



ANTICIPATION

The circus arrives without warning.

No announcements precede it, no paper notices on downtown posts and billboards, no mentions or advertisements in local newspapers. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.

The towering tents are striped in white and black, no golds and crimsons to be seen. No color at all, save for the neighboring trees and the grass of the surrounding fields. Black-and-white stripes on grey sky; countless tents of varying shapes and sizes, with an elaborate wrought-iron fence encasing them in a colorless world. Even what little ground is visible from outside is black or white, painted or powdered, or treated with some other circus trick.

But it is not open for business. Not just yet.

Within hours everyone in town has heard about it. By afternoon the news has spread several towns over. Word of mouth is a more effective method of advertisement than typeset words and exclamation points on paper pamphlets or posters. It is impressive and unusual news, the sudden appearance of a mysterious circus. People marvel at the staggering height of the tallest tents. They stare at the clock that sits just inside the gates that no one can properly describe.

And the black sign painted in white letters that hangs upon the gates, the one that reads:

Opens at Nightfall
Closes at Dawn

“What kind of circus is only open at night?” people ask. No one has a proper answer, yet as dusk approaches there is a substantial crowd of spectators gathering outside the gates.

You are amongst them, of course. Your curiosity got the better of you, as curiosity is wont to do. You stand in the fading light, the scarf around your neck pulled up against the chilly evening breeze, waiting to see for yourself exactly what kind of circus only opens once the sun sets.

The ticket booth clearly visible behind the gates is closed and barred. The tents are still, save for when they ripple ever so slightly in the wind. The only movement within the circus is the clock that ticks by the passing minutes, if such a wonder of sculpture can even be called a clock.

The circus looks abandoned and empty. But you think perhaps you can smell caramel wafting through the evening breeze, beneath the crisp scent of the autumn leaves. A subtle sweetness at the edges of the cold.

The sun disappears completely beyond the horizon, and the remaining luminosity shifts from dusk to twilight. The people around you are growing restless from waiting, a sea of shuffling feet,

murmuring about abandoning the endeavor in search of someplace warmer to pass the evening. You yourself are debating departing when it happens.

First, there is a popping sound. It is barely audible over the wind and conversation. A soft noise like a kettle about to boil for tea. Then comes the light.

All over the tents, small lights begin to flicker, as though the entirety of the circus is covered in particularly bright fireflies. The waiting crowd quiets as it watches this display of illumination. Someone near you gasps. A small child claps his hands with glee at the sight.

When the tents are all aglow, sparkling against the night sky, the sign appears.

Stretched across the top of the gates, hidden in curls of iron, more firefly-like lights flicker to life. They pop as they brighten, some accompanied by a shower of glowing white sparks and a bit of smoke. The people nearest to the gates take a few steps back.

At first, it is only a random pattern of lights. But as more of them ignite, it becomes clear that they are aligned in scripted letters. First a *C* is distinguishable, followed by more letters. A *q*, oddly, and several *e*'s. When the final bulb pops alight, and the smoke and sparks dissipate, it is finally legible, this elaborate incandescent sign. Leaning to your left to gain a better view, you can see that it reads:

Le Cirque des Rêves

Some in the crowd smile knowingly, while others frown and look questioningly at their neighbors. A

child near you tugs on her mother's sleeve, begging to know what it says.

“The Circus of Dreams,” comes the reply. The girl smiles delightedly.

Then the iron gates shudder and unlock, seemingly by their own volition. They swing outward, inviting the crowd inside.

Now the circus is open.

Now you may enter.

Part I

PRIMORDIUM

The whole of Le Cirque des Rêves is formed by series of circles. Perhaps it is a tribute to the origin of the word “circus,” deriving from the Greek *kirkos* meaning circle, or ring. There are many such nods to the phenomenon of the circus in a historical sense, though it is hardly a traditional circus. Rather than a single tent with rings enclosed within, this circus contains clusters of tents like pyramids, some large and others quite small. They are set within circular paths, contained within a circular fence. Looping and continuous.

— FRIEDRICK THIESSEN, 1892

A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.

— OSCAR WILDE, 1888



Unexpected Post

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 1873

The man billed as Prospero the Enchanter receives a fair amount of correspondence via the theater office, but this is the first envelope addressed to him that contains a suicide note, and it is also the first to arrive carefully pinned to the coat of a five-year-old girl.

The lawyer who escorts her to the theater refuses to explain despite the manager's protestations, abandoning her as quickly as he can with no more than a shrug and the tip of a hat.

The theater manager does not need to read the envelope to know who the girl is for. The bright eyes peering out from under a cloud of unruly brown curls are smaller, wider versions of the magician's own.

He takes her by the hand, her small fingers hanging limp within his. She refuses to remove her coat despite the warmth of the theater, giving only an adamant shake of her head when he asks her why.

The manager takes the girl to his office, not knowing what else to do with her. She sits quietly on an uncomfortable chair beneath a line of framed posters advertising past productions, surrounded by boxes of tickets and receipts. The manager brings her a cup of tea with an extra lump of sugar, but it remains on the desk, untouched, and grows cold.

The girl does not move, does not fidget in her seat. She stays perfectly still with her hands folded in her lap. Her gaze is fixed downward, focused on her boots that do not quite touch the floor. There is a small scuff on one toe, but the laces are knotted in perfect bows.

The sealed envelope hangs from the second topmost button of her coat, until Prospero arrives.

She hears him before the door opens, his footsteps heavy and echoing in the hall, unlike the measured pace of the manager who has come and gone several times, quiet as a cat.

“There is also a . . . package for you, sir,” the manager says as he opens the door, ushering the magician into the cramped office before slipping off to attend to other theater matters, having no desire to witness what might become of this encounter.

The magician scans the office, a stack of letters in one hand, a black velvet cape lined with shockingly white silk cascading behind him, expecting a paper-wrapped box or crate. Only when the girl looks up at him with his own eyes does he realize what the theater manager was referring to.

Prospero the Enchanter’s immediate reaction upon meeting his daughter is a simple declaration of: “Well, fuck.”

The girl returns her attention to her boots.

