

The Stygian Society

by Elaine Cunningham

Most men would enjoy a moonlit stroll with a beautiful woman, especially on the last night of Carnival, when all of Vienna donned masks and indulged in merry celebration. Commander Leonard Gebhardt, director of the Stygian Society's Austrian branch, was in no mood for such frivolities.

A playful wind snatched at his top hat. Gebhardt let it go, and good riddance to it. Carnival season and all the claptrap that came with it could not end soon enough to suit him. These were serious times. Wizardry had taken hold like a cancer, corrupting the minds and souls of its practitioners and endangering the empire. Yet the imperial palace blazed with festive light, and a steady stream of carriages delivered revelers clad in elaborate masks and costumes.

Gebhardt could think of few places less suited to covert activities than the Schönbrunn Palace gardens, but the woman beside him had insisted upon testing the new team members at this time and place. The opinions of Katharina Schratt, a famous actress who was also friend and confidant to the emperor himself, were not easily dismissed.

He glanced at his companion. Her costume, like the woman herself, bordered on scandalous without quite crossing the line. The Elizabethan style of her outer *robe du soir* was entirely appropriate for Carnival, but the underlying gown barely covered her hips! Snug leggings and well-fitted green boots outlined every curve of her exposed legs. A green mask and a liberal application of face paint had rendered her features quite unrecognizable. The elegant companion of Emperor Franz Joseph had disappeared; tonight, she was not Katharina Schratt but only the Spellsling.

Or so Gerhardt fervently hoped. More than one Spellsling had crossed the border between alchemy and wizardry. The damage someone like Katharina Schratt could do if she succumbed to magic's dark allure was almost unimaginable.

"You have lost your hat, Herr Commander," she observed. "Would you like to retrieve it, or shall I conjure you another?"

Her timing was unsettling, and so was her teasing tone. At least, Gebhardt *hoped* she was mocking him for his unspoken concerns. Still, it seemed prudent to backtrack a few steps and pluck the wretched hat from a garden hedge.

"You look quite dashing," she said, eyeing the cut of his evening cape with approval, "but I still maintain that the pirate captain costume would have suited you better."

It occurred to Gebhardt that she might be flirting. Most improper!

"We are not here to garner attention," he snapped. "Might I remind you, madam, that the Stygian Society prefers clandestine methods?"

"And may I remind you, sir, that life seldom takes our preferences into consideration?"

This, he could not refute.

They walked toward the palace without further speech. Gravel crunched underfoot, announcing their presence with each step. One of the lions in the imperial menagerie grumbled as they passed the east gate of the Tiergarten. A delighted shriek and giggle rose above the splashing of the Neptune Fountain, revealing the hiding place of playful lovers.

Gephardt glanced behind him, over the sweeping expanse of lawn to where the Gloriette crowned the hill overlooking the palace grounds. Its classical pillars gleamed in the torchlight, and the frivolous strains of a waltz floated down from its brightly lit dining hall. With so much activity about, the new team members would be hard-pressed to carry out their assignments.

Perhaps, he conceded, that was precisely the Spellsling's intention. If the new agents could not manage this test, what hope had they of outwitting wizards?

He turned back to regard the palace. The broad, straight path ahead gave them an unobstructed view of the rear palace, including the windows of Empress Elizabeth's wardrobe chambers.

"Do you see the Burglar?" he inquired.

The masked woman shook her head. "Not yet."

"Perhaps she will enter with the guests, or disguise herself as a servant."

She sent him an amused glance. "That would be too easy. Miryem thrives on challenge and she can climb like a cat. But if you like, I can take a closer look. With alchemy," she added in a return to her teasing tone.

"Please do."

She raised one gloved hand, palm up. A haze of green light surrounded it. Gebhardt watched intently as the Spellsling touched one glowing finger to her mask and then dismissed the light with a flick of her fingers.

To all appearances, the magic came to her summons, but did not flow through her. A small but crucial difference.

“Precisely on schedule,” she said, pointing toward the west corner of the palace.

