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Pantomime

Written by Laura Lam

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LAURA LAM

Pantomime

PAN BOOKS



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*For Craig,
who is always there
to catch me when I jump*

SUMMER: AUDITION

“They say magic left the world with the Chimaera and the Alder. Whether they perished or abandoned us for the stars, the magic has leeches from the earth and left us only its scattered remnants. Its Vestige. They say perhaps if the Chimaera and the Alder ever return, magic will as well.

“I do not hold with such frivolity.”

A HISTORY OF ELLADA AND ITS COLONIES,
Professor Caed Cedar, Royal
Snakewood University

“Well, *boy*,” the ringmaster said. “What can you *do*?”

I swallowed. The clown who had found me eavesdropping tightened his grip on my shirt. “Pardon?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Don’t tell me you’re simple. What can you do? Are you a fire-eater? An acrobat? A freak?”

I was a freak, but I could not tell him so. I took a breath, smelling hay and sand. “I . . . I’m good at climbing, sir. Like a squirrel.”

He raised his eyebrows and gave an amused look to

the mirthful circus folk. “The boy can *climb*. Well, I’ve never come across someone with so rare and useful a skill. I’m afraid we already have someone to take the glass globes up and down.” He waved a hand toward the top of the tent and my eyes rested on the tightrope and the trapeze.

“It wouldn’t take much time to turn me into an acrobat that can walk the rope and swing from the . . . swing.” I pointed up at the trapeze, for I did not know what it was called.

“What’s your name, boy?” the ringmaster asked, eyeing me up and down. What he thought of me was clear on his face: *scrawny runt*.

“Micah Grey, sir.”

“Did Riley and Batheo’s Circus of Mundanities send you?” He must have meant Riley & Batheo’s Circus of Curiosities, the largest circus in Ellada.

“No, I have never seen Riley and Batheo.” I took another breath, which was difficult with the white clown still holding onto the scruff of my neck. “I want to join your circus.”

Everyone around me erupted into laughter. The greasepaint on the clowns’ faces creased, looking cruel, almost goblin-like. The dwarf tapped the giant on the shin and asked to be put on his shoulder so he could have a better view.

“Well, little Micah, I’m sure you climb very well and all, but I think it’s best you run along back to your parents.”

I glanced at the two trapeze artists I had seen perform that night. The older man was grinning outright

and the girl pressed four fingertips of her hand against her lips. When she saw me looking, she gave me a wink. It was enough.

“I’ll prove it to you, sir,” I said, and broke away from the clown and dashed toward the ladder to the tightrope. The circus folk jeered and catcalled. Their cries spurred me on. I clambered onto the small wooden platform and my head spun as I looked down, though I had climbed much higher than this in the past. I looked up at the trapeze and began to judge the distance.

“Hey, boy, come on, you’ve had your laugh, now come down!” the ringmaster called. “I don’t feel like peeling your corpse from the ground and having to give your parents a pancake for a son!”

I ignored him and bent my legs.

“Arik! Aenea! Go bring him down before he kills himself.” Far below, I saw the female aerialist, Aenea, run toward the rope and begin to climb.

As soon as I had seen the circus, I had known it would come to this. I had nowhere else to run to. The Policiers of the Constabulary were after me. There was no going back now.

I jumped.

SUMMER: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

“Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! Currs and skags! Step into the world as you’ve never seen it! Discover the skills, the mystery, and the magic of R.H. Ragona’s Circus of Magic, the best circus in Ellada! There are the fabled felines of Linde and their fearless trainers! Men and women eat fire, stand upon a galloping horse, and contort into knots like rubber! Watch them fly through the air! This is the show you have always been waiting for, so step right up!”

Barker’s cry of R.H. RAGONA’S CIRCUS OF MAGIC

Several hours earlier:

I spent my last few coins to get into the circus, counting the coppers in my palm. I knew it was stupid to do so, but I needed an escape from the real world. I also felt like I owed it to my brother. We had planned to sneak out of the apartments to see the circus when it was next in town or, even better, to see Riley & Batheo’s Circus of Curiosities in the hippodrome in Imachara. Even Mother had once con-

sidered going when she heard that the Princess Royal had attended a show with the Two Child Queens of Byssia.

But my brother would not be here. Mother and Father would take out my disappearance on him, confining him to his rooms except for his lessons and visits to the courts with Father. He would not climb down scaffolding and come halfway across the city. He liked mischief as much as the next boy, but in the end he was a good sort. Unlike me.

I pushed past the men in bowler hats and the women in shawls to get a good seat near the front. The tent smelled of human sweat, old popping corn, and manure. Tinny music from a large gramophone lent the tent a festive air.

