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BREAD AND CIRCUSES

by Genevieve Valentine

The circus poster was a goner.

Everything in the city turned the color of ash as soon as you looked at it. We had to wash windows daily just to keep the wind from powdering them over. The kid with the metal legs had pasted the poster onto the old church (THE MECHANICAL CIRCUS TRESAULTI scrawled across the top), and it was nothing but paper and ink; it was done for.

(I was sorry to say it. Now that I had the smithworks, I put a stamp on things I made—a knot like the twisted vines that crawled up the buildings here—just to give them life, to set them apart. I knew why you'd want to make something beautiful, even if it couldn't last.)

But when the circus left a week later, the serious woman stayed behind to take up the post at our bread-oven, and that poster was still up on the old church wall, sharp green and gold, like it had been waiting for her.

* * *

“What's your name?” I asked, the first day.

Crane the magistrate had sent me to make sure she was what she seemed (“And who knows how to keep a fire hot better than you?”), and so I moved scraps of wood and bricks of peat near the oven and watched her sidelong. We worked for three hours in silence before I gave in and asked her name, just to have a little noise.

(No one had asked her, not even Crane—who cared what your name was if you could do the work?)

“They called me Valeria at the circus,” she said, lifted the metal rack out of the oven, carried it across the little bare yard to the water trough.

“I’m Tom,” I said, and she gave me a wary look for a moment before she turned to her work.

You’d never know she had been a dancing girl; she moved like a soldier.

* * *

Crane called a meeting to size her up, and everyone filed in to the Hall with their arms crossed, casting dark looks up at the steps.

(We think it used to be a museum. Most of the place is long gone, but the entrance hall is still standing except the blast-hole in the south wall and the top of the stairs—they go up into nothing, but they’re great for holding court. It’s all marble, stairs and floors and walls, ceilings fifty feet high.

My father told me that the first baker had been convicted of treason years back, for trying to defect to Two Oaks country north of us, and Crane had made an example of him in the Hall. You could hear the screams for miles.)

“We’ll be dividing the bread fairly,” Crane said. “One a day for each citizen. Children get half-ration.”

He explained the distribution (armed guard, randomized, no waiting in lines—Crane didn’t like unplanned crowds). His men a few steps below him shouldered their rifles, waiting for outcry.

But we had some order within the walls, which wasn’t the sort of thing people took for granted, and when someone raised a hand it was only, “What if we can’t grow any grain on the flats because of the ash?”

“It will grow,” he said with conviction, like any lawman would who knows what he’s doing. “It will grow, and we will grow, and then the people of Two Oaks will see what a proud city can be!”

All through the crowd there were smiles and even a flash of applause, and I thought we might go another week without war, after all.

* * *

I was on watch at the wall when the circus came.

The thing to understand is, when you grow up in a city like this, and you walk behind your father with your first gun dragging in the dirt, and you spend your waking hours scouring the horizon for anything slow enough to shoot, your world coils in on itself. It has to. One day it exhausts you just to walk from one end of the wall to the other; one night the wreckage seems like it's spreading over the ground like a living thing until you're living in a space so tight you can't see above your own shoulders.

I didn't know it, though, until I saw the red truck come over the horizon, with the banner draped across the front end: MECHANICAL CIRCUS TRESAULTI.

The truck rattled alone across the dust for a long time before the whole caravan came into view, but by then they were too late. Looking at that red truck, its too-bright banner trembling in the wind as it drove across the flats, was the first time I had ever thought about where something had come from, or that there was anywhere it could go.

By the time the string of trucks was in sight, by the time the first tinny song reached the city walls, my old world had already fallen away.

* * *

We all knew better than to tell her about what had happened to the first baker. Crane would have killed us for less,

and we'd all fought enough over the damn thing before she'd come that we knew not to frighten her off.

Not that she frightened easy. She had an air that would have kept worse people at arm's reach; not even Crane came around asking to sleep with her.

But she wasn't a fool, and she must have guessed why we had waited so long for an outsider, and why once a day she shoved dry brown bread into baskets guarded by Crane's men. She must have had some idea of the knot of politics that had pulled so tight that none of us trusted any of the others enough to let them take a turn sweating beside the open oven.

(These days the world is small, and you fight for every inch.)

* * *

I felt sorry for her, at first.

She came down from the circus hill with a bright flowered dress and a long black braid and a body drawn taut as a bow, carrying a burlap sack with rope handles like it was a king's purse.

That lasted until the first day in front of the oven.

By then her braid was already chopped off, and she wore a sacking shirt and heavy boots to protect her from the heat, and her shoulders went rounder and rounder every hour she spent wrist-deep in the dough.

Her hands went bleeding-red at first, then blister-white, then callus-purple. After three months, the palms of her hands were grey as rocks, and just as rough.

(That was a guess; I'd never touched her.)

* * *

I never went back to the smithworks.

"We need you at the baker's more," Crane said. "We can get Michael to take over the works for now. She needs someone to help her get started. That oven is a tricky business for a woman alone."

(It wasn't true; she had lifted the huge oven grate on her own, and even though her hair was singed down nearly to her ears, she'd never said a word about it. She wore a wet kerchief to keep from catching fire, but that was the only concession to the furnace she'd ever made.)

"Has she asked for me to stay?"

"Of course," Crane said, as if I'd never seen him lie before.

* * *

I shoveled wood and moss into the oven for months, kneeling all day at her feet.

She didn't like me, that was for sure. But I stayed quiet when I could, and we learned to move around each other without stumbling, and it was better than it could have been.

