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Written by

Sharon Gosling

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One

Le Cirque de la Lune

Rémy took a deep breath as she stood on the edge of the narrow plunge board. Above her, the old material of the big top's roof was close enough to touch. Below her was nothing at all but air dirtied by dust and tobacco smoke, and then, sixty feet below, arranged around the sawdust of the circus ring, there was the crowd. She could almost hear their silence, the collected indrawn breath of five hundred people. They were all waiting to see what she could do. They wanted to see her tumble through the air above them, to dive and swoop, hanging from a thin metal bar suspended only by two old ropes. And perhaps … just perhaps, this time, she would fall.

Beside her, Larotti balanced precariously, holding her trapeze still. Rémy dipped her hands in the chalk bowl, clapping them together to send a shower of white dust raining through the flickering gaslight. Then she nodded once, chin held high. The little Italian let go as the strains of Saint-Saëns' "Danse Macabre" began to rise from the ragged little orchestra below. Rémy counted two beats as the trapeze dropped away.

Then she leapt, into thin air.

For a second, there was nothing to keep her from falling to a horrible death. The crowd gasped, and then, as Rémy's fingers caught the fleeing trapeze, they sighed in relief. The sound rippled around the huge tent like a breeze, shivering its faded red and yellow stripes.

Rémy twisted lightly, graceful as a bird. She was wearing her favourite costume – it was cerise pink, edged in black, and, even though it was old and had been repaired more times than she could remember, it still stood out perfectly against her pale skin and unruly black hair. Rémy wore it with long fishnet stockings and greasepaint around her eyes, which made her look like a harlequin. Claudette had fashioned a flower from a scrap of almost-matching satin for her hair, along with two long, thin feathers dyed pitch black. From a distance, people said Rémy looked like a bird of paradise, flying on invisible wings.

She flipped herself backwards, letting go of the bar with her hands and catching the trapeze with her feet instead, arms stretching down towards the sawdust. Rémy flicked her hips to the right, sending the trapeze into a fast spin as she let one foot come loose and held it straight out, so the audience could see that now, it was only by one ankle that she had any hold at all.

Slowing the spin, Rémy righted herself again, dancing up to stand on her hands on the bar before somersaulting backwards as the trapeze swung in a graceful arc above the crowd.

Far below her, Rémy heard Claudette's sharp whistle echo in the distance. Glancing down, she saw Dominique canter into the sawdust circle. The little palomino wore an old tan saddle and a feather headdress to match Rémy's own, and on her back was

Nicodemus. The pony circled, her pace steady as the wizened little capuchin monkey began to somersault too, over and over, copying Rémy's movements on Domnique's back. The crowd roared with laughter, pointing and clapping and slapping their thighs in delight.

Rémy swung the trapeze twice more, gathering speed as the music built and built. She somersaulted again and again, faster and faster. Below, Nicodemus kept perfect time with her all the way.

And then, as the music reached its crescendo, she somersaulted again, twisting backwards, reaching for the bar…

She missed. Her fingers brushed the metal of the trapeze, but did not grip it.

Rémy fell like a stone.

Screams erupted around the big tent. People stood, shouting and pointing. Men waved their tattered hats in the air, women pulled their patched shawls up around their faces or used them to shield their children's eyes, as Rémy plunged head-first towards the compacted earth of the sawdust ring. She managed to twist in mid-air, a mighty turnabout that tipped her upright.

There was a flurry of movement in the corner of her eye. Someone from the audience had lunged over the barrier. It was a young man in a long brown coat and top hat – he was rushing towards her, arms outstretched, as if to break her fall.

Rémy's would-be rescuer was so focused on catching her that he almost stepped straight into the path of her horse. Thankfully, Dominique had seen Rémy falling and knew what she had to do. The pony butted the man out of the way, hard enough to send

him sprawling, but at least out of harm's way. Then she slowed until she was in exactly the right spot. Nicodemus jumped from her back and ran to the upturned bucket in the middle of the ring.

Rémy landed squarely, with both feet, on the pony's saddle, immediately lifting one leg to stand in ballet pose, her free foot pointing elegantly outwards. Dominique continued to canter in a circle as Rémy rode her one-footed. Still standing on the upturned bucket, Nicodemus saluted them both.

There was a second of silence as the crowd realized what had happened. And then the sound of cheering and clapping swept over Rémy like a tide, louder than for any other act that night. But then, it always was.

She dropped until she was seated on the pony's back, patting Dominique with one hand as she waved to the audience with the other. She'd usually do a couple of victory circuits of the ring to soak up the applause, but tonight Rémy's gaze searched for the man who had tried to save her. He was still picking himself up, forlornly brushing sawdust from his coat.

