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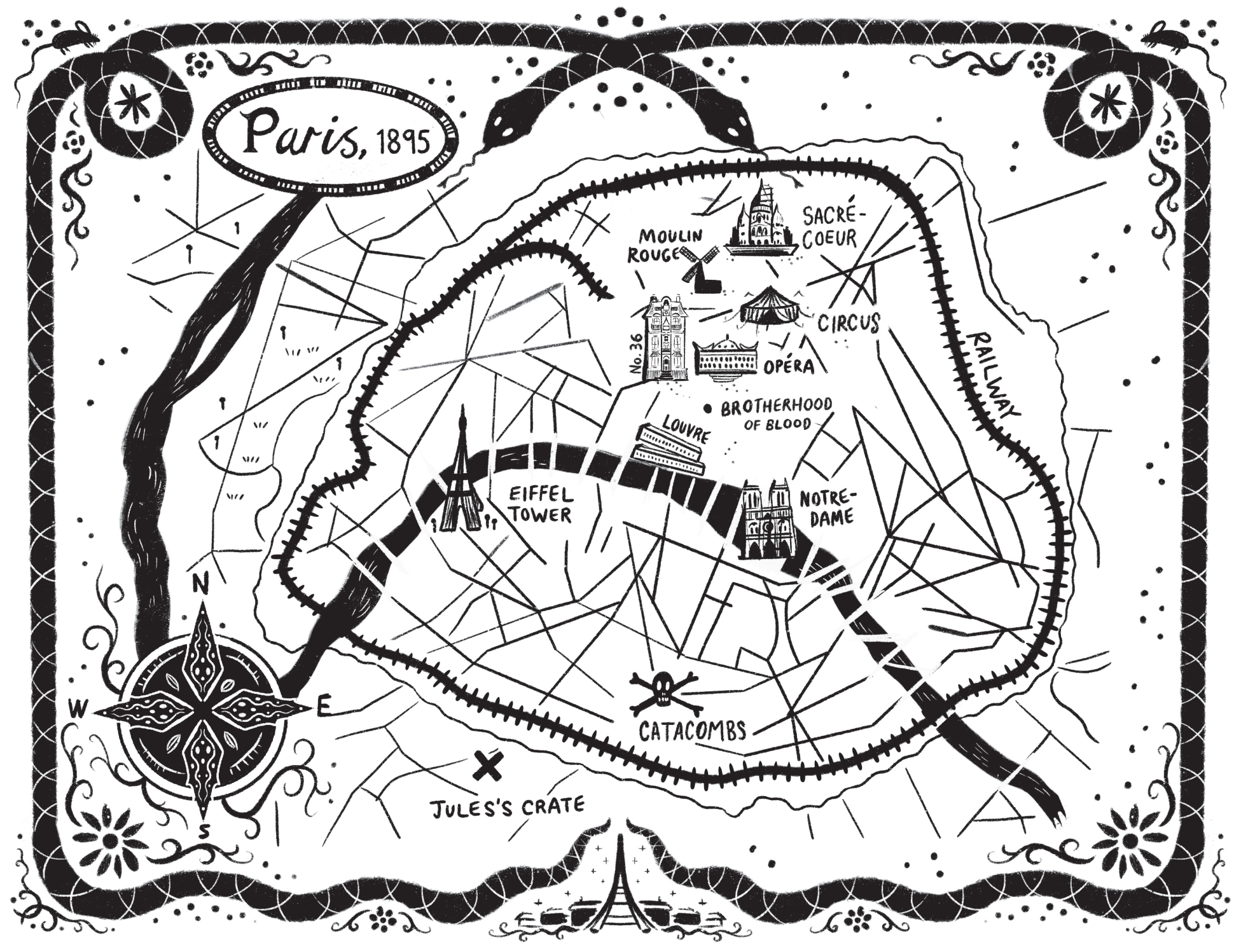
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In memory of my father, Somdeb DasGupta