We weren't fools; better to have me there than two of Crane's men.

When she kneaded the dough, she'd look absently around the square, watching the people not-quite-watching her, looking through the crumbling walls at the sprouts of grain that were just starting to fight their way up from under the carpet of ash.

"Who's that?" she'd ask, without really looking at me, and I'd say, "Samuels—he's a mason, not that you'd know it from the blast holes everywhere," or, "Marie—she can find a good bullet under fifteen feet of rubble."

(She never asked about Michael at the smithworks, or when I was going back there. She wasn't dim.)

She took to looking at the circus poster, which had hardly faded from the day she came; some of the darkest edges had begun to sand off, but it still looked bright even if it wasn't sharp.

"Do you miss them?"

She looked down at me.

I couldn't stop the flutter of panic that struck me suddenly, and when I opened my mouth it came out, "Will you go with them when they come back?"

For a moment she didn't move at all; then she got a funny look on her face, as if the only answer she had was in some other language and there was no translation.

"Oh, no," she said finally, false and light. "I don't think that's very likely."

I was anxious, all at once. "Why wouldn't they come back here? There's only so many cities, they'll have to make the circuit."

She looked into the fire. "I can't go back," she said. "That life isn't for me any more."

I didn't understand—once a wanderer, always a wanderer—but I didn't press her. (Why did I want to know? It was Crane's problem. What would it matter to me if she was staying or going?)

She reached into the open oven for a round loaf of bread. The steam was rising off it even in the sticky morning heat, but she held it in one hand for a moment, thoughtfully, before she dropped it into the basket.

I held the baskets at arm's length all the way through the yard to meet Crane's men, kept my arm out even after my hands shook from fatigue; the bread was still so hot that if I let it rest against me, it would have singed me right through the basket and my coat, down to the skin.

* * *

The parade came through the town square the day after the poster went up.

I don't really remember now—it's a blur of banners and tumblers and sharp-color coats. I remember the strongman with the metal spine, two heads taller than any of the other men, with a cage of brass ribs around him. I remember the silent pair of acrobats, because the woman had one eye missing and she never turned the good one to the crowd. I remember the tumblers moving faster than I could count them; I remember six young women wearing gauzy blue who ended up on the trapeze.

There was no moment where I saw Valeria's face among the knot of dancing girls, no gesture I made that caught her eye. I feel now as if there should have been one, but I can't even pretend to have noticed her in the crowd. The first time I ever really saw her was when she walked down the hill, and I looked up at her and thought, *Oh, have you made a mistake.*

But when I was standing in the city square watching them parade through the town, I couldn't even catch hold of their faces, I couldn't catch hold of my breath; it was just a wild cacophony of brightly wretched strangers, and I watched them dancing past me and tried not to die of joy.

* * *

It was amazing what a little bread could do.

Samuel the mason starting patching up the holes in the city walls, and Marie surprised us all by knowing how to read a little and holding school for those who wanted to learn. Knowing that bread would come tomorrow, the city slowly began to lift up its head and look around at the future.

I shouldn't have been surprised when Crane called me to his house and asked me to stay close to her at night as well as while she baked.

"There's no call for that," I said. "Who's threatened her? Everyone's gotten their equal share."

"So far," said Crane, "but what if she should turn on us? What if she's forming alliances behind our backs? Imagine what would happen if some started getting more bread than others. Our flour supplies aren't infinite, you know."

I wondered what she would gain from any of it—there didn't seem to be anything here she wanted except steady work and a place to sleep. Not that I understood that any better, but whatever she was, she wasn't a schemer.

(I should have understood what was happening to me already in that little room, but when your world is so small, you don't see above your shoulders.)

"She might not like having me around," I said.

“She should be pleased she’s so well-protected,” Crane said, offended, and it wasn’t until then that I realized I’d been her jailor since the beginning, and I was just the last to be told.

* * *

A year after the Circus Tresaulti had come and gone, the poster had lost its sharp edges and was just an impression of color through its feathery layer of ash. The wind had peeled the corners off, but the poster was holding on to that door as if it was under orders, as if it had to be ready for the circus that would come back any second to pick up the dancer it had lost.

I could see it clearly from the door of the baker’s prison, gleaming in the dark.

(That little house was a prison for me, too; I had been growing loyal to her instead of to the city, and had to be punished for my mistake.)

* * *

One day, as I was helping her scrape the flour off the inside of the paper sack, I said, “When you were in the circus, what sort of things did you end up eating?”

“You’re always asking about the circus,” she said, not quite a complaint.

I wouldn’t have had to ask so much if she’d only told me more, but that was unfair, so I said, “It’s more interesting than this place, that’s all.”

She didn't argue, and after a little pause she said, "I auditioned with a knife-thrower, as his assistant, but they only took me. It was just as well. He'd have slit all their throats, I think, and then he would really have been in trouble."

Why an armed man should have been the one worrying, she never explained, but I had seen the tumblers tossing one another in the air and the strongman lifting all six dancing girls on his outstretched arms like they were no heavier than a pair of sleeves. I could guess what would happen to anyone who was caught out.

The next day, as she sifted a little dirt into the flour, she said, "Sometimes when Elena jumped from the rigging it looked like she was going to fall, and at the last moment she'd move sideways so fast to the trapeze it was as if the wind had carried her."

For a moment my heart seized. "I remember that," I said, catching a memory of the aerialist's routine as if I was blinking against the sun. "She did that same thing the night I saw the circus—just dropped as if she had wings to carry her!"