The magician closes the door behind him, dropping the stack of letters on the desk next to the teacup as he looks at the girl.

He rips the envelope from her coat, leaving the pin clinging steadfastly to its button.

While the writing on the front bears his stage name and the theater address, the letter inside greets him with his given name, Hector Bowen.

He skims over the contents, any emotional impact desired

by the author failing miserably and finally. He pauses at the only fact he deems relevant: that this girl now left in his custody is, obviously, his own daughter and that her name is Celia.

“She should have named you Miranda,” the man called Prospero the Enchanter says to the girl with a chuckle. “I suppose she was not clever enough to think of it.”

The girl looks up at him again. Dark eyes narrow beneath her curls.

The teacup on the desk begins to shake. Ripples disrupt the calm surface as cracks tremble across the glaze, and then it collapses in shards of flowered porcelain. Cold tea pools in the saucer and drips onto the floor, leaving sticky trails along the polished wood.

The magician’s smile vanishes. He glances back at the desk with a frown, and the spilled tea begins seeping back up from the floor. The cracked and broken pieces stand and re-form themselves around the liquid until the cup sits complete once more, soft swirls of steam rising into the air.

The girl stares at the teacup, her eyes wide.

Hector Bowen takes his daughter’s face in his gloved hand, scrutinizing her expression for a moment before releasing her, his fingers leaving long red marks across her cheeks.

“You might be interesting,” he says.

The girl does not reply.

He makes several attempts to rename her in the following weeks, but she refuses to respond to anything but Celia.

*

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, once he decides she is ready, the magician writes a letter of his own. He includes no address, but it reaches its destination across the ocean nonetheless.

A Gentlemen's Wager

LONDON, OCTOBER 1873

Tonight is the final performance of a very limited engagement. Prospero the Enchanter has not graced the London stage in some time, and the booking is for a single week of performances, with no matinees.

Tickets, though exorbitantly priced, sold out quite quickly, and the theater is so packed, many of the women keep their fans at hand to flutter against their décolletage, warding off the heavy heat that permeates the air despite the autumnal chill outside.

At one point in the evening, each of those fans suddenly becomes a small bird, until flocks of them loop the theater to uproarious applause. When each bird returns, falling into neatly folded fans on their respective owners' laps, the applause only grows, though some are too stunned to clap, turning fans of feathers and lace over in their hands in wonder, no longer at all concerned about the heat.

The man in the grey suit sitting in the stage-left box does not applaud. Not for this, nor for a single trick throughout the evening. He watches the man upon the stage with a steady, scrutinizing gaze that never wavers through the entire duration of the performance. Not once does he raise his gloved hands to clap. He does not even lift an eyebrow at feats that elicit applause or gasps, or the occasional shriek of surprise, from the rest of the rapt audience.

After the performance has concluded, the man in the grey suit navigates the crush of patrons in the theater lobby with ease. He slips through a curtained door leading to the backstage dressing rooms unnoticed. Stagehands and dressers never so much as glance at him.

He raps on the door at the end of the hall with the silver tip of his cane.

The door swings open of its own accord, revealing a cluttered dressing room lined with mirrors, each reflecting a different view of Prospero.

His tailcoat has been tossed lazily over a velvet armchair, and his waistcoat hangs unbuttoned over his lace-edged shirt. The top hat which featured prominently in his performance sits on a hatstand nearby.

The man appeared younger on the stage, his age buried under the glare of the footlights and layers of makeup. The face in the mirrors is lined, the hair significantly greying. But there is something youthful in the grin that appears as he catches sight of the man standing in the doorway.

“You hated it, didn’t you?” he asks without turning away from the mirror, addressing the ghostly grey reflection. He wipes a thick residue of powder from his face with a handkerchief that might once have been white.

“It is a pleasure to see you too, Hector,” the man in the grey suit says, closing the door quietly behind him.

“You despised every minute, I can tell,” Hector Bowen says with a laugh. “I was watching you, don’t try to deny it.”

He turns and extends a hand the man in the grey suit does not accept. In response, Hector shrugs and waves his fingers dramatically in the direction of the opposite wall. The velvet armchair slides forward from a corner packed with trunks and

scarves while the tailcoat floats up from it like a shadow, obediently hanging itself in a wardrobe.

“Sit, please,” Hector says. “It’s not as comfortable as the ones upstairs, I’m afraid.”

“I cannot say I approve of such exhibitions,” the man in the grey suit says, taking off his gloves and dusting the chair with them before he sits. “Passing off manipulations as tricks and illusion. Charging admission.”

Hector tosses the powder-covered handkerchief onto a table littered with brushes and tins of greasepaint.

“Not a single person in that audience believes for a second that what I do up there is real,” he says, gesturing in the general direction of the stage. “That’s the beauty of it. Have you seen the contraptions these *magicians* build to accomplish the most mundane feats? They are a bunch of fish covered in feathers trying to convince the public they can fly, and I am simply a bird in their midst. The audience cannot tell the difference beyond knowing that I am better at it.”

“That does not make it any less frivolous an endeavor.”

“These people line up to be mystified,” Hector says. “I can mystify them easier than most. Seems a waste to let the opportunity pass by. Pays better than you might think, as well. Can I get you a drink? There are bottles hidden around here somewhere, though I’m not entirely sure there are glasses.” He attempts to sort through the contents of a table, pushing aside piles of newspapers and a birdless birdcage.

“No, thank you,” the man in the grey suit says, shifting in his chair and resting his hands on the handle of his cane. “I found your performance curious, and the reaction of your audience somewhat perplexing. You were lacking in precision.”

“Can’t be too good if I want them to believe I’m as fake as

the rest of them,” Hector says with a laugh. “I thank you for coming and suffering through my show. I’m surprised you even turned up, I was beginning to give up hope. I’ve had that box reserved for you the entire week.”

“I do not often decline invitations. Your letter said you had a proposition for me.”

“I do, indeed!” Hector says, striking his hands together in a single sharp clap. “I was hoping you might be up for a game. It has been far too long since we’ve played. Though first, you must meet my new project.”

“I was under the impression that you had given up on teaching.”

