



# Chapter 1

**H**ECTOR WAS LIKE A CASTAWAY who had washed up on a room of velvet curtains and marble floors. The revelers might as well have been wild animals ready to tear off a chunk of his flesh.

He felt utterly lost, alien and alone.

As Hector watched from a corner of the room, ladies and gentlemen partnered to dance, women fanned themselves and smiled, and men greeted each other with a tilt of the head.

He had attended many glittering balls, but none in this city. He knew no one here except for Étienne and Luc, and he was waiting with breathless expectation for the arrival of Valérie Beaulieu.

The first thing he'd done upon disembarking was to make discreet inquiries about the whereabouts of the lady. He was glad to discover she was in Loisail and, moreover, that she would be at the ball thrown by the De Villiers. He had no direct connection to the De Villiers—or hardly anyone else in Loisail, for that matter, having spent the past ten years abroad—but he did know Étienne Lémy, who was able to secure him an invitation.

Hector had dressed according to the weight of the occasion in a new double-breasted black dress coat, white shirt, and a white bow tie. White gloves and mother-of-pearl studs completed the ensemble. In his

excitement, he arrived unfashionably early, not wishing to miss Valérie, and after greeting his host had positioned himself strategically so that he could watch every elegant guest who entered the vast ballroom. But Hector had not been long at his post when he heard a couple of ladies commenting that Mrs. Beaulieu had been taken ill and would not be in attendance, which came as a shock to the women since Valérie Beaulieu's missing the opening of the season seemed unthinkable.

All his plans in tatters, the whole reason for his attendance at the ball suddenly vanishing, Hector did not know what to do with himself. Unable to stand the music and the noise, he escaped to the library, which was gloriously empty, its furniture decorated with a profusion of brass inlays, the bookcases primly protected with glass doors. The only reasonable course of action at this point was to wait there until he could perform a proper exit without seeming rude. He could not possibly retire until nine o'clock.

Hector consulted his watch, and after deliberating, he decided he'd brush up on his history. He wound up flipping through the pages of a book without touching them, having dragged a chair closer to him with a motion of his left hand, his talent at work. He did not read a single line, too troubled by thoughts of Valérie Beaulieu to make heads or tails of the words.

When they last saw each other, they'd both been nineteen, nothing but children, really. But he'd loved her. She had been beautiful, sophisticated, captivating. A perverse part of him hoped that time had somewhat washed away the colors from her face, but in his heart he knew this was impossible and that Valérie Beaulieu must remain as he remembered her: the most devastating woman in the room.

And he would not be seeing her that night.

The clock on the wall struck nine and the door opened. In walked a young woman in a blue pastel silk and velvet dress with appliquéd flowers along the bodice and skirt, the sleeves rather puffed out, as was in vogue.

She closed the door, taking several steps into the room before she raised her head and caught sight of him. "Sir," she said. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize there was anybody here."

"It's no matter," he replied, closing the book with his hands rather than with his mind; he reserved displays of his talent for the stage. He

did not add anything else. He was hardly in the mood for polite conversation. The De Villiers prided themselves on attracting the cream of the crop to their functions—the Beautiful Ones, rather than the New People. The barons of barely minted empires of telegraph wires and fresh steel could socialize elsewhere. Hector had been offered an invitation, proof of Étienne’s charm and his connections, but he knew he was, at best, a novelty for these aristocrats; at worst, an intruder. He did not wish to befriend any of them and threw the young woman a frosty look. The girl did not take his cue.

She looked at him carefully, her lips curving into a smile as she moved closer. “I know you. You are Hector Auvray.”

“Pardon me, were we introduced?” he asked, frowning. He was sure he had not seen this girl before. He had been presented to the hosts, and Étienne had pointed out a few people, but not her.

“I recognize your face from the posters around town. You are performing at the Royal. *Phantasmagoric: Feats of Wonder*, isn’t it? I was hoping to meet you,” she said.

“Oh?” he replied, a noncommittal sound, even if his interest had been piqued. Few aristocrats would admit to knowing the name of a vulgar entertainer. Instead, they nodded their heads politely and either assumed or pretended he was a slightly more elevated type of person.

