INVISIBLE *in a* BRIGHT LIGHT



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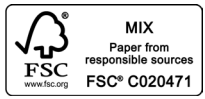
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CHAPTER 1



'Do you want to finish the game?' says the man in the emerald green suit.

'What game?' asks the girl.

'One thing is certain,' he says, ignoring her question, 'when you have finished the game, everything will have changed.'

Deep under the sea in the cave of dreamers hang the sleepers, suspended from boat hooks. Passengers and sailors alike, eyes closed, heads held high, their skin fish-flesh white. On and on, in neat rows they go until all that is left hanging from the hooks is empty clothes. Through these, fish swim and eels wriggle, causing trousers and petticoats to dance with the memory of their ghostly wearers.

At the entrance of the cave sits a man in a barnacle-encrusted chair. Before him is a desk. It

is his three-piece suit of emerald green that has caught the girl's attention, not his face as one might suppose, for it is a strange face. Behind him, neatly stacked, are hundreds of gleaming white candles.

'You are stronger than I thought,' says the man. 'I wasn't expecting to light another set of my candles. My candles are precious to me and I hate to waste them. Are you sure you want to carry on playing?'

Celeste is spellbound by the emerald green fabric. In it she sees her past all whirled together until it is a thing of threads and stitches.

'Before we go any further, tell me your age again,' says the man.

Only now does Celeste notice his face. She thinks he must be wearing a mask for she can't see his eyes. Perhaps they've been washed away. Fish occasionally nibble at his shiny, bald head.

On the desk rests a ledger. It is like the one she remembers the clerk in the hat shop had when she and Anna went to pick up a parcel for Mother.

'I asked you a question,' he says.

Celeste doesn't answer. She is studying the ring on his little finger. The stone is a bright emerald, the same colour as his suit. He dips a quill in the inkstand and tendrils of ink float away.

'In other words, how old are you?'

‘You are asking the questions in the wrong order,’ says Celeste. ‘The first question should be, “what is your name?”’

The man is taken aback.

‘I ask the questions, not you.’

He is unsettled by this girl. Seldom has he met a child with strength enough to move on to the final part of the game. Perhaps for once it will be played out to the bitter end. The thought delights him although he has no doubt who the winner will be. He persists with his questions.

‘Tell me your age.’

Again the girl answers with more energy than he would have thought possible. By this point in the game the player should be no more than a shadow.

‘My age?’ says Celeste. ‘I am eleven.’

‘I can smell a lie in the water,’ says the man. ‘I play you, girl, you don’t play me.’

The truth is Celeste can’t remember if she is about to be eleven or has just turned eleven or perhaps she is twelve. She is pondering this when the man in the emerald green suit turns over the page in the ledger. With his quill he points upwards. Celeste follows the tip of the feather. Above the heads of the sleepers hangs a glass chandelier in the shape of a galleon.

‘Seven hundred and fifty candles,’ says the man, ‘and not one of them is defeated by the seawater.’

For the first time Celeste can see clearly. The beams of light illuminate the faces of the sleepers whose names are on the tip of her tongue.

'Look at me,' says the man. 'Look at me.'

The moment she does the names are gone and somewhere in the cave a ship's bell sounds mournfully. Perhaps it's a warning, she thinks. He begins to laugh, his laughter a wave that causes the sleepers to sway as one.

'What if I don't want to play your game?' she says.

'A brave question, if I may say so. It would be a pity after you have come so far. But I would understand, for the game only gets harder from now on.' He leans back in his chair. 'Do you want to know what happens if you retire from the game?'

'Yes,' says Celeste.

'It's simple. You join the first row of sleepers. It's your decision. This part of the game is called the Reckoning and only I know the rules.'

'Then it isn't fair.'

'I never said it was. I always win. I will help you this much – and I am being too generous. I have already been too generous in letting you have one of the sleepers. Not that she is of any use. I did tell you that at the beginning, before I lit the first set of candles. But that is by the by. Where was I? Yes. The player – that is you, Maria – was abandoned as

a baby on the steps of the great opera house in the city of C—. There you were raised by the woman whose job it is to clean the crystal chandelier. When you were eight years old you were found to have a natural gift for dance and you were enrolled in the ballet school. To pay for your lessons you work – when you are not required to rehearse – for the famous singer, Madame Sabina Petrova.'

Maria? She is about to say, 'I'm Celeste,' when she senses rather than hears a voice, a voice in her head, '*No – don't tell him your name.*'

She looks again at the sleepers with a sickening realisation that she knows the name of every one of them. They shouldn't be there.

'If you win the game,' he says, 'they will go home. If you lose, they lose. Forever.'

The man in the emerald green suit moves towards her with unnatural speed. He puts his hand to her face and closes her eyes.

'Just to make sure, double sure,' he says. 'As I have done this once, let me do it again.'

And before she can say another word, all is forgotten.

'Good,' says the man, as he blows out the candles. 'Very good. Let the Reckoning begin.'



Down she falls and down she falls, deep down to the bottom of the sea into the inky black. The darkness becomes a line between the words and the paper, where sea meets sky and still she falls until below her the city with its many domed roofs spreads out before her. She sees the horse-drawn trams, the carriages, the park and the harbour with its tall ships. Down she falls through the dome of the opera house, down she falls, past the crystal galleon and as she passes it she hears the sound of something coming adrift. Down, down she falls…