“I had, but this was a singular opportunity I could not resist.” Hector walks over to a door mostly hidden by a long, standing mirror. “Celia, dearest,” he calls into the adjoining room before returning to his chair.

A moment later a small girl appears in the doorway, dressed too nicely for the chaotic shabbiness of the surroundings. All ribbons and lace, perfect as a shop-fresh doll save for a few unruly curls escaping her braids. She hesitates, hovering on the threshold, when she sees that her father is not alone.

“It’s all right, dearest. Come in, come in,” Hector says, beckoning her forward with a wave of his hand. “This is an associate of mine, no need to be shy.”

She takes a few steps closer and executes a perfect curtsy, the lace-trimmed hem of her dress sweeping over the worn floorboards.

“This is my daughter, Celia,” Hector says to the man in the grey suit, placing his hand on the girl’s head. “Celia, this is Alexander.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she says. Her voice is barely more

than a whisper, and pitched lower than might be expected from a girl her size.

The man in the grey suit gives her a polite nod.

“I would like you to show this gentleman what you can do,” Hector says. He pulls a silver pocket watch on a long chain from his waistcoat and puts it on the table. “Go ahead.”

The girl’s eyes widen.

“You said I was not to do that in front of anyone,” she says. “You made me promise.”

“This gentleman is not just anyone,” Hector replies with a laugh.

“You said no exceptions,” Celia protests.

Her father’s smile fades. He takes her by the shoulders and looks her sternly in the eye.

“This is a very special case,” he says. “Please show this man what you can do, just like in your lessons.” He pushes her toward the table with the watch.

The girl nods gravely and shifts her attention to the watch, her hands clasped behind her back.

After a moment, the watch begins to rotate slowly, turning in circles on the surface of the table, trailing its chain behind in a spiral.

Then the watch lifts from the table, floating into the air and hovering as though it were suspended in water.

Hector looks to the man in the grey suit for a reaction.

“Impressive,” the man says. “But quite basic.”

Celia’s brow furrows over her dark eyes and the watch shatters, gears spilling out into the air.

“Celia,” her father says.

She blushes at the sharpness of his tone and mumbles an apology. The gears float back to the watch, settling into place

until the watch is complete again, hands ticking the seconds forward as though nothing had happened.

“Now that is a bit more impressive,” the man in the grey suit admits. “But she has a temper.”

“She’s young,” Hector says, patting the top of Celia’s head and ignoring her frown. “This is with not even a year of study, by the time she’s grown she will be incomparable.”

“I could take any child off the street and teach them as much. Incomparable is a matter of your personal opinion, and easily disproved.”

“Ha!” Hector exclaims. “Then you are willing to play.”

The man in the grey suit hesitates only a moment before he nods.

“Something a bit more complex than last time, and yes, I may be interested,” he says. “Possibly.”

“Of course it will be more complex!” Hector says. “I have a natural talent to play with. I’m not wagering *that* for anything simple.”

“Natural talent is a questionable phenomenon. Inclination perhaps, but innate ability is extremely rare.”

“She’s my own child, of course she has innate ability.”

“You admit she has had lessons,” the man in the grey suit says. “How can you be certain?”

“Celia, when did you start your lessons?” Hector asks, without looking at her.

“March,” she answers.

“What year, dearest?” Hector adds.

“This year,” she says, as though this is a particularly stupid question.

“Eight months of lessons,” Hector clarifies. “At barely six years of age. If I recall correctly, you sometimes start your own

students a bit younger than that. Celia is clearly more advanced than she would be if she did not have natural ability. She could levitate that watch on her first try.”

The man in the grey suit turns his attention to Celia.

“You broke that by accident, did you not?” he asks, nodding at the watch sitting on the table.

Celia frowns and gives him the tiniest of nods.

“She has remarkable control for one so young,” he remarks to Hector. “But such a temper is always an unfortunate variable. It can lead to impulsive behavior.”

“She’ll either grow out of it or learn to control it. It’s a minor issue.”

The man in the grey suit keeps his eyes on the girl, but addresses Hector when he speaks. To Celia’s ears, the sounds no longer resolve into words, and she frowns as her father’s responses take on the same muddled quality.

“You would wager your own child?”

“She won’t lose,” Hector says. “I suggest you find a student you can tolerate parting with, if you do not already have one to spare.”

“I assume her mother has no opinion on the matter?”

“You assume correctly.”

The man in the grey suit considers the girl for some time before he speaks again, and still, she does not comprehend the words.

“I understand your confidence in her ability, though I encourage you to at least consider the possibility that she could be lost, should the competition not play out in her favor. I will find a player to truly challenge her. Otherwise there is no reason for me to agree to participate. Her victory cannot be guaranteed.”

“That is a risk I am willing to take,” Hector says without even glancing at his daughter. “If you would like to make it official here and now, go right ahead.”

The man in the grey suit looks back at Celia, and when he speaks she understands the words once more.

“Very well,” he says with a nod.

“He made me not hear right,” Celia whispers when her father turns to her.

“I know, dearest, and it wasn’t very polite,” Hector says as he guides her closer to the chair, where the man scrutinizes her with eyes that are almost as light and grey as his suit.

“Have you always been able to do such things?” he asks her, looking back at the watch again.

Celia nods.

“My . . . my momma said I was the devil’s child,” she says quietly.

The man in the grey suit leans forward and whispers something in her ear, too low for her father to overhear. A small smile brightens her face.

“Hold out your right hand,” he says, leaning back in his chair. Celia immediately puts out her hand, palm up, unsure of what to expect. But the man in the grey suit does not place anything in her open palm. Instead, he turns her hand over and removes a silver ring from his pinkie. He slides it onto her ring finger, though it is too loose for her slim fingers, keeping his other hand around her wrist.

She is opening her mouth to state the obvious fact that the ring, though very pretty, does not fit, when she realizes that it is shrinking on her hand.

Her momentary glee at the adjustment is crushed by the pain that follows as the ring continues to close around her

finger, the metal burning into her skin. She tries to pull away but the man in the grey suit keeps his hand firmly around her wrist.

The ring thins and fades, leaving only a bright red scar around Celia's finger.

The man in the grey suit releases her wrist and she steps back, retreating into a corner and staring at her hand.