Gebhardt squinted in the direction she’d indicated. “I don’t see anything.”

The Spellsling reached into a hidden pocket and produced a pair of green-rimmed spectacles mounted on a jeweled stick, a ridiculous device of the sort used by dowagers at the opera. He accepted her offering and raised it for a look.

High on the palace wall, faint green light surrounded a small figure. The commander quickly lowered the glasses to assure himself the spell had been cast on the lenses, and not on the Burglar herself. To his relief, the light disappeared.

Now that he knew where to look, he could see the Burglar with his unaided eyes, barely visible among the moving shadows cast upward by carriage lanterns. He lifted the opera glasses in time to see her break one of the small panes on a third floor window and reach inside.

Gebhardt grimaced. “Careless. She’ll alert the guard.”

“She is supposed to,” the Spellsling reminded him. “Her assignment includes collecting four guards, no more or less, and leading them to the next team member.”

“You’d think stealing Empress Elizabeth’s favorite earrings would be challenge enough,” he grumbled.

“Not unless the empress was wearing them at the time,” the Spellsling said with a smile. “And now, Herr Commander, events will move swiftly. Our rendezvous awaits!”

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Miryem flipped open the window latch and drew her hand carefully back through the jagged glass opening. The window slid soundlessly open, and she slipped through into a treasure trove.

She shut the window behind her and stood for a moment, eyes darted around the room as she assessed the fortune in gowns, furs, and elegant footwear. None of it, unfortunately, would fit into the leather satchel strapped over one shoulder, much less her hidden pockets. Fortunately, she was after more portable treasure.

The lock securing the imperial jewelry vault was almost an insult to someone of Miryem’s talents. She breezed through it into the closet-sized room beyond, where she opened one chest after another until she found the item she sought: a pair of emerald drop earrings, each made from a single large green gem.

It hurt to forego so much plunder, but Miryem suspected the ability to do so was a primary aspect of tonight’s test. So she tucked the earrings into the lining of her shadow-hued cape, adjusted her hat to a jaunty angle, and sauntered out into the hall.

Too easy, she thought. For someone raised on the docks of Old Odessa, a three-story climb was nothing, less difficult than climbing the rigging of a ship to swing over to the merchant vessel docked alongside. Given her past experience with

the Spellslings whose team she hoped to join, she'd been expecting more of a challenge.

Of course, attracting the attention of precisely four guards might be tricky. One could never predict what other people might do, which added an interesting challenge to work that had become too easy for Miryem's liking.

The first two guards were right where she expected them to be—two floors down, stationed near the foot of the stairs to keep guests from wandering into the imperial family's private chambers.

The Burglar took a pebble from her satchel, leaned over the hall railing, and let it fall to the floor below. One of the guards looked up. His eyes widened. He said something to his comrade and bounded up the stairs two at a time. The other guard, contrary to Miryem's expectations, held his position.

That necessitated a quick change of plan.

Miryam headed for a door leading to a servants' staircase, racing down the narrow stair toward a garden door where she'd seen three guards a few moments earlier. Fortunately, all three still stood their post. She darted past them. After a moment of startled silence, they joined the chase.

Four guards. The Burglar grinned, delighted with her success.

She led them down the path into the botanical gardens, where another prospective member of the team awaited his own test.

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Gaston Bixel hated skulking nearly as much as he hated wizards. It was not fitting for a decorated Swiss Guard to crouch behind a hedge like a common thief. At

least he was dressed for battle. His carnival costume was functional plate armor, finely crafted and well fitted to his massive frame.

He allowed himself to think wistfully of distant times, when a knight might stand and fight upon a field of battle, not hide in the leafy shadows.

The sound of several approaching runners brought him back to the task at hand. Good fighters, he hoped. His prodigious strength and his skill at arms had won him a place in the Stygian Society, and he intended to make sure they earned him a place in this new team. He rose to his full height and drew his weapon.

A boy, small and slight, raced toward him. The leather satchel slung over one shoulder bounced with each step. Four men, all wearing the uniform of the palace guard, followed the lad in close pursuit.

