

Excerpt from: **The Midnight Bargain**

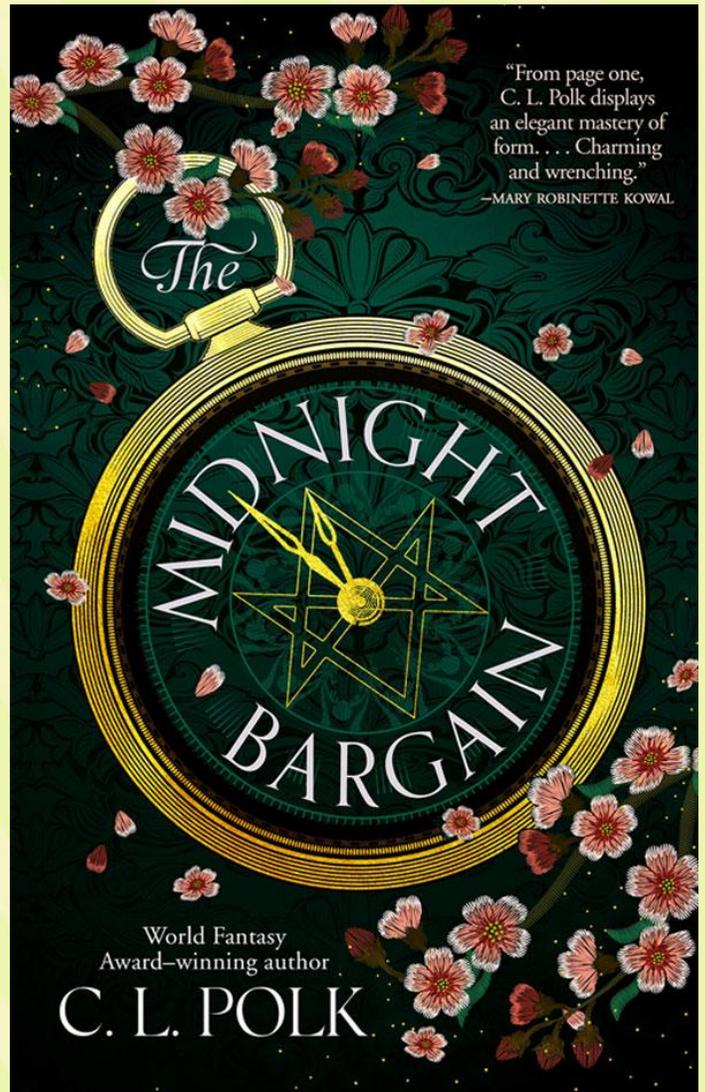
‘To Summon a Greater Spirit and Propose the Pact of the Great Bargain.’

This was everything Beatrice needed. No man would have a woman with such an alliance. Her father would see the benefit of keeping her secret, to use her greater spirit to aid him in his business speculations. She would be free. A Mage. This was her miracle.

She’d never leave her family home, but that didn’t matter. She could be the son Father never had, while her younger sister Harriet could have the bargaining season Beatrice didn’t want. Harriet would have the husband she daydreamed about, while Beatrice would continue her studies uninterrupted by marriage.

She stepped back and pivoted away from the shelf, and nearly collided with another customer of Harriman’s. They jumped back from each other, exclaiming in surprise, then stared at each other in consternation.

Beatrice beheld a Llanandari woman who stood tall and slim in a saffron satin-woven cotton mantua, the under-gown scattered all over with vibrant tropical flowers, the elbow-length sleeves erupting in delicate, hand-hooked lace. Hooked lace, on a day-gown! She was beautiful, surpassing



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even the famous reputation of the women of Llanandras. She was blessed with wide brown eyes and deep brown skin, a cloud of tight black curls studded with golden beads, matching a fortune in gold piercing the young woman’s ears and even the side

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of her nose. But what was she doing here? She couldn't be in this affluent seaside retreat away from the capital to hunt a husband just as Beatrice was supposed to be doing. Could she?

She stared at Beatrice with an ever-growing perplexity. Beatrice knew what the young lady found so arresting—the crown of sorcery around Beatrice's head, even brighter than the veil of shimmering light around the woman's. Another sorceress attracted to the call of the grimoire Beatrice clutched to her chest.

"Ysbeta? What has your back like a rod?"

He spoke Llanandari, of course, and Beatrice's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She knew the language, but she had never spoken it to an actual Llanandari. Her accent would be atrocious; her grammar, clumsy. But she plastered a smile on her face and turned to face the newcomer.

Beatrice beheld the same features as the lady, but in a man's face, and—oh, his eyes were so dark, his hair a tightly curled crown below the radiant aura of a sorcerer, his flawless skin darker than the girl's—Ysbeta, her name was Ysbeta. He was clad in the same gleaming saffron

Llanandari cotton, the needlework on his weskit a tribute to spring, a froth of matching lace at his throat. Now both these

wealthy, glamorous Llanandari stared at her with the same puzzlement, until the young man's brow cleared and he slapped the woman on the back with a laugh like a chuckling stream.

"Relax, Ysy," he said. "She's in the ingenue's gallery at the chapterhouse. Miss..."

"Beatrice Clayborn. I am pleased to make your acquaintance," Beatrice said, and hardly stumbled at all. This young man, achingly beautiful as he was, had seen her portrait hanging in the ingenue's gallery at the Bendleton chapterhouse. Had studied it long enough to recognize her. He had looked at it long enough to know the angle of her nose, at the shape and color of her eyes, at the peculiar, perpetually autumn-red tint of her frowzy, unruly hair.

Ysbeta eyed the book in Beatrice's grip, her stare as intense as a shout. "I'm Ysbeta Lavan. This is my brother, Ianthe. I see you admire the travelogues of J. E. Churchman." She spoke carefully, a little slowly for the sake of Beatrice's home-taught Llanandari.

"His telling of faraway places enchant me," Beatrice said. "I am sorry for my Llanandari."

"You're doing fine. I'm homesick for Llanandras," Ysbeta said. "That's a rare account of Churchman's, talking about the magical coast where Ianthe and I spent a happy childhood. It would do my understanding of your language some good to read books in your tongue."

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“You speak Chasand.”

She tilted her head. “A little. You are better at my language than I am at yours.”

Flattery, from a woman who knew exactly what Churchman’s book was. Beatrice’s middle trembled. Ysbeta and her brother walked in the highest circles in the world, accustomed to wealth and power. And Ysbeta’s simple statement betraying a feeling of loneliness or nostalgia confessed to an assumed peer were the opening steps of a courteous dance. The next step, the proper, graceful step would be for Beatrice to offer the book to soothe that longing.

Ysbeta expected Beatrice to hand over her salvation. The book carried her chance at freedom from the bargaining of fathers to bind her into matrimony and warding. To hand it over was giving her chance away. To keep it—

To keep it would be to cross one of the most powerful families in the trading world.