"Good girl," her father says.

"I will require some time to prepare a player of my own," the man in the grey suit says.

"Of course," Hector says. "Take all the time you need." He pulls a gold band from his own hand and puts it on the table. "For when you find yours."

"You prefer not to do the honors yourself?"

"I trust you."

The man in the grey suit nods and pulls a handkerchief from his coat, picking up the ring without touching it and placing it in his pocket.

"I do hope you are not doing this because my player won the last challenge."

"Of course not," Hector says. "I am doing this because I have a player that can beat anyone you choose to put against her, and because times have changed enough to make it interesting. Besides, I believe the overall record leans in my favor."

The man in the grey suit does not contest this point, he only watches Celia with the same scrutinizing gaze. She attempts to step out of his line of sight but the room is too small.

"I suppose you already have a venue in mind?" he asks.

"Not precisely," Hector says. "I thought it might be more fun to leave a bit of leeway as far as venue is concerned. An element of surprise, if you will. I am acquainted with a theatrical producer here in London who should be game for staging

the unusual. I shall drop a few hints when the time comes, and I am certain he will come up with something appropriate. Better to have it on neutral ground, though I thought you might appreciate starting things on your side of the pond.”

“This gentleman’s name?”

“Lefèvre. Chandresh Christophe Lefèvre. They say he’s the illegitimate son of an Indian prince or something like that. Mother was some tramp of a ballerina. I have his card somewhere in this mess. You’ll like him, he’s quite forward-thinking. Wealthy, eccentric. A bit obsessive, somewhat unpredictable, but I suppose that is part and parcel of having an artistic temperament.” The pile of papers on a nearby desk shifts and shuffles until a single business card finds its way to the surface and sails across the room. Hector catches it in his hand and reads it before handing it to the man in the grey suit. “He throws wonderful parties.”

The man in the grey suit puts it in his pocket without so much as glancing at it.

“I have not heard of him,” he says. “And I am not fond of public settings for such matters. I will take it under consideration.”

“Nonsense, the public setting is half the fun! It brings in so many restrictions, so many challenging parameters to work around.”

The man in the grey suit considers this for a moment before he nods.

“Do we have a disclosure clause? It would be fair, given my awareness of your choice of player.”

“Let’s have no clauses at all beyond the basic rules of interference and see what happens,” Hector says. “I want to push boundaries with this one. No time limits, either. I’ll even give you first move.”

“Very well. We have an agreement. I shall be in touch.” The man in the grey suit stands, brushing invisible dust from his sleeve. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Celia.”

Celia bobs another perfect curtsey, all the while regarding him with wary eyes.

The man in the grey suit tips his hat to Prospero and slips out the door and then out of the theater, moving like a shadow onto the busy street.

*

IN HIS DRESSING ROOM, Hector Bowen chuckles to himself while his daughter stands quietly in a corner, looking at the scar on her hand. The pain fades as quickly as the ring itself, but the raw red mark remains.

Hector takes the silver pocket watch from the table, comparing the time to the clock on the wall. He winds the watch slowly, regarding the hands intently as they swirl around the face.

“Celia,” he says without looking up at her, “why do we wind our watch?”

“Because everything requires energy,” she recites obediently, eyes still focused on her hand. “We must put effort and energy into anything we wish to change.”

“Very good.” He shakes the watch gently and replaces it in his pocket.

“Why did you call that man Alexander?” Celia asks.

“That’s a silly question.”

“It’s not his name.”

“Now, how might you know that?” Hector asks his daughter, lifting her chin to face him and weighing the look in her dark eyes with his own.

Celia stares back at him, unsure how to explain. She plays over in her mind the impression of the man in his grey suit with his pale eyes and harsh features, trying to figure out why the name does not fit on him properly.

“It’s not a real name,” she says. “Not one that he’s carried with him always. It’s one he wears like his hat. So he can take it off if he wants. Like Prospero is for you.”

“You are even more clever than I could have hoped,” Hector says, not bothering to refute or confirm her musings about his colleague’s nomenclature. He takes his top hat from its stand and puts it on her head, where it slides down and obscures her questioning eyes in a cage of black silk.

Shades of Grey

LONDON, JANUARY 1874

The building is as grey as the pavement below and the sky above, appearing as impermanent as the clouds, as though it could vanish into the air without notice. Nondescript grey stone renders it indistinguishable from the surrounding buildings save for a tarnished sign hanging by the door. Even the headmistress inside is clad in a deep charcoal.

Yet the man in the grey suit looks out of place.

The cut of his suit is too sharp. The handle of his cane too well polished beneath his pristine gloves.

He gives his name but the headmistress forgets it almost instantly and is too embarrassed to ask him to repeat it. Later, when he signs the required paperwork, his signature is completely illegible, and that particular form is lost within weeks of being filed.

He presents unusual criteria in what he is looking for. The headmistress is confused, but after a few questions and clarifications she brings him three children: two boys and one girl. The man requests to interview them privately and the headmistress reluctantly agrees.

The first boy is spoken to for only a few minutes before he is dismissed. When he passes through the hallway, the other two children look to him for some indication of what to expect, but he only shakes his head.

The girl is kept longer, but she too is dismissed, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

The other boy is then brought into the room to speak with the man in the grey suit. He is directed to sit in a chair across from a desk, while the man stands nearby.

This boy does not fidget as much as the first boy did. He sits quietly and patiently, his grey-green eyes taking in every detail of the room and the man subtly, aware but not outright staring. His dark hair is badly cut, as though the barber was distracted during the process, but some attempt has been made to flatten it. His clothes are ragged but well kept, though his pants are too short and may have once been blue or brown or green but have faded too much to be certain.

“How long have you been here?” the man asks after silently examining the boy’s shabby appearance for a few moments.

“Always,” the boy says.

“How old are you?”

“I’ll be nine in May.”

“You look younger than that.”

“It’s not a lie.”

“I did not mean to suggest that it was.”

The man in the grey suit stares at the boy without comment for some time.

The boy stares back.

“You can read, I presume?” the man asks.

The boy nods.

“I like to read,” he says. “There aren’t enough books here. I’ve read all of them already.”