“Stop the thief!” one of them shouted.

Gaston sheathed his sword. He had no need of it, not for such a foe. His speed was not his most impressive gift, but he felt confident he could run down the thief.

To his surprise, the young scoundrel ran directly toward him, diving over the low hedge and tucking into a rolling tumble. Gaston plunked the thief up with one hand and held him aloft at arm’s length, feet dangling.

At close quarters, he realized the thief was not a boy, but a rather fetching young miss. She wore a simple mask, but what he could see of her face brought to mind a slyly smiling fox.

“Stygian Society,” she whispered.

He released her and turned to face her pursuers.

Palace guards. This presented a conundrum. He had no wish to harm the emperor's men.

The guards, however, did not share his reticence. Three of them rushed him, swords in hand.

Gaston snatched up his shield and drew his sword in time to parry the first slashing attack. He swept the blade aside and shield-slammed the swordsman with enough force to send him reeling back. The man fell, taking one of his comrades down with him. Neither of them stayed down.

For the next several minutes the Knight was very busy indeed. He'd fought against worse odds, but never with the intent to subdue. Killing men was far easier.

One of the guards seemed to share this opinion. He hung back from the fight. From the corner of his eye, Gaston saw him draw a gleaming pistol and take aim.

"Four to one," he said. "Has the imperial guard lost all honor?"

"Put the gun away," said the guard facing Gaston. "I have this."

He lunged, his sword diving toward Gaston's unprotected throat.

The Knight leaned away from the attack and answered with a backhanded blow that slammed the hilt of his sword into his opponent's temple. The guard's eyes rolled up and he dropped heavily to the gravel path.

Two men left, not counting the man who still held a pistol.

"Stand clear!" the gunman snapped.

The other guards danced aside. Gaston lifted his shield, though he doubted it would turn aside a bullet at this close range.

He heard a soft thud, followed by a much larger one. One of the swordsmen cursed in Italian. The Knight lowered his shield and saw the gunman lying on the grass, arms flung out wide and an expression of frozen surprise on his face. Blood streamed from an obviously broken nose. In the faint light, Gaston could see neither the weapon nor the wielder, but he assumed the thief had managed a well-thrown rock.

A surge of indignation swept through him, and his lips parted to demand no further interference.

The words remained unspoken, for Gaston's mind was as nimble as his sword and he realized this, too, might be part of tonight's test. If he and the little thief were to be a team, he would have to accept assistance as well as give it.

Subduing his last two opponents took longer than he would have liked, but at battle's end, four men sprawled on the garden path.

A small, gloved hand patted his sword arm. "Well done, Sir Knight."

Gaston looked down into the thief's upturned face. "You are skilled in tending wounds, young miss?"

"Call me Burglar." She drew back her short cape to reveal a trio of throwing knives hanging from her belt. "Sorry, but my skills run more toward the inflicting than the tending."

The fighter scowled. "But I was told any wounds resulting from the battle would be attended by another prospective member of the party, a mystic healer."

She shrugged. "In that case, I imagine he'll be along directly."

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Grigori Rasputin strode down Lichte Alee, keenly conscious of his plain cloth cap and simple peasant clothing, so starkly at odds with the finery worn by the palace guests.

Someday, he vowed, he would live in such a place. His name would be known and revered. Until then, the Stygian Society was a fine place for a man of his gifts.

It was also a place where he might find answers. He had endured the attentions of wizards as a boy, and he needed to know beyond all doubt whether this crucible had created a monster or forged a weapon.

He hurried toward the designated place, where he found a tall warrior in plate armor standing over four fallen men.

The Knight looked up. Relief flooded his stern, bearded face. "You are the Doctor?"

It was as good a title as any. "I am he," Rasputin said.

"Hurry. This man is gravely wounded."

He readied his equipment and set to work. The Knight had given him plenty to do, enough to test the limits of any healer. The simple act of healing, however, would not guarantee him a place on this team.