Valeria's face went solemn at that, as if she had betrayed some confidence, and all that day she glanced up the hill as she worked the dough in her hands.

The third day when I looked up at her, waiting, she shook her head silently, made little pockets in the bread so it looked

bigger than it was. (I was too crushed by her silence, I didn't think much of her doing it; I didn't realize that her worries had begun in earnest.)

* * *

Crane stopped by one morning and pulled her aside. His two men stayed near me and shouldered their rifles; I shoveled peat into the furnace and watched her talking with him, too far away for me to hear. Once or twice she nodded, solemnly, and he seemed pleased.

He walked back smiling, and said too calmly, "Good morning, Tom," and walked back across the square with his two men, disappearing into the streets.

She kept her eyes on her work, but after they had vanished she said, "We're running out of flour."

I frowned, tried to steady myself past the first flash of panic. "What does he suggest we do?"

"He told me you're a traitor," she said. "That you've been stealing from the supplies and selling to Two Oaks. He told me you're supposed to kill me if I find out. I shouldn't trust you, he said."

My blood went cold, and the peat I was holding crumbled in my grip.

"That's not true," I said, when I could speak.

She didn't look up. "I know," she said. "You want to know about the circus too much to kill me."

I flushed. (I was still safe enough to be embarrassed. I hadn't given any thought to what might have happened if she hadn't told me; if she had believed him.)

We were short of flour and that was a fact, and the grain wasn't growing fast enough. I was the shortcut in case Crane couldn't deliver on his promise; Valeria would be next, being a stranger.

"I'm beginning to wish you'd stayed with the circus," I said. "No offense."

She looked over at the poster. "The circus was a prison of its own," she said. "Just because it travels doesn't mean it can't be a trap for the people in it."

That stung more than anything, somehow. She looked down at me; her face seemed stretched thin, as if her whole self was pulling in and away, and she sucked in a breath that sounded like it hurt, and said, "But I don't really remember. It was a long time ago."

Her hands were shaking as she turned back to the dough, and I knew she wouldn't speak another word about the circus—not even for her own sake, but for mine.

* * *

Crane wasn't stupid enough to forbid us to see the circus, but he also didn't want the temptation to linger, so he went up the hill the morning after the boy with the metal legs put up the poster. When he came down again he announced the circus would be in town for one week only, so if we wanted to see it, we should make our plans.

I was still a smith then, but I was on watch four nights a week, like all the men, and in the end I only saw the circus once.

It was one tent at the top of the hill, tall and wide and cobbled together from a dozen fabrics patched up in wide stripes to look intentional, purple and yellow and red. The strings of lanterns and bare bulbs flickered in tune with a little generator somewhere inside the tent. The whole place smelled of sweat and sour beer and the tang of tree sap from the bleachers under our feet.

I tried to save it up in my memory so I could unroll it later, but when the ringmaster came out and threw her arms wide open and the applause began, it felt as if I had crested a hill I didn't remember, and I was just beginning a long fall.

I remember things only in glimpses, as if I had been spying—the strongman carrying the red truck right out of the tent, a juggler's face illuminated as the torches flew at him, the woman acrobat bent backwards and balanced on her partner's hand,

six girls suspended between two trapezes; these were the deep, sharp pictures I could grasp hold of as I fought the sense of falling that I couldn't understand.

* * *

My clock was ticking, and she and I made bread every day knowing that if the grain didn't ripen, we were next in line to be cut down.

A week after Crane visited her, his men began to come back after their bread run and make lazy loops around the square. I kept my head low; whenever I glanced up, Valeria was looking at them like she was just waiting for one of them to get within arm's reach of the fire.

But if one of them caught her eye, she tilted her head and smiled slightly, as if she was sharing a secret with him, and he'd blink and grin, and I would remember that she had been a performer dressed in veils.

(Maybe this was why I never really remembered her when I thought of the circle of dancers; I could only see her as a soldier.)

One day the farmers came back through the city gates, and as they crossed the square, Marie shot a dark glance at Valeria and shook her head, furious.

For the first time since my childhood, I started looking at the walls.

* * *

I had never been outside the city, not even out to the little grain field that stood in the shadow of the Hall. I had done my time as a sentry inside the wall, but all it had ever done was made me suspicious of the horizon (until the circus came).

I had memorized the jagged edges where the Hall had struck; the crater between the gate and the gatehouse where you could keep an animal, if you ever found one; the half-moon behind the smithy from a bomb that had landed just on the other side of the defenses, which saved the buildings near it but had probably been quite something for the smith.

The walls had never seemed a prison until the circus came; but when I realized that our time was up and what Crane might have intended for us, I felt the same knot in my stomach, that need to be away from the city that had grown through every act of the circus, until I was watching the women on the trapeze, too caught up to look away, too frightened to breathe.

* * *

It was winter, and I had taken to sleeping on the ground in the front room of the little windowless house. I had never gone farther, though, and when I tapped on her bedroom door and opened it, she was scrambling out of bed fully clothed with a knife in her hand.

(Crane would never have let her near a knife; she must have stolen one out from under me early on. Good for her.)

I said, "I know a way out."

She was pulling on her boots as soon as she recognized me, and by the time I finished talking, she was ready.

* * *

Samuel was a good mason, but slow, and he hadn't gotten around to patching up the little half-moon behind the smithy. It was too small for either of us, but we were two strong pairs of arms used to the work, and the ashy ground peeled away under our shovels.