“Good.”

Without warning, the man in the grey suit tosses his cane at the boy. The boy catches it in one hand easily without flinching,

though his eyes narrow in confusion as he looks from the cane to the man and back.

The man nods to himself and reclaims his cane, pulling a pale handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the boy's fingerprints from the surface.

"Very well," the man says. "You will be coming to study with me. I assure you I have a great many books. I will make the necessary arrangements, and then we shall be on our way."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Do you wish to remain here?"

The boy considers this for a moment.

"No," he says.

"Very well."

"Don't you want to know my name?" the boy asks.

"Names are not of nearly as much import as people like to suppose," the man in the grey suit says. "A label assigned to identify you either by this institution or your departed parents is neither of interest nor value to me. If you find you are in need of a name at any point, you may choose one for yourself. For now it will not be necessary."

The boy is sent to pack his small bag of negligible possessions. The man in the grey suit signs papers and responds to the headmistress's questions with answers she does not entirely follow, but she does not protest the transaction.

When the boy is ready, the man in the grey suit takes him from the grey stone building, and he does not return.

Magic Lessons

1875-1880

Celia grows up in a series of theaters. Most often in New York, but there are long stretches in other cities. Boston. Chicago. San Francisco. Occasional excursions to Milan or Paris or London. They blend together in a haze of must and velvet and sawdust to the point where she sometimes does not recall what country she is in, not that it matters.

Her father brings her everywhere while she is small, parading her like a well-loved small dog in expensive gowns, for his colleagues and acquaintances to fawn over in pubs after performances.

When he decides she is too tall to be an adorable accessory, he begins abandoning her in dressing rooms or hotels.

She wonders each night if perhaps he will not return, but he always stumbles in at unseemly hours, sometimes petting her gently on the head while she pretends to be asleep, other times ignoring her entirely.

Her lessons have become less formal. When before he would sit her down at marked, though irregular, times, now he tests her constantly, but never in public.

Even tasks as simple as tying her boots he forbids her to do by hand. She stares at her feet, silently willing the laces to tie and untie in messy bows, scowling when they tangle into knots.

Her father is not forthcoming when she asks questions. She

has gathered that the man in the grey suit whom her father called Alexander also has a student, and there will be some sort of game.

“Like chess?” she asks once.

“No,” her father says. “Not like chess.”

*

THE BOY GROWS UP in a town house in London. He sees no one, not even when his meals are delivered to his rooms, appearing by the door on covered trays and disappearing in the same manner. Once a month, a man who does not speak is brought in to cut his hair. Once a year, the same man takes measurements for new clothing.

The boy spends most of his time reading. And writing, of course. He copies down sections of books, writes out words and symbols he does not understand at first but that become intimately familiar beneath his ink-stained fingers, formed again and again in increasingly steady lines. He reads histories and mythologies and novels. He slowly learns other languages, though he has difficulty speaking them.

There are occasional excursions to museums and libraries, during off-hours when there are few, if any, other visitors. The boy adores these trips, both for the contents of the buildings and the deviation from his set routine. But they are rare, and he is never permitted to leave the house unescorted.

The man in the grey suit visits him in his rooms every day, most often accompanied by a new pile of books, spending exactly one hour lecturing about things the boy is unsure he will ever truly understand.

Only once does the boy inquire as to when he will actually be allowed to do something, the kinds of things that the man

in the grey suit demonstrates very rarely himself during these strictly scheduled lessons.

“When you are ready” is the only answer he receives.

He is not deemed ready for some time.

*

THE DOVES THAT APPEAR ONSTAGE and occasionally in the audience during Prospero’s performances are kept in elaborate cages, delivered to each theater along with the rest of his luggage and supplies.

A slamming door sends a stack of trunks and cases tumbling in his dressing room, toppling a cage full of doves.

The trunks right themselves instantly, but Hector picks up the cage to inspect the damage.

While most of the doves are only dazed from the fall, one clearly has a broken wing. Hector carefully removes the bird, the damaged bars repairing as he sets the cage down.

“Can you fix it?” Celia asks.

Her father looks at the injured dove and then back at his daughter, waiting for her to ask a different question.

“Can I fix it?” she asks after a moment.

“Go ahead and try,” her father says, handing it to her.

Celia gently strokes the trembling dove, staring intently at its broken wing.

The bird makes a painful, strangled sound much different than its normal coo.

“I can’t do it,” Celia says with tears in her eyes, lifting the bird up to her father.

Hector takes the dove and swiftly twists its neck, ignoring his daughter’s cry of protest.

“Living things have different rules,” he says. “You should

practice with something more basic.” He picks up Celia’s only doll from a nearby chair and drops it to the floor, the porcelain head cracking open.

When Celia returns to her father the next day with the perfectly repaired doll he only nods his approval before waving her away, returning to his preperformance preparations.

“You could have fixed the bird,” Celia says.

“Then you wouldn’t have learned anything,” Hector says. “You need to understand your limitations so you can overcome them. You do want to win, don’t you?”

Celia nods, looking down at her doll. It bears no evidence that it had ever been damaged, not a single crack along the vacant, smiling face.

She throws it under a chair and does not take it with her when they depart the theater.

*

THE MAN IN THE GREY SUIT takes the boy for a week in France that is not precisely a holiday. The trip is unannounced, the boy’s small suitcase packed without his knowledge.

The boy assumes they are there for some manner of lesson, but no particular area of study is specified. After the first day, he wonders if they are visiting only for the food, entranced by the luscious crackle of fresh-baked bread in *boulangeries* and the sheer variety of cheeses.

There are off-hour trips to silent museums, where the boy tries and fails to walk through galleries as quietly as his instructor does, cringing when each footfall echoes. Though he requests a sketchbook, his instructor insists it will be better for him to capture the images in his memory.

One evening, the boy is sent to the theater.

He expects a play or perhaps a ballet, but the performance is something he finds unusual.

The man on the stage, a slick-haired, bearded fellow whose white gloves move like birds against the black of his suit, performs simple tricks and sleight-of-hand misdirections. Birds disappear from cages with false bottoms, handkerchiefs slip from pockets to be concealed again in cuffs.