"Sorry," she called over the thunderous sound of the audience as she pulled Dominique to a halt beside him. "She is trained not to let anything get in her way when we do my act. If she had stopped, I would have died. And you too, probably. I would have crushed you!"

The young man looked up at her. To her surprise, she saw he couldn't be that much older than she was. It was his eyes that really startled her, though. They were two different colours – one as blue as the sky over Paris on a bright day in May, one as

deep brown as good chocolate. And they twinkled.

He bent down to retrieve his hat and pushed it on over his mussed hair before replying.

"Well," he said with a slight smile. "That'll teach me to be a good Samaritan, won't it? People do keep telling me I shouldn't bother. Good day, miss."

He tipped his hat briefly and then turned away. A second later, he was lost in the crowd. Rémy's gaze tried to follow him, but it was no good. He was gone.

She and Dominique did one more circuit of the ring and then left the big top, Nicodemus skittering along in their wake.

Claudette was waiting for her at the players' entrance. The little monkey rushed off into the thick night, through London's chill drizzle and back to the animal enclosure. Claudette tutted as she saw Rémy adjust her opal necklace, pulling it down from where it had flown up around her ears as she'd fallen.

"You know you should not wear that on the wire, *ma chérie*," Claudette chided in her gentle, sing-song voice, as Rémy slid gracefully from Dominique's back. "One of these days, you will strangle yourself. And it will be a night like tonight, when someone stupid tries to save the girl who does not need to be saved."

Rémy grinned as she took the threadbare black robe Claudette held out and pulled it on over her head. She kicked off the silver slippers she always wore on the trapeze and struggled into her boots, instead. They were leather, black and worn like everything else she possessed, and the only pair she had owned since she was ten – six whole years. "Never, Claudette. You know

me – I live a charmed life. Probably because I never take my opal off."

Claudette shook her head with long-suffering patience, her thick chestnut hair hanging loose around her shoulders. At 24, she was eight years older than Rémy, and along with her little daughter, Amélie, was the closest thing Rémy had to a family.

"Well, I hope your charm is at full power tonight," Claudette told her. "Gustave wants to see you."

Rémy made a face and sighed. "Ach. It must be time."

Claudette raised an eyebrow. Her eyes seemed even darker than usual, and they bore a trace of worry. "Take care, *chérie*. This one will be difficult, I think. We are not in France now, you know. This is the great city of London, not a little town in Provence."

Rémy straightened up and wiped rain from her eyes as she regarded her friend. Claudette was a fortune-teller and talented pickpocket. She could take a wallet from its owner and they would swear blind she'd never even been close enough to touch them. They were all vagabonds and thieves at Le Cirque de la Lune – and Rémy… well, Rémy was queen of them all. She'd been stealing since she was old enough to walk, and a jewel thief since she'd learned how to work the wire aged eight. Now, she was the best gem snatcher in Europe, probably in the whole of the world. Rémy had never been caught. *And*, she thought to herself, *I never will be. Never.*

"You worry too much," she said. "Why should this be different to any other? They'll never catch me, Claudette. That is what makes me so valuable to Gustave, yes?"

Claudette sighed. "You should not take these things too

lightly, Rémy," she warned. "One day your luck will run out. And in any case, this life… it is not good enough for you. You should run, while you still can. Gustave could not –"

Rémy shook her head. "When I can take you and Amélie with me, then we will all go," she said. "But not before. We need money! And now is not the time for this old argument of ours, *ma belle amie*. I must go before the old goat gets too impatient. Kiss Amélie goodnight for me. Tell her she must sleep well because Dominique will be waiting to give her another lesson in the morning."

Claudette smiled, taking Dominique's reigns and digging a sugar-lump from her pocket as she led her away. "Then you had better make sure you come back, hadn't you, Little Bird?"

Rémy watched Claudette disappear into the thick black shadows of the circus tents. Behind her, the last of the audience was leaving, laughing and chattering. She smiled. She had been good tonight – really good, even despite the almost-disaster caused by the boy with the mismatched eyes. Rémy was always good, she knew that, but some nights it felt as if she could walk on air, and those were always her best performances. Not that Gustave ever paid her extra, or praised her work. He was more interested in her other, illegal, skills.

