

The Night Circus



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERIN MORGENSTERN

Erin Morgenstern was born in Marshfield, Massachusetts, and graduated from Smith College in 2000 with a double major in Studio Art and Theater. She is a writer and multimedia artist, and has produced her own tarot card deck under the brand *Phantomwise*. She wrote *The Night Circus* in 2005 as part of the National Novel Writing Month, and published it in 2011. Her next novel, *The Starlit Sea*, is due out in 2019. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Night Circus is set, generally, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, centered in London with frequent stops in cities around the world. This time period in England is known as the Victorian Era, which was dominated by conservative Protestant social values. The circus was a popular form of entertainment, allowing spectators to temporarily shake off the strict rules and limitations of Victorian society; it also served as a refuge for people who were likely to be marginalized for their physical or mental differences. International travel was still difficult and prohibitively expensive for most people, so the traveling circus offered spectators a glimpse of the exotic world they could not visit on their own.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Critics have compared *The Night Circus* to the Harry Potter and Twilight books, as well as to other mainstream fantasy fiction such as *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke, *Martin Dressler* by Steven Milhauser, and works by writers like Ray Bradbury and Neil Gaiman. Like the Harry Potter and Twilight books, *The Night Circus* is suitable for both adults and young adult readers.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Night Circus
- **When Written:** 2005
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts and New York City
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Literature
- **Genre:** Fantasy, Speculative Fiction
- **Setting:** Various settings, mainly London and Concord, MA, late 19th century to early 20th century
- **Climax:** Marco and Celia jump into the bonfire to escape the

competition

- **Point of View:** 3rd and 2nd

EXTRA CREDIT

If At First You Don't Succeed... Morgenstern was rejected by thirty literary agents before signing with Inkwell Management and publishing her novel with Doubleday, a major publishing company, in 2011.

You, Too, Can Join the Circus! In 2011, before the book was published, *The Night Circus* was turned into an interactive game, which is still available to play online. There have been plans to make the novel into a movie or television show as well, although the screenplay has been in progress since 2012 with nothing confirmed yet.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens to the mysterious *Le Cirque des Rêves*, a circus that “arrives without warning” and is only open at night. This is the main setting of the novel, though the story jumps back and forth across the globe and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After a short prologue describing the circus—“No color at all [...] Black-and-white stripes on grey sky; countless tents of varying shapes and sizes, with an elaborate wrought-iron fence encasing them”—the story begins in New York City in 1873.

Prospero the Enchanter finishes his magic show to find a five-year-old girl waiting in his dressing room. Celia Bowen is his daughter, and her mother has committed suicide, leaving behind the child and a note. Prospero (whose real name is Hector Bowen) is uninterested in Celia until she begins to make teacups move with her mind, demonstrating innate magical abilities. He begins to train her as a magician and arranges a meeting with Mr. A.H., another magician and Hector’s lifelong rival. The two magicians have been competing against one another, using their apprentices as proxies, for centuries. Hector offers Celia as his new competitor, against anyone of Mr. A.H.’s choosing. They agree, and Mr. A.H. burns a ring into Celia’s finger to commit her to the competition.

While Hector trains Celia, Mr. A.H. finds his new apprentice in an orphanage and begins his magical lessons as well. He keeps the boy in isolation, taking him out to see magic shows as part of his education, and puts him up in his own apartment in London when he turns 19. On his own, the young man gives himself a name, Marco Alisdair, and quickly meets a young woman named Isobel Martin, a fortune-teller of mysterious origins, who moves in with him.

In the meantime, a theater producer named Chandresh Christophe Lefevre has invited a group of collaborators to his home for a Midnight Dinner, where he presents them with his new idea for a circus, “like no circus anyone has ever seen.” The group begins immediately, and soon they have found a contortionist named Tsukiko, and begin to audition illusionists; Marco, who has taken a job as Chandresh’s assistant, watches Celia Bowen’s audition and recognizes her as his opponent in the competition. He tells Isobel about this, and she offers to travel with the circus as well, to keep watch over Celia and her magic performances. She sends Marco letters as often as she can, but it is simply not enough information for Marco.