The boy watches both the magician and his modest audience curiously. The spectators seem impressed by the deceptions, often applauding them politely.

When he questions his instructor after the show, he is told the matter will not be discussed until they return to London at the end of the week.

The next evening, the boy is brought to a larger theater and again left alone for the performance. The sheer size of the crowd makes him nervous, he has never been in a space so full of people before.

The man on this stage appears older than the magician from the previous night. He wears a nicer suit. His movements are more precise. Every exhibition is not only unusual but captivating.

The applause is more than polite.

And this magician does not hide handkerchiefs within his lace shirt cuffs. The birds that appear from all manner of locations have no cages at all. These are feats that the boy has seen only in his lessons. Manipulations and illusions he has been expressly informed again and again must be kept secret.

The boy applauds as well when Prospero the Enchanter takes his final bow.

Again, his instructor refuses to answer any of his questions until they return to London.

Once in the town house, falling back into a routine that now feels as though it had never been disrupted, the man in the grey suit first asks the boy to tell him the difference between the two performances.

“The first man was using mechanical contraptions and mirrors, making the audience look different places when he did not wish them to see something, to create a false impression. The second man, the one named for the duke from *The Tempest*, he was pretending to do similar things, but he did not use mirrors or tricks. He did things the way you do.”

“Very good.”

“Do you know that man?” the boy asks.

“I have known that man for a very long time,” his instructor says.

“Does he teach those things as well, the way you teach me?”

His instructor nods, but does not elaborate.

“How can the people watching not see the difference?” the boy asks. To him it is clear, though he cannot properly articulate why. It was something he felt in the air as much as observed with his eyes.

“People see what they wish to see. And in most cases, what they are told that they see.”

They do not discuss the matter further.

While there are other not-quite holidays, though they are rare, the boy is not taken to see any other magicians.

*

PROSPERO THE ENCHANTER uses a pocket knife to slit his daughter’s fingertips open, one by one, watching wordlessly as she cries until calm enough to heal them, drips of blood slowly creeping backward.

The skin melds together, swirls of fingerprint ridges finding one another again, closing solidly once more.

Celia's shoulders fall, releasing the tension that has knotted in them, her relief palpable as she draws herself safely together.

Her father gives her only moments to rest before slicing each of her newly healed fingers again.

*

THE MAN IN THE GREY SUIT takes a handkerchief from his pocket and drops it on the table, where it lands with a muffled thump, something heavier than silk hidden in the folds. He pulls the square of silk upward, letting the contents, a solitary gold ring, roll out onto the table. It is slightly tarnished and engraved with something that the boy thinks might be words in Latin, but the script is looping and flourished and he cannot make them out.

The man in the grey suit replaces the now empty handkerchief in his pocket.

"Today we are going to learn about binding," he says.

When they reach the point of the lesson that includes the practical demonstration, he instructs the boy to place the ring on his own hand. He never touches the boy, regardless of the circumstances.

The boy tries in vain to pry the ring from his finger as it dissolves into his skin.

"Bindings are permanent, my boy," the man in the grey suit says.

"What am I bound to?" the boy asks, frowning at the scar where the ring had been moments before.

"An obligation you already had, and a person you will not meet for some time. The details are not important at this point. This is merely a necessary technicality."

The boy only nods and does not question further, but that night, when he is alone again and unable to sleep, he spends hours staring at his hand in the moonlight, wondering who the person he is bound to might be.

*

THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY, in a crowded theater that thunders with applause for the man onstage, hidden in the shadows formed between disused pieces of scenery backstage, Celia Bowen curls herself into a ball and cries.

Le Bateleur

LONDON, MAY—JUNE 1884

Just before the boy turns nineteen, the man in the grey suit removes him from the town house without notice, setting him up in a modestly sized flat with a view of the British Museum.

At first he assumes that it is only a temporary matter. There have been, of late, journeys of weeks or even months, to France and Germany and Greece, filled with more studying than sight-seeing. But this is not one of those not-quite holidays spent in luxurious hotels.

It is a modest flat with basic furnishings, so similar to his former rooms that he finds it difficult to feel anything resembling homesickness, save for the library, though he still possesses an impressive number of books.

There is a wardrobe full of well-cut but nondescript black suits. Crisp white shirts. A row of custom-fitted bowler hats.

He inquires as to when what is referred to only as his *challenge* will begin. The man in the grey suit will not say, though the move clearly marks the end of formal lessons.

Instead, he continues his studies independently. He keeps notebooks full of symbols and glyphs, working through his old notes and finding new elements to consider. He carries smaller volumes with him at all times, transcribing them into larger ones once they are filled.

He begins each notebook the same way, with a detailed drawing of a tree inscribed with black ink inside the front cover. From there the black branches stretch onto the subsequent pages, tying together lines that form letters and symbols, each page almost completely covered in ink. All of it, runes and words and glyphs, twisted together and grounded to the initial tree.

There is a forest of such trees, carefully filed on his bookshelves.

He practices the things he has been taught, though it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of his illusions on his own. He spends a great deal of time regarding reflections in mirrors.

Unscheduled and no longer under lock and key, he takes long walks around the city. The sheer volume of people is nerve-racking, but the joy in being able to leave his flat whenever he chooses outweighs his fear of accidentally bumping into passersby as he attempts to traverse the streets.

He sits in parks and cafés, observing people who pay him little notice as he blends into crowds of young men in interchangeable suits and bowler hats.

One afternoon, he returns to his old town house, thinking perhaps it would not be an imposition to call on his instructor for something as simple as tea, but the building is abandoned, the windows boarded.

As he walks back to his flat, he places a hand on his pocket and realizes that his notebook is missing.

He swears aloud, attracting a glare from a passing woman who steps aside as he stops short on the crowded pavement.

He retraces his steps, growing more anxious with each turn.

A light rain begins to fall, not much more than mist, but several umbrellas spring up amongst the crowd. He pulls the

brim of his bowler hat down to better shield his eyes as he searches the dampening pavement for any sign of his notebook.