“What were you reading?” she asked, pointing at the book he was clutching between his hands.

“History. Miss—”

“Nina,” she said, stretching out her hand. “Antonina, really, but I rather hate it. I’m named after a witch of a great-aunt, the most awful wretch who ever lived. Well, not quite, but I resent the association, and therefore it is Nina.”

“Hector, though you already know that part.” He shook her hand. “It’s probably best if we exit this room now. A bachelor such as myself, a young lady such as yourself—we wouldn’t want to cause a scandal.”

Truly, he wanted only to get rid of her and could not have cared what anyone thought. If the girl wished to walk around the house without an escort, then let it be. He had come to speak to one woman and one woman alone. If she was not there, then Hector would wallow in his velvet misery.

“I can’t possibly leave now,” she replied.

“Why not?” he asked, annoyed.

She did not notice his tone of voice or did not care. Instead, she took off the dance card dangling by her wrist and held it up for him to look at.

“If I go out there now, Didier Dompierre is going to ask me for a dance, and if you’d ever danced with Didier, you would know he is the most terrible dancer. I have been told he’ll put his name down for two dances, and you must be aware a lady cannot refuse a dance from a gentleman. It would be uncivil.”

Hector did not understand why a man might want to corral this particular girl for two dances in a row. She was not an enviable beauty—somewhat run-of-the-mill, to be frank—and her square jaw, black hair, and thin lips were rather unstylish. She possessed eyes of a pretty shade of hazel, though, and her dress was very fine; perhaps that was enough for a young chap with poor dance skills such as this Didier Dompierre.

“Then your thought is to spend the rest of the evening here, avoiding him?”

“Not the rest of the evening, but, say, a half an hour, and by then he will have found some other girl he can stomp on,” she replied, sitting in the chair in front of him and stretching her legs.

“This does not seem the best-conceived plan.”

“It is a plan, which is what matters. Whom are *you* hiding from?” she asked. If she were another woman, this might have been mistaken for an attempt at flirting. Valérie would have taken the opportunity to lace her voice with honey, but the girl was plain and spoke plainly.

“I am not hiding from anyone,” he said.

“Do you make it a habit to go to balls, then, and creep into the library to brush up on your history?”

“Do you talk to all men in this manner?” he replied, growing more curious than irritated.

She toyed with her dance card, putting it again on her wrist, and gave him a mortified look. “I apologize. This is only the second dance I’ve attended, and I can see it will end catastrophically already.”

“This is the second party of the De Villiers’ you’ve attended?” he asked.

“The second party in the city I’ve ever attended, and this is the beginning of the Grand Season, the true test of a lady’s mettle. You must not think me a complete fool. I went to a couple of dances in Monti-

pouret, but it was different. Small affairs. Loisail is large and there are many people and the rules are different.”

He was talking to a country girl, for clearly the designation of “woman” would have been misplaced on her. Worse than that, a country rube. But Hector could not help but feel more sympathy than distaste. He had, after all, been a country nothing at one time and less polished than this girl.

He smiled despite himself, to assuage her. “No doubt you’ll learn them soon. You seem quick-witted.”

“Thank you,” she replied, appearing rather pleased with his words.

She looked at him curiously and another smile crossed her face. “I must confess, I know more about you than your name from looking at the posters. I read about you in *The Gazette for Physical Research*. Alexander Nicolay has been investigating your telekinetic abilities.”

“Are you a fan of *The Gazette*?” he asked, surprised that she’d be informed about Nicolay’s research. He’d bumped into the man a couple of years back. He was attempting to measure and classify all psychokinetic talents and convinced Hector to let him take his pulse while he manipulated objects with the force of his mind. It was the sort of thing people did not think to bring up in casual conversation.

“Not particularly. But I am interested in the phenomena. They say you are one of the great psychokinetics of our era.”

“I’m a decent performer,” he replied.

“Modest, too.”

She was a curious girl, and now he reassessed her again. Not an aristocrat and not a country rube and—what exactly? He didn’t like it when he couldn’t classify people.