The opening night of the circus, the multi-colored bonfire is lit, and at that very same moment, one of the performers goes into labor, giving birth to twins who are known to the circus members as Widget and Poppet. They become an essential part of the circus, and each develops a particular magic skill: Widget is able to read people’s pasts, while Poppet has visions of the future. The circus itself is encased in magic, thanks to a spell that Marco has placed on it, anchored within the bonfire. Chandresh is not aware of the real magic that is going on in his venue, and Marco has to erase his memory on a regular basis to ensure he does not realize what is going on. The other organizers of the circus, including Ethan Barris, the engineer, and Tara and Lainie Burgess, begin to realize that they are not aging properly; Tara comes to speak with Ethan about her concerns, and he sends her to speak with “the man in the gray suit,” Mr. A.H., who knows much more than he reveals. Immediately following Tara’s conversation with the magician, however, she is overtaken by a strange impulse to throw herself in front of a moving train, committing suicide. Her sister Lainie comes to speak with Ethan about the tragedy, and he admits that he knows what is going on in *Le Cirque des Rêves* but cannot reveal anything, as he has promised to keep it a secret. In fact, Ethan knows all about the competition between Celia and Marco and has agreed to create a tent, known as the Labyrinth, where they can both perform in collaboration.

In Concord, Massachusetts, in 1902, a young man named Bailey Clarke attends *Le Cirque des Rêves* for the first time. A few years earlier, he snuck into the circus during the day on a dare, and was ushered out by one of the performers, who gave him her glove as proof that he had actually snuck in. During this visit, he visits Isobel, who informs him that he is “part of a chain of events,” though she does not specify what those events are; she also tells him that he is looking for Poppet. He stumbles upon Poppet, who happens to be the performer that gave him her glove years earlier. They become friends, and Bailey receives a free lifetime pass to the circus. Poppet has her own reasons for befriending Bailey: she has a vague vision of disaster, and in her vision it is Bailey who rescues the circus and all of its performers. She cannot say when this will happen, but she is sure that Bailey is part of the solution.

Le Cirque des Rêves is developing a strong following, thanks to the efforts of Herr Friedrich Thiessen, who made the clock that stands in the middle of the circus. After a meeting with Ethan Barris, Herr Thiessen creates a clock for him and doesn’t hear from him again. On vacation in France, a friend mentions the clock and invites him to the circus to see it. Thiessen is so impressed with *Le Cirque des Rêves* that he writes a newspaper column about it, which is then published throughout Europe. This brings together a group of circus fans, known as the *revêurs*, many of whom follow the circus around the world. They are known for dressing in black and white, with a single dash of red, such as a scarf or hat, and have a secret method of informing each other of the circus’s next location. Thiessen begins a correspondence with Celia Bowen, not realizing that she is the circus’s illusionist, and the two maintain a close friendship that lasts until Thiessen’s death.

The more that Celia and Marco get to know each other, the more attracted they are to one another. While Marco knew that Celia was his opponent from the moment he saw her perform, Celia was not aware of her opponent’s identity for years after joining *Le Cirque des Rêves*. Without knowing who he was, Celia still felt a deep connection to him, especially when she enters the Ice Garden, one of Marco’s creations; he feels the same connection when he enters the Wishing Tree that Celia created. Celia finally realizes that Marco is her competitor when she accidentally takes his umbrella from a café in London—as he runs after her to retrieve his umbrella, she realizes that he has placed a protective spell on it, keeping her much drier than an ordinary umbrella would.

The competitors steal quiet moments for conversation, much to the chagrin of their guardians, Hector and Mr. A.H., who often appear to interrupt them or warn each of them that they should be working against one another, not falling in love. By this time, Hector Bowen has become a ghost, officially dead but able to appear to people whenever he chooses; he keeps watch over Celia, berating her for collaborating and connecting romantically with the man who should be her rival. After one such conversation with Mr. A.H., Marco announces to his teacher, “I’m in love with her,” and walks into the ballroom where Celia is dancing with Herr Thiessen and kisses her. He then magically erases the memory of this moment from the minds of all in attendance, but it is a turning point for his relationship with Celia, as they both are aware of the depth of their feelings for one another. It is also an important moment because Isobel, who has been suspicious of their connection all along, overhears the conversation between Marco and Mr. A.H., and decides that she must leave the circus so as not to come between the two lovers. Before leaving, Isobel undoes a protective spell she had cast over the circus, which puts the circus members in peril. At that same moment, Chandresh, fueled by alcohol and a conversation he had with the ghost of Hector Bowen, is searching the circus grounds for Mr. A.H. in

order to kill him. He throws a knife at the magician, who steps out of the way at the last minute, and the knife hits and kills Herr Thiessen, bringing a note of sadness over *Le Cirque des Rêves*.

