's eyes widened at the magical green fog swirling through the cave. It gathered round the buildings, conjuring a delightfully ghoulish atmosphere.

'Are we *underneath* the Underground?' she asked the captain in an awed voice.

'We're underneath Old London,' her father said. 'Quite a long way under, as it happens.'

'But why's this place hidden? Does everyone know about it?'

'Oh, plenty of people *know*. Getting down here's the tricky part – tickets are rather hard to come by, and horrifically expensive. Darkwell's a bit . . . exclusive, you see.'

'Illegal, you mean?' Metty said with a mixture of dread and excitement.

Her father was normally very respectable. She was surprised he'd brought her to somewhere so shady, never mind so obviously magical. Magic had been strictly controlled in England for the last few decades. There were a few exceptions, of course: harmless things like using enchantments to fix a broken leg, or hurry along awkward roadworks, or communicate with someone via mirror, but most acts of magic were against the law. According to the captain, the streets of Old London hadn't always been so bare and colourless, without a single enchantment to brighten them, although they'd been like that for as long as Metty could remember.

'Not illegal *exactly*.' Her father steered her towards the largest and most glamorous townhouse, right at the end of the street. 'Darkwell's got a bit of a reputation, that's all, like most pockets of magic left over from the old days. Don't look so horrified, Met. You know I wouldn't bring you down here for no good reason. Speaking of which . . .'

They stopped opposite the looming townhouse, and the captain rang the doorbell. A moment later, an elderly butler came to greet them. Tattooed on the man's hand, just beneath his knuckles, was a silver key. Metty stared at it in fascination, trying to remember what such a tattoo meant. Her fingers strayed towards her jacket pocket and the little book tucked inside it.

'Afternoon,' her father said, sweeping off his hat. The cheerful boom of his voice startled Metty, and she lowered her hand again.

'Good afternoon, sir,' the butler replied warily. 'How may I help you?'

'We've come to meet the famous prophetess.'

'Indeed. And is Madame LeBeau expecting you?'

'I should hope so. I made the appointment last week and paid an extortionate amount for it.' The captain paused, looking down at Metty with a proud smile, although she noticed a hint of dread in his eyes. 'Bit of a special day for us, actually. It's my daughter's birthday, you see.'

'Ah,' said the old man with a curious glance at Metty. 'In that case, you'd better come inside.'

They followed him into a hallway with a black chandelier and a polished hardwood floor. Framed posters decorated the walls, the kind you might find in a theatre advertising upcoming shows. One drew Metty's eye in particular: a portrait of a lady wearing a sequined dress and holding a crystal ball in her long dark fingers. Words flamed across the poster.

# Madame Fayola LeBeau

*Celebrated, World-renowned Medium and Prophetess.*

*Witness the Exquisite Oracle for*

**ONE WEEK ONLY**

*at the*

*Shadow Trove Theatre*

*Doors open at 8pm*

*Ticket Prices Non-negotiable. No Refunds.*

*Satisfying Fate Not Guaranteed.*

'That's not who we've come to see?' Metty whispered. 'She looks terrifying!'

The captain chuckled. 'Don't tell me you're getting cold feet.'

'I'm not!'

Metty had been dying to see a prophetess for ages, longing for her tenth birthday to hurry up and arrive. She wasn't about to miss out now the day was finally here.

Her father looked at her kindly. 'It's normal to get anxious before a fating, you know. Everyone feels a little—'

Metty groaned. 'I'm not anxious.'

The butler led them to the first door in the hallway. 'Please take a seat while I inform the lady of your arrival,' he said with a sweep of his hand.

The captain held the door for Metty, who found herself entering an old-fashioned drawing room with vintage furniture and heavy curtains. There were two long sofas and a coffee table in the middle of the room, holding a pile of magazines and newspapers.

Metty was about to sit down when something distracted her: golden glimmers of light trickling down the walls like honey. She looked up, frowning, and a gasp escaped her lips.

Floating on the high ceiling were hundreds of jellyfish. Some were tiny, others as big as watermelons, and their bodies shone light into the otherwise gloomy space. Metty

was entranced, unable to look away. The jellyfish were clearly painted onto the ceiling, and yet they moved like real living creatures, gliding along as if in water, their tentacles and spongy heads rippling at the touch of invisible waves.

The butler cleared his throat. 'Wonderful, aren't they? My mistress has quite an eye for enchanted decor,' he said, watching the jellyfish with a thoughtful smile. Metty hadn't sensed him creep up behind her. 'I take it this is your *tenth* birthday, child?'

'Um, yes,' she said, tearing her eyes from the ceiling.

'And that's why you've come to see Madame LeBeau?'

Metty swallowed and gave a determined nod. 'I'm here to find out my fate.'