He gestured toward the door. “Shall I escort you to the ballroom?”

She looked down at her dance card, carefully running her fingers around its edge. “Yes. If you feel inclined, you might partner with me for a dance. I would be really thankful. I was not exaggerating when I said Didier Dompierre is the worst dancer you’ve ever seen. Is that a terrible request? It’s not, is it?”

He was somewhat amused by the question and her tone of voice, and though the girl’s nervous energy at first did not sit too well with him, he had to admit he felt a bit relieved by her intrusion. He was full to bursting with thoughts of Valérie and could do with a few minutes more of

light chatter. It would also satisfy the practical necessity of actually showing himself at the ball, which he ought to do at one point. He could not spend every single minute in the library. He could wallow later, in the privacy of his apartment.

“One dance.”

She took his arm before he offered it to her as they exited the library, which was presumptuous.

The owners of the house had placed mirrors on the walls of the corridor that led to the ballroom, an ostentatious touch, but this was a new trend that was sweeping the capital and soon the nation. Whatever took the fancy of Loisail would take the fancy of the whole of Levrene; this was a known fact.

The ballroom was huge, with tall gilded mirrors reflecting the attendees, magnifying the space: the party seemed to go on forever. Above them hung monstrous chandeliers that sparkled with all their might, and all around them there were ladies with their shoulders bare, in their fine silks, while the gentlemen stood sober and proud, creating a glorious rainbow of colors, from the restrained browns of the matriarchs to the pale pinks of the unmarried women.

Hector carefully took hold of Antonina’s hand and they joined the dance. He did not consider himself an excellent dancer, though he could manage. His partner fared poorly, but gave the feeling of being entertained.

“Do you know Loisail well, Mr. Auvray? Or is this your first time here? It wouldn’t be, would it?”

“I don’t know it well, no. I’ve spent only a few days in Loisail before my move here.”

“How do you find it? Is it different from the cities where you’ve lived?” she asked.

He thought of the myriad countries and stages where he’d toured. To be back in his country of birth, in Levrene, was to be back home, though not due to a quirk of geography but because this was where Valérie resided. Here, in Loisail, even if she was hidden away at this moment. She existed and colored the city for him, lit it brighter than the elegant iron lampposts.

“Interesting. I have yet to form a strong opinion of it,” he said politely.

“Then you intend to remain for a while?”

“I will be performing for a few months here, yes. As to whether I intend to make it my permanent base of operations, we shall see. And you?”

He did not expect her to launch into a complete and honest answer. A touch of coquetry, the outline of a smile, those would have been suitable. This had been Valérie’s way.

The girl clutched his hand excitedly. “I’ll most definitely be here until the summer. I am spending all of the spring with my cousin. My mother thinks a time in the city would do me good. Where are you lodging? My cousin’s house is in Saint Illare.”

“I think you’ve asked another bold question,” he informed her.

“Is it, really?”

Her words were candid and he found himself amused by the naivety. Rather than schooling her with a scowl and a clipped yes, which normally suited him magnificently, he gave her a proper answer.

“To the east. Boniface. Not as smart as your cousin’s house, I would wager,” he said.

“Boniface. Is that so you can remain near the theater?”

“Indeed.”

“I’m sure it’s smart enough. Boniface.”

As the dance ended, a young man moved in their direction, his eyes on Antonina. Hector was going to incline his head and release the girl, but on contemplating the look of pure panic that crossed her face, he did his best to suppress a chuckle and instead asked her for a second dance. She accepted and told him the man who had been moving toward them was poor Didier. In the end, he danced a total of three dances with Nina, but since two of the three were lively stevkas, they did not speak more than a few words.

After he had thanked her for the dances and strolled away, Étienne Lémy and his little brother, Luc, wandered over. Étienne was Hector’s age and Luc a handful of years younger, though looking at them, people always swore they were twins, so alike were they, both possessing the same blond hair and stylish mustache. They furthered the illusion that evening by wearing matching gray vests.

“There you are, you devil. I couldn’t find you anywhere,” Étienne said, clasping his shoulder. “For a moment I thought you’d left.”