Rémy looked towards his caravan. It stood apart from the rest, at the back of the field he had rented for them. Well, Gustave called it a field, but it was really just a barren patch of land behind the Spitalfields market, turned to mud by the never-ending rain. Rémy glanced up, blinking into the night gloom at the sooty grey clouds that seemed permanently gathered overhead. Out

beyond the market square, the buildings of London slouched towards each other as if sheltering together from the miserable weather. Lights flickered and guttered in windows caked with grime and soot. The silhouettes of the taller townhouses of the East End loomed darkly over the cobbled streets. It was the first time Rémy had left France, and she'd expected a better, brighter place. But there was as much dirt and poverty here as at home, and the bread was bad, too. She dreamed of a life somewhere else, somewhere sunny, where she did not have to steal. One day…

Rémy pulled her hands into her sleeves and scuffed the toe of her boot into the mud. 'One day' was not tonight, she reminded herself. Tonight, she had to steal the second biggest diamond in the world.

Squaring her shoulders, she headed for Gustave's haunt. She could hear music from inside the caravan, and knew it was Dorffman, the German, playing his violin. He was supposed to be the circus's chief carpenter, but ever since Gustave had uncovered Dorffman's musical skills, he'd made him play every night as the circus owner ate. Rémy wondered what crime the man had committed to end up in this place. She liked him, he seemed nice, but it could be anything. Murder, maybe, although it was more likely to be theft… but everyone at Le Cirque de la Lune had their own story. One day she would ask, she decided, as she mounted the rickety painted steps to her master's door.

"Come!" Came the yell of his voice as she knocked.

Inside, Gustave was at his dinner, tearing a whole roast chicken apart with his fat fingers. The sight of the grease trickling

down over his knuckles turned Rémy's stomach and made her forget that she hadn't eaten since lunch, and then only a round of gritty, grey bread and dripping.

The circus owner glanced up at her. "The cloud is thick tonight. It is Friday, the police are tired after their long week," he grunted. "But still, now is not the time."

She blinked, surprised. "No?"

"No," Gustave rumbled around a mouthful of food. "You see, this is important. More important than any other job you've ever done. And so I want you to do a… reconnoitre. Find the best way in, determine where the guards are stationed and, more importantly, establish your escape route. Make the plan infallible, yes? You must not fail me, Rémy."

For a moment, Rémy was speechless. He'd never asked her to do reconnaissance before. And she had never, ever failed him. She had never even come close to failing.

Seeing her indignation, Gustave sighed and put down his chicken. "You know where this jewel is being kept?"

"In the Tower of London, master."

"Yes," he said, his voice dry. "The Tower of London. Make no mistake, my little thieving genius. However good you are, this is going to be the hardest thing you have ever tried. So, reconnaissance. There is to be a reception for the great and the good at the Tower tomorrow night. It is the perfect opportunity for you to learn everything you need to know about where the jewel is held. Now, tell me what you are looking for."

"The Darya-ye Noor," Rémy huffed.

"And what are you not looking for?"

"The Koh-i Noor. I know."

He snorted, sending flecks of grease and chicken flesh to pepper the table. "You think you know everything, do you not, little Rémy? Can you tell me the difference between the two?"

Rémy sighed. Gustave had been lecturing her on this for weeks. As if she couldn't tell one diamond from another. As if she hadn't been born able to know the worth of a gem just by looking at it. Rémy remembered every precious stone she'd ever seen in her life, and she could feel all of them now as if she held them still. In her hands jewels were living things, and they seemed to like her. They fell towards her fingers gratefully. She knew them. The thief toyed with the opal around her neck absently, and recited Gustave's lessons.

"The Koh-i Noor – the Mountain of Light – and the Darya-ye Noor – the Ocean of Light – are sister-stones. They were both mined from Golconda in India more than a century ago. Now Queen Victoria owns the Mountain of Light, and the Shah of Persia owns the Ocean of Light. And for the first time since they were both mined, the stones are back together. In the Tower of London. So that is why we are here."

"And what do we want?"

"The ocean, not the mountain," Rémy repeated, dutifully.

Gustave's pudgy, pasty face creased into a frown. "Remember that, Little Bird. The Ocean is smaller than the Mountain, but prettier. And it belongs to the Shah, not the Queen, so the good policemen of London will not care so much about it. Get in, take it, get out. That's what you need to do when the time is right. Do not get distracted by the larger stone. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, master."

He nodded slowly, and then held up the remains of his dinner's carcass. "Do that, and there will be one of these for you. You can share it with that light-fingered friend of yours. And her strange little whelp, if you really do insist on feeding it."

Rémy held herself still, but she wanted to hit him. How dare he talk about Amélie like that? Just because she was different, just because she didn't speak. How dare he –

"Well?" Gustave bellowed. "What are you waiting for? Go! Prepare!"

Rémy gritted her teeth and left, slamming the door as she ran down the steps. The sound was masked by Dorffman and his mournful violin, the ripple of sad strings rising into the dead, wet night.

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