We were nearly finished when we heard footsteps thundering through the square toward the bakery furnace. Crane must have gotten tired of waiting for dissent before he began his work.

(I pitied that first baker, years ago.)

The hole wasn't big enough for me, but it would just fit her if she was strong enough to press through.

I felt like I was falling.

"Go on," I said.

She looked at me for a moment, but she wasn't fool enough to think we'd both make it, not now.

"He won't kill me," she said. "You should go. I'll find my way out somehow."

I shook my head; we knew better.

The cry went up at the baker's—we had no more time.

“Thank you,” she said, and a moment later she was scrambling through the hole. The footsteps were close enough that the ground under me was shaking.

I dropped to my hands and knees; it was dark, but I could just see her climbing to her feet.

“Will you find the circus again?” I asked, breathless.

I wanted it to be true, I needed it to be, and she must have known, because when she said, “Yes,” it was the sweetest lie I'd ever heard.

She moved like a soldier through the ragged scrub until the dark closed in around her, and she was lost to sight even before Crane's men reached me.

* * *

There was no time wasted with a trial; I had been caught conspiring with an enemy. Crane and his men walked me to the Hall for my punishment. (Blood cleaned easily off the marble.)

“I'm disappointed,” said Crane as we walked. “She never had much promise, but I expected a little more fortitude from you.”

“Or from the grain,” I said through the blood in my mouth.

One of the men cracked the butt of his rifle against my bound hands, just hard enough to snap a bone.

Several people were already waiting in the Hall (the commotion had spread), and they stood in little knots, waiting to see who had crossed Crane. There was some surprise amongst the others when I came in, which was gratifying. Maybe a little doubt could bring down even a magistrate, given enough time; maybe that's why Crane had decided to act before anyone could question him.

I was left on the landing of the stairs, the better to be seen; Crane walked down a few steps, with his men between us for safety.

When Crane threw his arms wide, I remembered the threadbare circus tent and the silhouette of the ringmaster against the paper lanterns as she called for the circus to begin.

"Tom the Smith," Crane began, "has been found guilty of conspiring with a traitor to sell flour to Two Oaks. He has betrayed not just myself, but all of you, for his own petty gain."

The murmurs began. I remembered the sound of the crowd as the trapeze artists came out, one by one, and began to scale the rigging, all the way up to where the trapezes were waiting.

"He must be dealt with," Crane said.

I remembered the pair of acrobats; he had thrown her into the air and she had come down headfirst—he had caught her an inch above the ground.

I turned around without thinking, took the stairs as fast as I could. Behind me there were shouts, but I was taking the stairs two at a time, up and up into nothing.

If I jumped, I would land outside the city walls. That would be enough; whether or not I lived, I would have been even once outside the gates.

(The aerialists had done the same—you held your breath and jumped as far out as you could, and hoped the wind would carry you.)

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Genevieve Valentine's World-Fantasy-Award-nominated short fiction has appeared in or is forthcoming from: The Way of the Wizard, Running with the Pack, Federations, Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons, and more. Her first novel, Mechanique: a Tale of the Circus Tresaulti, set in the same world as "Bread and Circuses," is forthcoming from Prime Books in 2011. Her appetite for bad movies is insatiable, a tragedy she tracks on her blog, www.genevievevalentine.com.

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THE POPINJAY'S DAUGHTER

by Anne Cross

In the House of the Mad Russian, there are many doors. You may pass through as many of them as you like and not arrive where you think you ought to, because you cannot leave the House except through the door you entered in by, and you cannot exit the House unless it be in the same state you came in. But the truth of those words is as mutable as the doors, and the magic of doors is both blatant and subtle, depending upon the expectations of the opener.

The House is headquarters to much of the Popinjay Society, home to a very few of them, and the preferred place for them to keep their “guests.”

In the seventh year of my incarceration, one such guest was dragged in through the front door in hysterics, incoherent with impotent rage and heavily pregnant. The shrieks of fury had already attracted my attention when they drifted in through my window, but Cook's cries for “Ghost! Ghost!” brought me to use the quickest way down, the magic of the Unexpected Door.

I found the nearest window with the runes inscribed on its sill, concentrated very hard on how much I expected to be anywhere but in the front hall, and darted through. I emerged from the coat closet beneath the stairs to the sound of the front door slamming, and with a jingle of keys, being locked.

Cook and I had other concerns. It took us both to get the heavily pregnant woman up onto one of the low divans, where she cried herself into an uneasy doze. As Cook rose to go, she observed, “It’s just luck none of the staff’s come in through that door in a week.”

I was more interested in my fellow prisoner. “Who is she? And what crime has she committed against the Society?”

“The young master didn’t so much as give her name. He just told her he’d be wed to her in two months, child or not, and left.”

I eyed the woman’s stomach and frowned. ‘Master’ meant he had completed his apprenticeship to the Society. He would be one of the gentleman defenders of the Realm, with knowledge both of the mysteries of the House and of magic. The latter incidentally freed him, by the Queen’s mandate, of any unfortunate social repercussions. It also made the woman’s refusal a little odd, but the Master’s decision to lodge his *pregnant* fiancée in the House for a full two months verged on dangerous.

“How far along is she? If she’s likely to give birth here, to cease being pregnant *here*....” From pregnant to full-blown mother—the only greater change of state I could think of was perhaps from living to dead. “If that happens, even they won’t be able to free her, will they? Unless he plans to... well.” Some things were not to be discussed.