Marco and Celia realize that there is no end point to their competition, and that it is only over once one of the competitors dies; distraught, they attempt to come up with ways to end the competition, to no avail, and each one offers to commit suicide to save the other. Marco discusses the competition with Tsukiko the contortionist, and learns that she, too, was once Mr. A.H.'s apprentice. Tsukiko won her competition because her opponent "set herself on fire. Ignited a pillar of flame and stepped into it as though it were water." She encourages Marco to do the same, telling him that Celia is the greater loss to the circus. As Marco begins to sacrifice himself in the fire, Celia leaps into his arms and the two are magically transported through the bonfire and end up deep within the circus, neither dead nor alive. They remain together within the circus indefinitely, and the competition must be declared a stalemate.

Unfortunately, the central bonfire of *Le Cirque des Rêves* has gone out, and the circus cannot survive without it—Celia and Marco realize that they must find someone to relight the fire and take charge of the circus in order for it to continue. Recalling Poppet's vision of destruction and salvation, they realize that Bailey Clarke is to be the circus's caretaker. Celia explains to him that he must carry part of the circus within him, "tied very tightly to the circus itself." Bailey agrees, and carefully follows her directions to re-light the fire.

The story jumps to Paris, in 1903, as Widget and Poppet have a conversation with Mr. A.H. to negotiate the official end of the competition between Celia and Marco, and to take control of *Le Cirque des Rêves*. Mr. A.H. agrees, selling Widget the circus for a story—the story of the circus itself. Widget begins his story with the first line of *The Night Circus*: "The circus arrives without warning."

Before realizing that Marco is her competitor, Celia begins to feel a strong connection to him through his magical creations in *Le Cirque des Rêves*. With the help of Mr. Barris, the circus engineer, Celia and her opponent begin to collaborate; eventually, Marco reveals himself, and he and Celia fall in love despite their guardians' protests. To be together, they must break the binding rules of the competition. Risking their lives, Celia and Marco jump into the **bonfire** at the center of *Le Cirque des Rêves* to escape the consequences of the competition, and end up together in a state of semi-immortality within the confines of the circus itself.

Marco Alisdair – Marco Alisdair works as the assistant to Chandresh Lefevre, the original organizer of *Le Cirque des Rêves*. He is also involved in a high-stakes competition with Celia Bowen, orchestrated by their guardians, to determine who is the better magician. As a young boy, Marco was plucked from an orphanage by Mr. A.H. and trained in the art of magic. He spent most of his youth in isolation, reading and practicing, and was set free at 19 to begin his competition. When he watches Celia Bowen audition for *Le Cirque des Rêves*, he knows immediately that she is his opponent, and that the circus is to be the arena for their competition. Marco was an excellent student—Mr. A.H. notes that he was probably the best he ever had—but when he meets Celia, he is unsure if he can win the competition, or if he even wants to. Marco enlists the help of Isobel Martin, a beautiful young fortune teller who is in love with him: she travels with the circus to keep an eye on Celia and the magic she performs, reporting back to Marco in London whenever she can. Soon, however, Isobel realizes that she is no longer helping Marco watch over his opponent, but rather the object of his affection, and she leaves the circus for good, leaving the two magicians free to fall in love. Their guardians strongly disapprove of the pair's romantic involvement, as Celia and Marco soon begin working together rather than competing against one another. Eventually, the lovers jump into the **bonfire** at the center of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, trapping themselves inside of the circus indefinitely and forfeiting the competition that would have torn them apart.