A team healer must prove his ability to work during the turmoil and distraction of battle. The only foe worthy of a man like Rasputin was...Rasputin. Tonight he would battle his own soul-deep hatred of wizards and his compulsion to attack them on sight.

He doubted the Stygian Society would go so far as to procure a wizard to test his resolve, but working with a Spellsling would be trial enough. If his aversion to wizards extended to those who practiced the magic of alchemy, he had no place on this team. He understood and accepted this.

Still, he was not quite prepared for the sudden flash of alchemical fire.

He forced his mind back to the task of healing, forced himself to accept the Spellsling's power boost. When he touched the palace guard's battered face, the broken nose snapped back into place. Startled, he glanced up at the Spellsling, a lovely redheaded woman who regarded him with a comrade's smile.

"Again," she said, pointing to another fallen guard.

To his relief, they worked together well. When all of the guards' wounds had been healed and the men were eased into a deep, healing sleep, Rasputin prepared to answer one final question. He called upon a hard-won talent: The ability to sense a wizard's presence, like a foul stench in the back of his mind.

He felt none of that magic's taint in the Spellsling.

The Doctor looked to the Commander Gephardt and nodded. Relief flooded the commander's stern face.

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The Spellsling noted this exchange without surprise or insult. She might have designed most elements of the evening's examination, but she would have thought less of Commander Gerhardt had he not added a test of his own.

She was pleased with her new team. Granted, the Knight had done a bit more damage than she would have liked, but he looked like a man who could do considerably more, if he so chose. The Doctor's healing ability surpassed her expectations. The Burglar, appropriately enough, was nowhere to be seen.

"Come out, Miryem," the Spellsling said in an amused voice. "I know you're lurking about somewhere."

Branches rustled overhead, and a small woman dropped lightly from the tree.

"Do you have it?" the commander demanded.

The Burglar reached into her cape and produced two green gems. "I was told I could keep any treasure we don't need to use in battle. I'll start with these."

"Nice try," the Spellsling said dryly. She took the earrings from the Burglar's hand and deftly slipped them into place.

"That's hardly fair," the smaller woman complained. "Why do you get to wear them?"

"Two reasons: They match my ensemble, and unlike you, I will not be tempted to keep them when the night is over."

The Burglar conceded this point with a shrug and a nod.

Commander Gephardt cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him. "You've done well, all of you. Please proceed to the carriage house, where a coach awaits to take you to the wizards' tower."

"What, tonight?" squeaked the thief.

He stared at her from beneath lowered brows. "Did you have other plans?"

Her gaze shifted wistfully toward the palace, but only for a moment.

“Tonight’s good.”

* * *

The newly assembled team rode north into the Vienna Woods, traveling throughout the night. A small circle of light forged ahead, cast by the flicking, swaying carriage lanterns.

Shortly before dawn, they turned off onto a narrow dirt path, a rough passage strewn with rocks and deeply rutted from the spring thaw. The carriage bumped and jolted along, jostling them so mercilessly that their first glimpse of the tower came almost as a relief.

The carriage drove up to the iron gates of a cemetery. It did not escape anyone’s notice that most of the graves looked new.

The Doctor climbed out of the carriage and squinted at the tower. “Wizardry is strong here,” he murmured, not quite able to keep the fear from his voice. “Stronger than anything I have yet encountered.”

“Good,” the Burglar said. “I’d hate to see Carnival end without a bit of excitement.” She jumped down from the carriage and trotted off toward the cemetery.

The Knight squared his massive shoulders. “I will take point. Herr Doctor, Madam Spellsling, if you would stay behind me.”

“What of the Burglar?” the Doctor inquired.

“She’ll find her own way in. Shall we?” The Spellsling smoothed her hair into place and touched the emerald drop hanging from one ear. The other had disappeared during the carriage ride.

A wry smile touched her lips as she recalled her earlier words to Commander Gephardt. Apparently stealing the empress’s earrings while she was wearing them was not, in fact, beyond the skill of the team’s thief.

The small, shadow-clad woman crouched behind a tombstone patted the pocket holding the stolen emerald. The wizards, she hoped, would present more of a challenge.