Cook frowned. “Another mouth to feed. One accustomed to *quality*,” she muttered. Cook did not care for the over-inflated tastes of the gentry. “Lunch will be late.”

The woman woke half an hour later, and once she’d gotten a look at the room, adopted a distinctly suspicious expression. “This is the House, isn’t it.”

“Yes, you’re in the House of the Mad Russian,” I said. “What have you done to upset the Popinjays so? Even I didn’t inspire them to lock the front door behind me.”

Her face brightened. “Oh! Are you that boy they locked in here, the one who never escaped?”

I grimaced. Others had come and gone during my tenure, through bribery or guile or begging, most inside of a month. There had even been other apprentices, who shunned my company as if my ignorance were a disease that might be contagious. Still, I had learned what I could by observing, and manners were one thing that did not require literacy to learn. “Yes, miss. The staff call me Ghost. May I ask your name?”

“I am Magdalena Selworth, and I’m betrothed against my will to Master Francis Ramond. The man who left me here.” She glanced down. “This child is not his.”

I am certain I looked confused.

“I arranged to find myself pregnant, in hopes that he would want nothing to do with a sullied woman.”

The piercing gaze she speared me with and her refined beauty both dazzled me. “I, I can’t see how being pregnant would have much bearing on whether anyone would care for you or not.”

Magdalena laughed, a sound as sweet as bells, and I could not help smiling. “It’s refreshing to meet so much innocence in such a pretty package, Ghost. But—I know the story of the boy who was locked up. It’s told as a cautionary tale now, illustrating the perils of offending the Society, but they don’t provide details. What did you *do*?”

The pathetic story of my captivity would not impress her, but her attention was compelling. “I told one of the elderly Masters that anyone could do what they did. I did so loudly, as he passed me by in the public hiring fair in Harrow without a second glance. I said that anyone properly trained could guard the Realm, and win Her Majesty’s favor, and that if this Master truly cared for the good of all, he would stop lording it over us poor folk, and teach us.”

Magdalena's smile was balm on my loneliness. "Ah. You were brave, but very foolish."

"Oh yes," I agreed. "They brought me into the House that night, while I slept, and left a marque of apprenticeship by me. But they have taught me nothing, and so here I sit, for I'm told by the staff that I cannot leave the House except through the same door, and in the same state. I tried every door I could find in the first month I was here. As you can see, nothing worked."

"Poor boy," she said, sounding sympathetic, though her patronizing tone briefly etched away some of her beauty's shine.

After all, at fourteen years, I was accounted a young man. If I had never challenged the Society, chances were good I would have been courting, married within a pair of years. But before I could say a word, she flinched, putting one hand to her back. "Ah, if you could show me some place more comfortable to rest? He... was not gentle with me."

As she smiled at me, I found myself saying, "Of course, Miss Selworth."

* * *

Alone in my room that evening, I stared out the window at the mix of riders on horses and smoky alchemical engines going by, men and woman walking together in the cool spring air, seeming utterly alien to me. I tried to imagine myself

strolling by with Miss Selworth on my arm and strangely found I didn't want to, though I was certain I had desired just that over lunch.

Frustrated, I turned away to the pages of my book, the only one I had found during my tenure that I had some chance of understanding. Behind the highest window in the House, right under the cupola, was a small room, accessible only through magic, and I had inadvertently fallen in the window while trying to escape. Learning to get back to that room taught me how to use the Unexpected Door, and on my fifth visit, I found the book wedged into a gap between the wall and the window, its wood-grain spine nearly invisible beneath the sill.

Every time I opened it, it felt as if I were opening one of the House's doors, and indeed, the book was filled with pictures of them, marked with strange glyphs and sigils. Opposite each drawing was a single page completely filled with crabbed, incomprehensible handwritten text.

Hundreds of times, I painstakingly copied the diagrams onto doors in the attic, and always there was a sense of impending *something*. Yet when I opened the doors, the symbols would vanish, and the door would be just a door. I had memorized the glyphs, knowing they were important, but I *needed* the words.

I only briefly considered asking Miss Selworth for help. No one in the House knew I had the book, even Cook, and if one of the Popinjays insisted on marrying her, utterly against her will, there had to be more to her than just her lovely face.

* * *

For the next three days, I had no time for my book. I found myself alternating between dancing attendance on Magdalena and trying to think of a suitable bribe for the hired help, who *could* leave, and who therefore could bring a locksmith to open the front door. I'd tried all this before, of course, when I was first locked in, but it had not helped since I did not know which door I'd entered by. Magdalena, however, might leave easily—if only someone would unlock the front door.

None of them were willing, not even when I threatened to resume the poltergeist behavior that had earned me my nickname. “The Masters might lock *us* in here,” seemed to be the universal, annoyingly reasonable response.

After my one lapse into vengeful pot flinging, Magdalena sweetly asked where I had been, over a late, rather burnt lunch that I brought to her in the Salon. My abashed explanation of what I had been up to and why Cook had been so distracted bought me a disapproving look and, “I thought you said that you were no longer a boy.”

When I visibly wilted, she turned that dazzling smile on me again.

“If you *really* want to set me free, then you might avail yourself of what they keep here, and learn the mysteries of the doors.”

“I know *those*,” I muttered.

“The House has belonged to the Popinjay Society for over two hundred years, and they keep their library here. They come and go -” there had been one of their nightly meetings already, which I had watched as usual, trying to glean some meaning from it—”and they clearly do not fear the doors the way the staff do. You say you have tried everything, but there must be some secret to it that you don’t know.”