Paris, 1895
SACRÉ-COEUR
MOULIN ROUGE
CIRCUS
No. 36
OPÉRA
BROTHERHOOD OF BLOOD
LOUVRE
RAILWAY
EIFFEL TOWER
NOTRE-DAME
CATACOMBS
JULES'S CRATE
N
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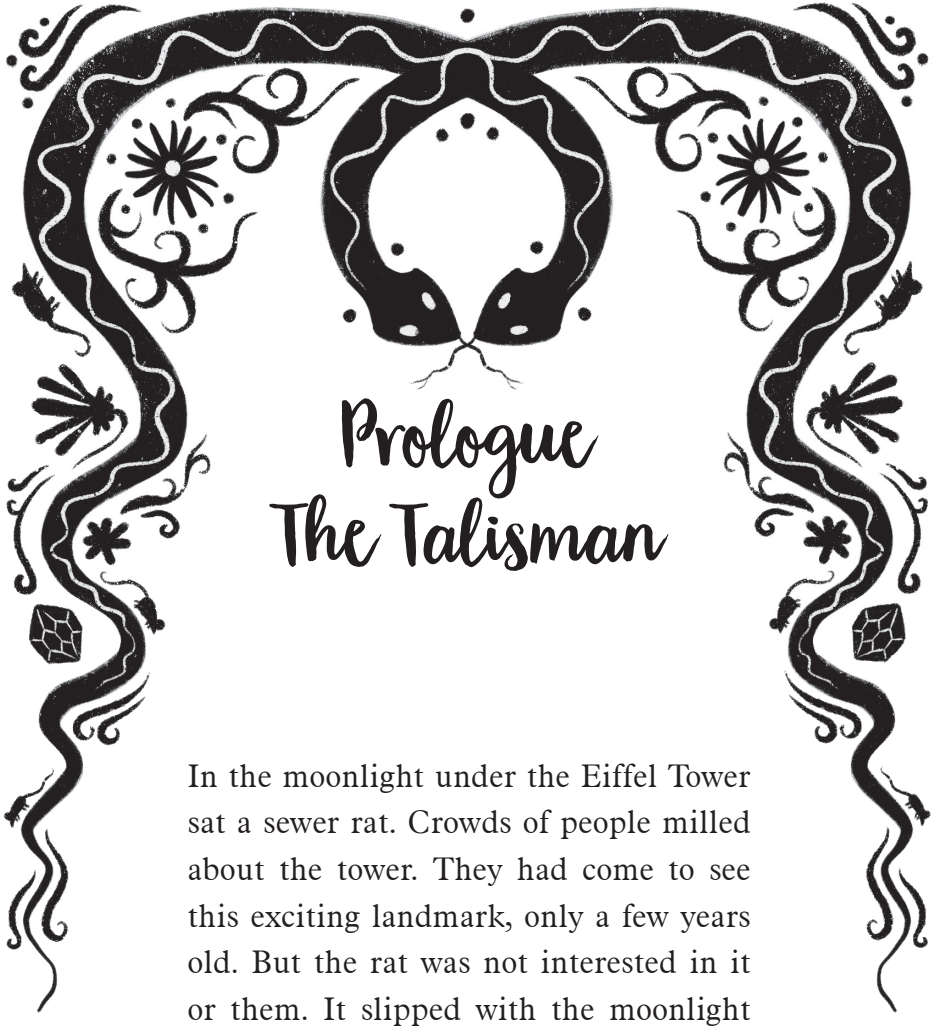


Paris has beneath it another Paris; a Paris of sewers; which has its streets, its crossroads, its squares, its blind-alleys, its arteries, and its circulation, which is of slime, minus the human form…

The sewer is the conscience of the city. Everything there converges and confronts everything else. In that livid spot there are shades, but there are no longer any secrets. Each thing bears its true form, or at least, its definitive form. The mass of filth has this in its favour, that it is not a liar… All the uncleannesses of civilization, once past their use, fall into this trench of truth… All which was formerly rouged, is washed free. The last veil is torn away.

A sewer is a cynic. It tells everything…

Extracted from Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*



Prologue
The Talisman

In the moonlight under the Eiffel Tower sat a sewer rat. Crowds of people milled about the tower. They had come to see this exciting landmark, only a few years old. But the rat was not interested in it or them. It slipped with the moonlight through a grating in the pavement and disappeared from sight.

The rat scurried into a drain and down, down, down into the bowels of the city. It ran along the channels where the Romans had collected urine to use as mouthwash.

It ran through the old, disused private latrine of the guillotined king. It ran under the toilets of the Opera House. It ran and it ran until it reached a spot in the north of the city, where a man and a boy were busy working underground, trying to unblock a sewer.

The rat plopped into the river of black water rushing through the sewer. Through its beady eyes it spotted a small gold object winking and glistening on the riverbank. Waves of vibration flowed from the object through the water. The rat paddled hard to get away, sensing something deep and slow and older than the city or the earth upon which it was built.