He stops at a corner beneath the awning of a café, watching the lamps flickering on up and down the street, wondering if he should wait until the crowd thins or the rain lets up. Then he notices that there is a girl standing some paces away, also sheltered beneath the awning, and she is poring over the pages of a notebook that he is quite certain is his own.

She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps a bit younger. Her eyes are light, and her hair is an indeterminate color that cannot seem to decide if it is blond or brown. She wears a dress that would have been quite fashionable two years ago and is damp from the rain.

He steps closer, but she does not notice, she stays completely absorbed in the book. She has even removed one of her gloves to better handle the delicate pages. He can now see that it is, indeed, his own journal, open to a page with a card pasted onto it, printed with winged creatures crawling over a spoked wheel. His handwriting covers the card and the paper around it, incorporating it into solid text.

He watches her expression as she flips through the pages, a mixture of confusion and curiosity.

“I believe you have my book,” he says after a moment. The girl jumps in surprise and nearly drops the notebook but manages to catch it, though in the process her glove flutters to the pavement. He bends down to retrieve it, and when he straightens and offers it to her, she seems surprised to see that he is smiling at her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, accepting her glove and quickly pushing the journal at him. “You dropped it in the park and I was trying to give it back but I lost track of you and then I . . . I’m sorry.” She stops, flustered.

“That’s quite all right,” he says, relieved to have it back in his possession. “I was afraid it was lost for good, which would have been unfortunate. I owe you my deepest gratitude, Miss . . . ?”

“Martin,” she supplies, and it sounds like a lie. “Isobel Martin.” A questioning look follows, waiting for his own name.

“Marco,” he says. “Marco Alisdair.” The name tastes strange on his tongue, the opportunities to speak it aloud falling few and far between. He has written this variant of his given name combined with a form of his instructor’s alias so many times that it seems like his own, but adding sound to symbol is a different process entirely.

The ease at which Isobel accepts it makes it feel more real.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Alisdair,” she says.

He should thank her and take his book and go, it is the sensible thing to do. But he is not particularly inclined to return to his empty flat.

“Might I buy you a drink as a token of my thanks, Miss Martin?” he asks, after slipping the notebook into his pocket.

Isobel hesitates, likely knowing better than to accept invitations for drinks from strange men on darkened street corners, but to his surprise, she nods.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” she says.

“Very well,” Marco says. “But there are better cafés than this particular one”—he gestures at the window next to them—“within a reasonable distance, if you don’t mind a damp walk. I’m afraid I don’t have an umbrella with me.”

“I don’t mind,” Isobel says. Marco offers her his arm, which she takes, and they set off down the street in the softly falling rain.

They walk only a block or two and then down a rather

narrow alley, and Marco can feel her tense in the darkness, but she relaxes when he stops at a well-lit doorway next to a stained-glass window. He holds the door open for her as they enter a tiny café, one that has quickly become his favorite over the past few months, one of the few places in London where he feels truly at ease.

Candles flicker in glass holders on every available surface, and the walls are painted a rich, bold red. There are only a few patrons scattered about the intimate space and plenty of empty tables. They sit at a small table near the window. Marco waves at the woman behind the bar, who then brings them two glasses of Bordeaux, leaving the bottle on the table next to a small vase holding a yellow rose.

As the rain patters gently against the windows, they converse politely about insubstantial things. Marco volunteers very little information about himself, and Isobel responds in kind.

When he asks if she is hungry she gives a polite non-answer that betrays that she is famished. He catches the attention of the woman behind the bar again, who returns a few minutes later with a platter of cheese and fruit and slices of baguette.

“However did you find a place like this?” Isobel asks.

“Trial and error,” he says. “And a great many glasses of horrible wine.”

Isobel laughs.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Though at least it worked out well in the end. This place is lovely. It’s like an oasis.”

“An oasis with very good wine,” Marco agrees, tipping his glass toward her.

“It reminds me of France,” Isobel says.

“Are you from France?” he asks.

“No,” Isobel says. “But I lived there for a while.”

“As did I,” Marco says. “Though that was some time ago. And you are correct, this place is very French, I think that’s part of the charm. So many places here don’t bother to be charming.”

“You’re charming,” Isobel says, and immediately blushes, looking like she would pull the words back into her mouth if she could.

“Thank you,” Marco replies, unsure what else to say.

“I’m sorry,” Isobel says, clearly flustered. “I didn’t mean to . . .” She begins to trail off, but perhaps emboldened by a glass and a half of wine, she continues. “There are charms in your book,” she says. She looks to him for a reaction but he says nothing and she looks away. “Charms,” she continues to fill the silence. “Talismans, symbols . . . I don’t know what all of them mean but they are charms, are they not?”

She takes a nervous sip of her wine before daring to look back at him.

Marco chooses his words carefully, wary about the direction the conversation is taking.

“And what does a young lady who once lived in France know of charms and talismans?” he asks.

“Only things I’ve read in books,” she says. “I don’t remember what all of them mean. I only know the astrological symbols and some of the alchemical ones, and I don’t know them particularly well, either.” She pauses, as though she cannot decide whether or not she wants to elaborate, but then she adds, “*La Roue de Fortune*, the Wheel of Fortune. The card in your book. I know that card. I have a deck, myself.”

While earlier Marco had determined her to be little more than mildly intriguing and fairly pretty, this revelation is something more. He leans into the table, regarding her with considerably increased interest than he had moments before.

“Do you mean you read the tarot, Miss Martin?” he asks.

Isobel nods.

“I do, at least, I try,” she says. “Only for myself, though, which I suppose is not really reading. It’s . . . it’s just something I picked up a few years ago.”

“Do you have your deck with you?” Marco asks. Isobel nods again. “I would very much like to see it, if you don’t mind,” he adds, when she makes no move to take it from her bag. Isobel glances around the café at the other patrons. Marco gives a dismissive wave. “Don’t worry yourself about them,” he says, “it takes a great deal more than a deck of cards to frighten this lot. But if you would rather not, I understand.”

“No, no, I don’t mind,” Isobel says, picking up her bag and carefully pulling out a deck of cards wrapped in a scrap of black silk. She removes the cards from their covering and places them atop the table.

“May I?” Marco asks as he moves to pick them up.