“I was unconscious,” I reminded her, stung by her implication of sloth, though the smile soothed it somewhat. “And *they* always post a guard at the door they come in through. They always leave by the same door they came in, and they’re always careful to leave nothing behind. They *don’t* trust the doors.”

“But they trust them more than the staff. The library may tell us why.”

“It might tell *you*,” I mumbled, ashamed.

“Come now, Ghost—though you may have never bothered to avail yourself of the resources here, can you at least bring yourself to help *me* use them?”

I felt much like I imagined a puppet on a string might, as my head jerked up and down.

* * *

“Oooh...,” Magdalena exhaled as we reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs. “I do not look forward to climbing those. It’s as well I did not drink much tea at breakfast.”

“There is a door down here that I can make open to the third floor,” I assured her. “Whenever you’re tired. But there are none that lead *down* here, ever. Even the Masters must take the stairs to get to this room.” Then I opened the door into the library, with its high tall windows that let in only a little light between all the shelves. It was dark and musty-smelling, and as crammed and cramped full of paper as it could be and still allow someone to stand inside.

In Magdalena’s gravid state, she had little chance of navigating it, and I had long since given up finding anything of use inside. The one time I had vented my frustration, I found that the Popinjays had several traps in there for vandals, or for angry small boys. I now knew better than to deface the books further.

Magdalena stared into the room with some consternation. “Ghost, you will have to help me.”

“Of course,” I said, trying to be gallant, and was rewarded with a smile.

“Good. Someplace in here, according to my uncle, there are three books that tell of the earliest history of the House, and how the Popinjay Society began learning their magics. They are *The Chronicles of the Mad Russian*, and they are where we will begin.”

I eyed the library dubiously, and said nothing.

She frowned, apparently struck by a thought. “Ghost, can you read?”

“Who would teach *me*? We were poor, my parents and sisters and I. Before I was brought here, I shoveled coal for two pence a day. My words to the Master weren’t an idle observation, Miss Selworth.”

She sighed, and I realized I had disappointed her again, but this time the fault was not mine and that made me angry. “Well, you speak well enough to have fooled me, so I suppose you *can* be educated.... If I write something out for you, can you match the shapes on the marks on the spines of the books, and bring me what you find? I’ll wait here on the stair.”

I flinched inside, knowing that I would surely disappoint her again many times, but only said, “Certainly, Miss Selworth.”

Then she won my loyalty past a thousand cutting remarks by adding, “And then we’ll see about making certain that you can read them for yourself in the future.”

* * *

I spent the rest of that morning—and all the mornings following—ferreting out books for Magdalena. The afternoons were spent drilling me on my letters, struggling to embed them in my memory and then learning how to string them together to make words. However, Magdalena’s patience had notable limits, and when she tired of teaching me, she would declare that I must be weary of my labors and leave me to my own devices while she read in silence.

Whenever that happened, or after we were finished with dinner, I would leave Magdalena to gain what rest she could and turn my attentions to *my* book. The first words I read alone were its title: *The Book of Doors*. I almost told Magdalena.

Instead, I kept reading.

The initial page was titled, “On the Virtue of Expectation.” It took me almost an hour to string together the letters and sound out the words. After that, I got used to the handwriting,

and things went a little faster. Staring at the glyphs of the *Book* for hours on end, and eavesdropping on the Popinjays as well, turned out to have been a good idea. With the words' help, I was able to quickly piece together many of the missing pieces I had lacked in my understanding of how the House doors worked. Though the script was crabbed and difficult, I felt I was making very good progress, and that in a month or perhaps two, I might be able to free myself—and once I was outside, there were likely Doors that I could open that would free Miss Selworth as well.

I wasn't given the month, however. Three days after my optimistic prediction to myself, little Theresa decided it was time to put in her appearance, a bare forty days after Miss Selworth had been locked in the House.

* * *

Her tapping on my door was ragged and somewhat frantic, but it was her gasp and moan that woke me more than the knocking. "Miss Selworth?" I said, as I opened the door. She grabbed hold of my shoulders with convulsing hands and nearly collapsed. I braced myself, trying to take her weight.

"Baby," she gasped out. "They're coming too close together to hope... that I'm not... and... I shall be trapped here forever!"

My mind went blank for a moment, and then Miss Selworth burst into tears of frustration and fear. I pushed my

panic aside. I had no idea how to birth a baby, but after she had taught me to read, I was *damned* if I would abandon her to her fate. “Miss Selworth—calm down, please—it will be all right.”

She could not seem to stop sobbing, but another gasp and clutch at my shirt told me that I had better get her someplace where she could lie down, quickly. I swung her into my arms, taking that liberty, and carried her back to her room. She lay back against the pillows sobbing as I glanced out the window. False dawn was lightening the sky, and the staff would be at their jobs in a few hours. I dared not leave her long, but I penned a hasty note in crooked, awkward letters—“MYD WYFE. 3 UP BAK.—G” and raced down to the kitchen, praying that Cook would find someone who could read my dreadful handwriting and that Miss Selworth would hold out long enough for me to get back to her.

Both women did, but in between, there was only interminable waiting. For over an hour I fretted and waited for the staff to arrive and see my note. With no one in the House to ask for aid, there was nothing I could do but hold Miss Selworth’s hand when the convulsions wracked her.

I have never been more relieved in my life to hear footsteps in the stairwell. Cook bustled into the room, followed by another woman I had never seen in my life. “Ah, she’s far

gone,” the woman said, and glanced at me. “Go boil some water.”