The tent had been constructed on a wide, flat slab of stone topped with sand and sawdust, with one large ring drawn onto the stage with white chalk. Above the audience rose a canopy of faded red and blue canvas, and a rope ladder led to the tightrope and the long, thin swings of the trapeze. Tiny glass globe lights dotted the ceiling like stars. I was surprised – the Vestige artefacts were not cheap and getting rarer each year. But I supposed they were cheaper than a fire in a circus tent.

People trickled in. Grubby little children grinned and pointed at the rings in the center of the stage. Courting and married pairs strolled, the men with their cravats and the ladies in their bonnets and bustles. Hawkers wasted no time and circled and weaved through the rows, calling out their wares.

“Peanuts! Popping corn! Sugar floss!” they cried. Most were young, fairly attractive women wearing skirts short enough to show their ankles. I desperately wanted to try some of the sugar floss that looked like clouds, but it cost

nearly as much as the ticket. I settled into my seat, my stomach rumbling.

As I turned to watch the entering people, two Policiers came into the tent, their polished badges gleaming. They took off their helmets and tucked them under their elbows. I twisted toward the ring and slouched lower in my seat, forcing my breath to stay even. I hazarded another glance, my eyes following them as they made their way to the seats only three rows behind me. They were here for their own merriment – perhaps they had just finished a shift, and felt like seeing the circus on their way home. But they might have had my description. I tucked as much of my auburn hair as I could under my cap and pulled it lower over my forehead.

With a pang, I wished my brother was sitting next to me so I could poke him in the ribs with my elbow and share a grin. The large smelly man beside me would not have appreciated it, I was sure.

A man strolled out to the ring and the music faded. He was tall and burly, but had cultivated a paunch that threatened to burst his gold waistcoat. The quintessential ringmaster wore a crimson overcoat, a top hat, and sported a moustache waxed into curled points. He brandished a shiny teak cane.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice booming, “to the greatest circus in Ellada, R.H. Ragona’s Circus of Magic!” The audience applauded. He swept a bow, flourishing his white gloved hands and waving his cane.

“You are in for a treat tonight, my friends,” Mr Ragona beamed. His voice had the lilt of some foreign country. I leaned forward in my seat.

“You are not in a canvas tent.” He said, pausing for a few confused titters. “You are in a palace of magic. Men and women from every corner of the Archipelago have brought their secrets and powers to show you. Men and women fly through the air, and animals bow to their will. Here, nothing is impossible!” Cheers erupted again.

“We also offer more magic and more excitement than any other circus in Ellada. After the show, there is also a fun fair where you can see the animals close up – if you dare – or view our collection of human curiosities!” He beamed again. His teeth were very white.

“The show never ends with R.H. Ragona’s Circus of Magic,” he called. “But first, we must let it begin!” He threw up his hands and cane.

Fog rolled across the stage from each side of the ring. It filled the circus with the sweet scents of pine smoke and dried rose petals. The music faded into a silence that pressed against my skin. The crowd sat in a dark grey cloud, and not a cough or rustle could be heard.

A cymbal crashed, and lightning flashed in the tent. The audience yelled. Thunder rumbled and stars twinkled briefly in the fog before fading. The fog dissipated.

The music returned. Six golden-skinned shirtless men wearing loose pantaloons somersaulted on the rock slab of the stage with liquid grace. They paraded around the stage before forming a human pyramid in the center. They did not even appear to be out of breath.

But mine caught in my throat.

In the past life that was now lost to me, I had jumped through trees and scrambled up scaffolding, but it had never occurred to me to deliberately fall and flip. The

men were beautiful, with rippling muscles, sharp, Kymri features, and knowing smiles.

The man at the top of the pyramid stood and flipped to the floor, twirling in midair, and the others broke formation, moving like a pack of wolves towards backstage.

A man stumbled onto the stage. The music warbled to a stop.

The clown was tall and muscled, with incongruous white hair that looked like a dandelion standing out straight from his head in all directions. His face was painted milk-pale, with two spots of pale rouge on his cheekbones. His eyes were ringed in black and his lips cherry-red, with eyebrows painted high on his forehead. He wore clothes in a motley of cream and blanched pink save for a large orange flower on his breast.

A brass horn quavered. The clown cupped his hand to his ear, frowning. The horn chirruped again. The clown nodded vigorously and jumped forward.

He tumbled about in a parody of the acrobats that had just been on stage. With an odd, bumbling grace he somersaulted and stood on his head, kicking his feet. The audience laughed. He ran about the perimeter of the ring, pulling faces at the audience and sticking out his tongue.

Abruptly, he stopped, cupped his hand to his ear again, and continued his mute conversation with the horn. The horn urged him to do something, and the clown vigorously shook his head, holding palms out in front of him. The horn insisted. The clown crossed his arms across his chest and held his nose in the air. He stuck out his tongue and made a wet raspberry. The audience laughed.

The horn player blared, the sound startling every-

one in the tent. The clown jumped in the air and then crouched on his hands and knees in the middle of the ring. He sighed and shook his head, as if resigned to his fate, then whistled over his shoulder.