“By all means,” Isobel answers, surprised.

“Some readers do not like other people touching their cards,” Marco explains, recalling details from his divination lessons as he gently lifts the deck. “And I would not want to be presumptuous.” He turns over the top card, *Le Bateleur*. The Magician. Marco cannot help but smile at the card before replacing it in the pile.

“Do you read?” Isobel asks him.

“Oh no,” he says. “I am familiar with the cards, but they do not speak to me, not in ways enough to properly read.” He looks up from the cards at Isobel, still not certain what to make of her. “They speak to you, though, do they not?”

“I have never thought of it that way, but I suppose they do,” she says. She sits quietly, watching him flip through the deck.

He treats it with the same care she showed with his journal, holding the cards delicately by their edges. When he has looked through the entire deck, he places them back on the table.

“They are very old,” he says. “Much older than you, I would venture to guess. Might I inquire as to how they came into your possession?”

“I found them in a jewelry box in an antiques shop in Paris, years ago,” Isobel says. “The woman there wouldn’t even sell them to me, she just told me to take them away, get them out of her shop. Devil cards, she called them. *Cartes du Diable*.”

“People are naïve about such things,” Marco says, a phrase oft repeated by his instructor as both admonishment and warning. “And they would rather write them off as evil than attempt to understand them. An unfortunate truth, but a truth nonetheless.”

“What is your notebook for?” Isobel asks. “I don’t mean to pry, I just found it interesting. I hope you will forgive me for looking through it.”

“Well, we are even on that matter, now that you have allowed me to look through your cards,” he says. “But I am afraid it is rather complex, and not the easiest of matters to explain, or believe.”

“I can believe quite a lot of things,” Isobel says. Marco says nothing, but watches her as intently as he had regarded her cards. Isobel holds his gaze and does not look away.

It is too tempting. To have found someone who might even begin to understand the world he has lived in almost his entire life. He knows he should let it go, but he cannot.

“I could show you, if you wish,” he says after a moment.

“I would like that,” Isobel says.

They finish their wine and Marco settles their bill with the

woman behind the bar. He places his bowler hat on his head and takes Isobel's arm as they leave the warmth of the café, stepping out once again into the rain.

Marco stops abruptly in the middle of the next block, just outside a large gated courtyard. It is set back from the street, a cobblestone alcove formed by grey stone walls.

"This will do," he says. He leads Isobel off of the pavement and into the space between the wall and the gate, positioning her so her back is against the cold wet stone, and stands directly in front of her, so close that she can see each drop of rain on the brim of his bowler hat.

"Do for what?" she asks, apprehension creeping into her voice. The rain is still falling around them and there is nowhere to go. Marco simply raises a gloved hand to quiet her, concentrating on the rain and the wall behind her head.

He has never had someone to try this particular feat on before, and he is uncertain he will even be able to manage it.

"Do you trust me, Miss Martin?" he asks, watching her with the same intense stare from the café, only this time his eyes are barely inches from her own.

"Yes," she says, without hesitation.

"Good," Marco says, and with a swift movement he lifts his hand and places it firmly over Isobel's eyes.

*

STARTLED, ISOBEL FREEZES. Her vision is obscured completely, she can see nothing and feels only the damp leather against her skin. She shivers, and is not entirely sure it is due to the cold or the rain. A voice close to her ear whispers words she has to strain to hear and that she does not understand. And then she can no longer hear the rain, and the stone wall behind her feels

rough when moments before it had been smooth. The darkness is somehow brighter, and then Marco lowers his hand.

Blinking as her eyes adjust to the light, Isobel first sees Marco in front of her, but something is different. There are no drops of rain on the brim of his hat. There are no drops of rain at all; instead, there is sunlight casting a soft glow around him. But that is not what makes Isobel gasp.

What elicits the gasp is the fact that they are standing in a forest, her back pressed up against a huge, ancient tree trunk. The trees are bare and black, their branches stretching into the bright blue expanse of sky above them. The ground is covered in a light dusting of snow that sparkles and shines in the sunlight. It is a perfect winter day and there is not a building in sight for miles, only an expanse of snow and wood. A bird calls in a nearby tree, and one in the distance answers it.

Isobel is baffled. It is real. She can feel the sun against her skin and the bark of the tree beneath her fingers. The cold of the snow is palpable, though she realizes her dress is no longer wet from the rain. Even the air she is breathing into her lungs is unmistakably crisp country air, with not a hint of London smog. It cannot be, but it is real.

“This is impossible,” she says, turning back to Marco. He smiles, his bright green eyes dazzling in the winter sun.

“Nothing is impossible,” he says. Isobel laughs, the high-pitched delighted laugh of a child.

A million questions rush through her head and she cannot properly articulate any of them. And then a clear image of a card springs suddenly into her mind, *Le Bateleur*. “You’re a magician,” she says.

“I don’t think anyone has actually called me that before,”

Marco responds. Isobel laughs again, and she is still laughing when he leans closer and kisses her.

The pair of birds circle overhead as a light wind blows through the branches of the trees around them.

To passersby on the darkened London street, they look like nothing out of the ordinary, only young lovers kissing in the rain.

False Pretenses

JULY—NOVEMBER 1884

Prospero the Enchanter gives no formal reason for his retirement from the stage. His tours have been so sporadic in recent years that the lack of performances passes mostly without notice.

But Hector Bowen still tours, in a manner of speaking, even if Prospero the Enchanter does not.

He travels from city to city, hiring out his sixteen-year-old daughter as a spiritual medium.

“I hate this, Papa,” Celia protests frequently.

“If you can think of a better way to bide your time before your challenge begins—and don’t you dare say reading—then you are welcome to it, provided it makes as much money as this does. Besides, it is good practice for you to perform in front of an audience.”

“These people are insufferable,” Celia says, though it is not exactly what she means. They make her uncomfortable. The way they look at her, the pleading glances and tear-streaked stares. They see her as a thing, a bridge to their lost loved ones that they so desperately cling to.

They talk about her as though she is not even in the room, as if she is as insubstantial as their beloved spirits. She must force herself not to cringe when they inevitably embrace her, thanking her through their sobs.