I found myself evicted from Miss Selworth’s side. I wanted to think that she would have protested, but by that point, I really had no idea what she thought of me, and she was in so much pain that I don’t believe she cared *who* was holding her hand.

I paced for a time, but then my legs gave out on me and I simply collapsed on the top stair, brooding over how helpless I felt and how much I despised feeling helpless, and how frustrated I was at my own slowness in mastering magic.

A baby’s scream sometime near dusk startled me out of my nervous reverie. A few minutes later, Cook came to the head of the stairs. I managed to choke out, “Is she—?”

Cook tsked softly. “She’s fine. Just worn out. What’ve you been doing with that woman, I wonder?”

“She’s teaching me to read,” I said, managing an exhausted smile.

“Really?” Cook’s expression gradually settled into something akin to smug relief. “Good! I’ll go make up something strengthening for the lady there. You can come fetch it in an hour or so. But you won’t be learning much reading from her for a while, I think.”

I clambered upright as Cook went by and sketched a small, ironic bow after her before I cautiously peered through Miss Selworth's still-open door. The midwife seemed to be packing her things, but when I cleared my throat, she looked up.

"Is she...," I asked again, because Miss Selworth looked nearly dead with exhaustion, and I could see a pile of bloodied linen on the floor next to the bed.

The midwife crossed the distance to the door quickly, and pulled it partially closed behind her. "She is very weak, and will be so for some time—the child is a *large* baby, and Mistress Selworth is not a large woman. She's in no immediate danger, so long as she does not exert herself, but it will be your task, young Master, to make certain that she does not. And that the demands of her daughter do not cause her to do so for at least a month."

I blinked. "A daughter?" I whispered.

The midwife smiled. "A fine daughter, with red hair, just like yours." She waved at the stubble on my chin, where I'd only recently begun to shave it. I thought about correcting her misapprehensions, then decided it really didn't matter. "She called her 'Theresa' just before she fell asleep."

"Theresa." I smiled at the sound of it. "May I... may I sit with them?"

“Heh. You’d do better to sleep in the chair, young Master, and catch your rest as you can. You will be very busy from now on.”

* * *

Babies, as everyone but me apparently knew, are a terrific amount of work. I had only a nebulous idea of just *how* much work they are, having been only three when my sisters were born.

I would say that I didn’t mind in the slightest, but I would be lying. However, I didn’t mind nearly enough for it to matter. Miss Selworth’s time was no longer restricted by our need to get her out of the House quickly, now that she was just as trapped I was, and she tired too easily to waste her effort sharpening her tongue on me. So I was pleased to spend my time on both her and increasingly on Theresa, who was almost certainly trapped for life.

Miss Selworth seemed to mind her daughter’s demands far more, as she passed the baby off to me as frequently as she could, immersing herself in the books with an increasingly fervid obsession as her energy returned.

I was far more interested in the miracle I was watching unfold, but *the Book of Doors* saved me quite a lot of running up and down stairs just the same. The first secret the Book had given me was one I had already learned with the Unexpected

Door. A door with *that* glyph on it *never* led where one expected it to go, while one without the glyph could be encouraged to take me anywhere—which for me was most frequently the kitchen. The symbols were a means of enforcing that expectation, each one a different sort of enforcement, but a true magician could manage without the markings, if his will was strong enough.

I quickly found that a screaming baby with a dirty diaper had a remarkable means of empowering one's will.

* * *

By the end of her prescribed month, Magdalena was more than recovered; the shine was back in her smile, and the sharpness in her expectations. She was, however, quite startled when I altered her bedroom door to let her reach the lounge off the front hall, where I could open the windows to let her smell the garden in bloom while she rested.

I left her lounging there while I went to the kitchen to collect more diapers. I was walking back, humming to myself and wondering when we would be graced with a repeat of Theresa's first smile and whether Magdalena would get to see it this time, when I heard her shriek of rage from the lounge, followed by Theresa's startled howl.

My heart nearly stopped, but my feet did not—I was running before I even consciously registered that I should

hurry. I don't think I could have reached the front door any faster even if I'd used the doors.

Magdalena was struggling furiously in the grasp of a man I did not know, her eyes sparkling with fury as they fought. Theresa lay on the floor across the room, bawling her lungs out, in a tangle of blanket from her half-unwrapped swaddling. A bruise purpled the side of her face.

"Ghost!" Magdalena shrieked when she saw me standing there. "Help me!"

Taking advantage of her distraction, the man twisted Magdalena's arm up behind her, then spared a glance to the doorway where I stood gaping. "The door be sealed against you!" he yelled, flinging his free hand up in one of the gestures I had seen the Popinjays use in their rituals. "The way be blocked, the portal be shut!"

There was no door in that particular arch, but the doorway itself seized around me, holding me fast. Every muscle in my body screamed with strain; I couldn't move an inch. Even breathing was a strain.

Magdalena sagged limply, in defeat or sudden exhaustion I could not tell, while the man behind her shifted his grip to keep her from falling, unconcerned with the bruises he was leaving on her arms. After a moment of scrutinizing me, or perhaps the doorway around me, he nodded, looking both pleased and

thoughtful as he mused, “Excellent. The power in the Selworth remains, though this generation it’s produced a Source instead of a Magus. Of course, I can make much better use of that power than you, dear Maggie. All you can manage is charming hapless young men to your whim, while with your strength, I can bind them to a doorway for as long as I like.”

“You’re despicable, Francis. Let go of me!”