The boy spotted the glistening gold object too. He picked it up curiously. It resembled two halves of a walnut shell, opening on a hinge and shutting with a small clasp. Some sort of locket perhaps. Carved into the surface were letters in a strange spidery script. The boy bit the metal expertly. It was solid gold. As he held the thing in his hand, it seemed to heat up and vibrate, throbbing in his palm with a powerful energy. The boy was used to finding strange things at work in the sewers: snakes, watches, wallets, guns, a baby, an alligator, a twenty-carat diamond (which the Paris authorities had confiscated). Once even a human torso. But this thing seemed to have a life of its own. It twitched in his palm like a living organ, giving off a halo of sickly greenish-yellow light.

The boy looked at the blue metal plaque on the sewer wall that identified the name of the street above. Rue Morgue. One of those streets with swanky houses, some even equipped with the latest flushing toilets. The object must have come from one of those. He slipped it into his pocket. It might be valuable. Perhaps he would get some money for returning it. He decided to try to find the house the next day.

Far above the boy's head, in one of the tall houses on Rue Morgue, a toilet finished flushing. A figure shut the door of the marble-tiled water closet and crept stealthily away. Only the old night owl that slept in the rafters of the Sacré-Coeur heard and saw.

On flew the night owl, skimming over the rooftops of Rue Morgue, swooping over a skylight to a small attic room where a girl tossed in uneasy sleep. The wind whined through a crack in the skylight and the girl's bed was crooked, hard and unyielding. But it was not for that reason she tossed and turned.

The owl flew back to its perch in the eaves of the cathedral. And the girl slept on fitfully, fretting and muttering, until dawn broke, and the city awoke.

1

The Witch

Zélie prodded the dead canary. The bird lay stiff on its back in the morning light, legs in the air, eyes open and staring, unseeing.

Standing on tiptoe, Zélie stretched her hand further through the door of the gilded cage. She stroked the bird's tummy, as soft and fluffy as a baby chick's. She wondered if they would bury it or throw it on the rubbish heap.

"The Lord have mercy on us…" Blanche, the maid, had appeared in the hall and began to back away, crossing herself. Picking up her long skirts, she rushed back down the corridor. "The witch! The witch has done it again! Cook, Pierre, come quickly!"

Zélie tossed the fringe of thick curly black hair out of her eyes, which were still puffy from her sleepless night. She caught a glimpse of the cat's tail whisking out of sight behind the door and braced herself for what was to come. Soon she heard Pierre the butler's fast footsteps approaching, followed by the shuffling tread of Cook. As they entered the room, their jaws dropped open in unison. Cook fanned herself while Pierre rushed to the birdcage.

Zélie pointed to the muddy paw prints on the floor below the cage. "The cat. The bird must have died of fright…" She faltered. She knew it was useless. Whatever she said, she would be blamed for the bird's death.

Cook and Pierre crossed themselves.

"Come on, witch." Pierre seized Zélie by her frilly maid's collar and dragged her through the hall to the kitchen. He dumped her on a chair by the stove.

"Sizzling *saucisses*! That's three incidents this week, Zélie Dutta." Cook folded her sweaty arms and glared at Zélie. "First Madame's earrings disappear, then the milk goes sour. Now this. And it's only Tuesday!"

"It's Wednesday, not Tuesday." Zélie corrected her. Cook's brain was getting foggier by the day. It must be all that absinthe she kept drinking.

Cook's face turned as puce as a lobster. "I said Wednesday. Are you deaf?"

Zélie rolled her eyes. She got off the chair and went to the kitchen door, marched through it and pulled it shut behind her, sticking her tongue out when it was closed. Through the keyhole she could just about make out Cook's muffled voice.

"It isn't natural, is it? That girl's peepers. One eye the colour of an angel, the other that of the devil himself. And coming from foreign parts. She must be a witch! There's no other explanation. There's more devil than angel in that ferret, I'll bet."

"Hush, it's not up to you to question Madame's judgement," Blanche retorted. "The mistress must have reasons for keeping the girl here. Madame will be back later. I'll make sure she knows about this. Just mind your own business and keep your head down." Through the keyhole Zélie saw the maid making for the kitchen door, so she beat a hasty retreat upstairs.