Other clowns somersaulted onto the stage. One was dressed in a blue motley, another in red and orange, one in shades of yellow, and another in shades of green. They cavorted on stage, linking arms and skipping. The white clown whistled again, impatient.

They formed into a human pyramid, but one far less graceful than the acrobats of earlier. They swayed to the right, and then they swayed to the left, looking as if they would fall at any moment. It must have been more difficult to do than the previous tumblers' pyramid. The white clown grinned at the audience in mischief, and then squirmed out of the bottom of the pyramid. The rest of the clowns tumbled and proceeded to chase the white clown around the ring and then offstage. I giggled with the rest of the audience.

I leaned forward in anticipation. Mr Ragona ambled back onto the stage and looked around, as if faintly surprised that we were all still here.

"Enjoying yourselves?" he called.

The audience hooted and hollered.

"Let me just say, girls and boys, ladies and gentlemen . . ." He held his hands out again. "You haven't seen anything yet."

A trick equestrian act performed. The man relied on brute strength, hanging from the side of the cantering horse. The woman looked as calm as she would if she were balancing on solid ground.

Between each act, Ragona made another announcement, or the white clown and his fellows mimed and parodied the previous act or told jokes. The pace of the circus never waned and each act only seemed to grow more daring and dangerous.

And between each act, much as I knew I should not, my gaze darted to the Policiers three rows behind. They did not seem to notice me, but my heart still pattered in fear.

I had looked at a volume of exotic animals from around the world in father's library, but so many of them had looked like they could never be real. The illustrations came to life before me. Little furred creatures called otters trotted onto the stage after their trainer. Together, they stood on hind legs and danced, or tossed a ball from one to the other. They twined about their trainer, two perched on his shoulders and another twisted about his waist like a belt.

An elephant named Saitha balanced on its hind legs; larger than a hansom cab, with tusks longer than sabers. I wondered what the skin would feel like; it looked like grey tree bark.

Men ate and spat fire like human dragons. A solid slab of a man lifted barbells that were said to weigh more than three average men.

I peered at the empty ring, knowing that the finale was brewing. A child cried out and pointed. A man and a woman walked onto the stage, their costumes glittering in the light of the glass globes.

The slender woman wore green. With a long brown braid snaking down her back she looked like a forest elf out of legend. Her costume was like the bodice of a

woman's dress, but instead of skirts she wore pantaloons, thick tights and light slippers. The man in blue was older, his hair silvered at the temples. The woman curtseyed and the man bowed.

They walked away from each other and each climbed a rope ladder to the wooden platforms. I wondered what they thought, standing so high as they looked down into a sea of faces.

She picked up a lace parasol from the platform, pirouetting and opening it. She balanced on tiptoe, holding her other leg so high she could have kissed her knee.

The aerialist stepped onto the tightrope. The rope bent slightly under her weight and I held my breath, frightened she would fall.

But her feet were firm as she made her slow, steady crossing in midair. She looked so dainty and delicate as she walked, pointing her toes when she lifted a foot, holding the parasol aloft, as though she could bend her legs, propel herself upwards, and fly away. The light filtered through the lace, shadows dappling her skin. When she finally made it across, I let out the breath I had been holding and clapped as loudly as I could.

The man walked across next, and he was even more talented. He must have been an acrobat for decades since he did not hesitate as he stepped onto the thin rope to perform. He walked across it as naturally as though he were strolling through a park.

Once he crossed the tightrope, the man clutched the delicate wooden handle of the trapeze and pushed himself into midair. The woman grasped her trapeze and dived after him.

A flautist on the gramophone trilled a solo as they flew through the air under the canopy of the tent, like sparrows in courtship, fluttering close to each other only to coyly dart away again. At times it seemed certain that one would clip the other, but they never did.

The man shifted, hanging by the crook of his knees instead of his hands. The woman let go, somersaulted in midair, and clasped the man's hands above the wrist.

They swung together in a human chain. If the man's hands were to slip ever so slightly, the woman would plummet to her death.

The woman climbed up the man and stood on the top of the trapeze bar, her feet to either side of the man's knees. He changed position and again hung by his hands. They swung together, gaining momentum, and the woman flipped off the trapeze and rotated twice in midair. At the last second, she reached out a hand and grasped her trapeze.

The aerialists finished to wild applause as they shimmed down the ladder and bowed before exiting.

The circus ended with the entire cast reappearing. The elephant waved its trunk and clowns wove their way between the acrobats and the trainers, the strong men and the contortionists. All smiled and waved as they bowed.

The circus had been unlike anything I could ever have imagined and I could not walk away. I wanted to be a part of the magic; create it and wield it with such skill that it looked effortless. I wanted to fly.

It was the perfect way to lead a completely different life.