“Oh, I don’t think so. Now that you’re divested of that inconvenient child, I can deal with that rebellious streak of yours.” He began shoving her toward the front door, which still stood open. “We’ll just have to wait until later to see if your daughter has inherited her mother’s spirit or her power—but no matter. I can be patient.”

I paid only cursory attention to their argument, far more worried about his threat to Theresa. I suddenly wanted the two of them both far, far away from us, and ideally from each other, where neither of them could make a second wreck of my life, just as I had begun to rebuild it.

“You’ve forgotten the House,” Magdalena snarled, struggling to get him to turn toward her. “I can’t leave, after all—unless you propose to rape me here in the foyer and get me pregnant again. Even Her Majesty wouldn’t stand for that if I told her—let go of me, Francis!”

In my mind, I called up the glyphs I had drawn so many times over the doors in the attic, focusing on superimposing them on the front archway where the door stood open to the street. Beyond them, instead of cobbled streets and passing people I imagined the windswept, heathered moor that I had seen outside my kitchen window for the first seven years of my life. No longer home, it was also nowhere nearby.

Master Ramond only laughed. “Maggie my dear, you can’t possibly think you know more about the House than I do? You’ve had less than two months to comprehend what I’ve spent my whole life mastering. You’ll be able to leave—you’re just as overwrought now as you were when I dragged you in here!”

The air I was staring at began to shimmer, as if in a heat haze, and I felt the strength begin to drain out of me as I worked my first magic without the House’s backing; only the trap-spell on the doorway I stood in kept me upright.

“What?” Magdalena whispered. “You mean... no!” she shrieked, as he shoved her straight through the front door.

Space bent. My spell held for an instant, then snapped, and she vanished. The compulsion holding me shattered. Master Ramond shouted, “Magdalena!” and rushed out the door. I dropped to my knees, coughing, and crawled to where

Theresa lay crying. I picked her up and cradled her against my chest as Master Ramond stormed back in.

“*What* have you done with her?” he demanded.

“She’s in Harrow, I think.” I coughed, rocking Theresa who was starting to calm down slightly. He stared at me in shock. “Do you *also* think I am still here because I am just lazy?”

“After seven years, never showing any sign of any skill whatsoever...” He shook his head. “You’ve made Master Wilthorn a laughingstock, the worst apprentice anyone’s ever picked!”

“I suppose no apprentice has ever before lacked the ability to read when he was locked in,” I said, getting slowly to my feet. “But until you imprisoned Miss Selworth with me, I had no way to learn. Your apprentices may learn quickly, Master Ramond, but how many of them understand? I know this House now, and I have a daughter to care for.”

In all of her furious ranting, Magdalena Selworth had not said a word about her daughter. So be it. She would be *my* daughter now, and I was not about to let this arrogant popinjay anywhere near her. “You will not touch her, ever.”

“I’ll see you hanged first!” he swore, writhing his fingers at me. A twist of space slid past me and lodged in the doorway I’d just escaped. “Interfering with the affairs of the Popinjay Society—”

“Of which I’m a part, given my apprentice’s marque,” I said distractedly, focusing instead on the hallway behind me, on solid floorboards, wooden paneled walls, plaster-paint ceiling, *home*. “Though I hesitate to claim any relationship with such appalling hubris.”

He snarled something in a language I did not know.

I stepped backwards through his magic. Theresa wailed as the doorway twitched, trying to wrap around our throats. Then it bounced off the magic of the House embodied in her, tangled partly around me, and slid off my exact certainty of where I stood. Given no other target, like any swinging door, it rebounded back on him—hard.

He staggered. Blood dribbled from his nose, into his mustache, and he blotted at it with one hand. For a moment, fear covered in his eyes. “This is not over, boy, but I have better matters to attend to than you!”

He stormed toward the open front door, in what I suspected was bravado over terror. I clutched Theresa to my chest, whispered, “Unexpected be...,” and with an unsteady mental hand, painted the glyph into the archway that had been applied to every door in the House when it was built. But my glyph omitted the twist that kept the exits within the bounds of the House. This Unexpected Door was unlimited; I would never know where he ended up, but neither would he.

He twitched in recognition, raised his hand to cancel my work. Miserably certain that I was too new a Magician to challenge him, I resisted anyway. Our wills clashed for an instant before a rush of energy from the infant cradled in my arms surged through me and overwhelmed his unmaking.

With an actinic flash, the glyphs burned themselves into the air of the doorway, leaving shining afterimages, and Master Ramond failed to check his steps in time. His fearful howl echoed in the foyer as he passed through the doorway and vanished.

Theresa let out a tiny, exhausted hiccup, and fell asleep instantly.

For a moment, everything was silent. Then the twitter of birdsong and the sound of clopping hooves resumed beyond the doorway. The faint creak of an unlatched shutter upstairs, and footsteps in the House somewhere behind us grounded me.

I walked to the front door, looked out at the busy street beyond—the city continuing its life beyond the House’s walls. For just a moment, I considered the scene and the smiling sleeping baby in my arms.

Then I reached out, pulled the front door shut—blocking the world out—and locked it.

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COVER ART

“Fantasy Gate,” by Wolfgang Wachelhofer



Wolfgang Wachelhofer is an Austrian graphic artist and web designer who has a deep passion for surreal art. Most of his inspiration comes from the rich and colorful cultures of Brazil, where he lived for four years. He has done a lot of work for various clients for which he has earned a high reputation for his uniqueness. View more of his art in his [online galleries](#).

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