The attic room was hot and stuffy. Zélie stood on tiptoe and opened the skylight, then sat down at the rickety table pushed to the wall with a cracked mirror propped against it. She glared at the reflection in the mirror. Brown skin, freckles, black hair popping untidily like champagne corks out of her maid's cap. Nothing to look twice at. Except for one thing, only noticeable on close scrutiny: the left eye was sea grey, the right was obsidian black. Sighing, she pulled open a drawer in the table and brought out a sheet of paper and pen. A few hours before Madame was due back from her visit to the country. Plenty of time to write a letter. She sat down at the desk and wrote in a clear, fluid hand.

~~The Attic~~
~~36 Rue Morgue, Paris~~
~~Wednesday morning, 16th October 1895~~

~~Dear Baba,~~
~~Please can I come home? I hate it here. Madame Malaise is a monster and everybody blames me for everything because they say I am a witch. They also accuse me of stealing.~~

~~Respectfully your daughter,~~
~~Zélie~~

The Attic
36 Rue Morgue, Paris
Wednesday morning, 16th October 1895

Dear Baba,
Everything is fine. Paris is a very nice city and I am getting lots of exercise polishing the stairs. I am also eating lots of vegetables, mainly turnip gruel, and I have made friends with a pigeon. Today the canary died.

Respectfully your daughter,
Zélie

Zélie knew her letters were read before they were sent. She looked up at the clouds drifting past behind the iron bars of the skylight. Even after a year and a half here in Paris the memories remained, dull and nagging like toothache. The clatter of rickshaws on bustling dirt roads. Baba, with his twinkling eyes and strong arms, swinging her on to his shoulders as if she were as light as a leaf. The squeak of her grandmother's wicker chair during a rainy monsoon night as she paused thoughtfully in telling a story.

Groping with her hand to the very back of the drawer, Zélie pulled out a bundle of papers tied with a piece of ribbon. She opened it and leafed through the letters. They were full of news from back home, jokes and riddles. Especially riddles, which she and her dad both loved. Such as:

Smooth, ripe, mellow,
Luscious, creamy, yellow.
One thing that's my trait,
I am never straight.

What am I?

The answer would always be tucked away somewhere else in the letter for Zélie to find – hidden in another word, or upside down, or on a slip of paper, or a word that could only be read in a mirror:

ɐuɐuɐq

But for two whole months now, there had been no letter from Baba. Just an eerie, deafening silence. A slow dread began to creep stealthily into Zélie's brain. *What if—*

A soft cooing from the skylight woke her from her

reverie. She looked up. Two beady orange eyes stared down at her. Zélie jumped on the chair and pushed open the grating. She dug in her apron pocket and brought out a crust of baguette. The pigeon hopped about on the slate tiles of the roof expectantly.

"*Coucou*, Rodolphe." Zélie broke up the crust and tossed the pieces on the roof, watching the pigeon hopping after them as they bounced down the tiles. One of Rodolphe's clawed feet was missing, but he did a pro's job of hopping on the other. He came every day, and Zélie was always sure to save a bit of baguette for him, even though she was usually quite hungry herself. "You've only got one foot," she told him. "But you've got two beautiful orange eyes."

The breeze coming through the skylight was thick with the smell of roasting chicken, leather harnesses and horse dung from the street below. Cautiously Zélie pushed the grating aside and climbed out through the skylight. She perched on the grey slate roof next to Rodolphe. The slope was very steep, but that didn't bother Zélie. She'd climbed the palm trees back home many times, racing against the neighbour's boys to get coconuts. Below her the chequered roofs of the city lay spread out in the morning haze like a giant's chessboard.

Zélie leaned against the warm chimney stack. From the pocket of her apron she pulled a large book with the title *The Parisian Lady's Maid's Handbook* printed on its cover. She flipped it open to reveal a second cover beneath: *The Mysteries of Paris*, a book she had stolen from the house library when she was supposed to be dusting. It told the story of the adventures in Paris of a certain Count Rodolphe, an expert in kick-boxing. Zélie had eagerly absorbed the kick-boxing techniques, which were described in detail in the book, and considered herself something of an expert in this art. She had named the pigeon Rodolphe in honour of the hero.

Soon Zélie was lost in a sword fight on the banks of the Seine. Beside her, Rodolphe hopped on his single foot, beady orange eyes blinking. The city murmured to itself far below, like an old lady mumbling in her sleep. Bliss.

CRASH!

An ear-splitting noise ripped the air. Rodolphe dropped the piece of bread he had been pecking and flapped noisily away. Zélie jumped to her feet and swung back down through the skylight, landing with a smack on her bottom on the hard wooden floor. She ran to the door of the attic and opened it, crossing the