Alexander / Mr. A.H. – Known to many of the other characters in the novel as the mysterious man in the gray suit, Mr. A.H. is a magician, as well as Hector Bowen's greatest rival. He and Hector have been competing by proxy for decades—if not centuries—to establish which one of them can train the best magician. When Mr. A.H. meets young Celia Bowen, he agrees to a new competition and selects a young boy from an orphanage to be his apprentice. He is an excellent teacher, but he isolates his young student, only letting him out into the world to attend magic shows; when his apprentice turns 19, Mr. A.H. gives him his own apartment in London and sets him free to the world; he has never learned his apprentice's name, so the young man calls himself Marco Alisdair. Mr. A.H. is also one of the original organizers of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, where the



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Celia Bowen – Celia Bowen is an illusionist with *Le Cirque des Rêves*, the titular night circus; her performances in the circus are part of her competition with her fellow magician, Marco Alisdair. Celia met her father, Hector Bowen, when she was five years old, after her lovesick mother committed suicide. He took little interest in Celia until he recognized her immense natural talent for magic and realized that she could be of use to him in his longstanding rivalry with another old magician, Mr. A.H. Celia and Marco then find themselves involved in a mysterious competition without their consent, left to fulfill their guardians' wishes and compete until only one of them is left standing.

competition will take place. The other organizers do not know what to make of him, and as the circus members develop a sense of family and community, he makes no significant connections to the people around him, clearly preferring both distance and control. He appears aloof and mysterious, but really Mr. A.H. is isolated from those around him by his magic, and especially by the fact that he is not entirely mortal and has lived for centuries beyond the normal human lifespan. His rivalry with Hector Bowen and the strained relationship he had with his student Marco are the closest things Mr. A.H. has to emotional connections in his life.

Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter – Known publicly as Prospero the Enchanter, Hector Bowen is a magician who has made his living performing for audiences that do not understand that his magic is real, and not just a skillful illusion or sleight of hand. His fellow magician Mr. A.H. seems to look down on him for performing, suggesting that he is wasting his magical skills on people who will never understand them. The two magicians have been rivals for a very long time, and have been making their apprentices compete against one another for nearly as long. Hector's previous apprentice forfeited the competition by setting herself on fire, but he has found a new and more promising competitor in his daughter, Celia Bowen. Hector's daughter Celia came to him when she was five years old, after her mother committed suicide; he was unmoved by the suicide and the child he now had to take care of, until he realized that Celia had innate magical abilities that he could use in his competition against Mr. A.H. Hector retired from performing to train Celia, and then withdrew from public life when one of his magic tricks went horribly wrong, turning him into a ghost-like specter. He watches over the competition between Celia and Marco in *Le Cirque des Rêves*, inserting himself when they begin to collaborate, fearing that he will lose another round of competition with Mr. A.H. In the end, however, he loses his daughter, as she and Marco escape the competition by jumping into the central **bonfire** of the circus and trapping themselves inside to be together forever.

Chandresh Lefevre – Chandresh Christophe Lefevre is a successful theater producer who, in search of a new and exciting project, came up with the idea of a new kind of circus. He built a cadre of some of the best and most creative people he knew, and together they created *Le Cirque des Rêves*, the night circus. The circus is wildly popular and tours the world, drawing crowds and even inspiring a group of dedicated followers known as *revêurs*; however, Chandresh is unaware of its real purpose as the arena for the competition between the illusionist Celia Bowen and his assistant Marco Alisdair. In fact, Chandresh does not know about any of the real magic that runs his circus, though he often has his suspicions. He discovers the notebook that Marco uses to protect the circus members and is upset, but Marco simply erases his memory of the event. Eventually, however, Chandresh begins to drink heavily and

cannot focus on other projects, and loses much of the control over the circus that he created. Hector Bowen capitalizes on his fragile mental state, and a secret conversation between the two leads Chandresh to attempt to kill Mr. A.H. Unfortunately, Chandresh's aim is off, and he accidentally kills the clockmaker Herr Thiessen instead.

Isobel Martin – Trained as a clairvoyant and fortune-teller, Isobel Martin becomes part of *Le Cirque des Rêves* via her relationship with Marco Alisdair. They meet for the first time in London, when Marco realizes that he has misplaced his notebook filled with magic lessons, and he finds Isobel reading it with interest. The two move in together in London, and Marco lets Isobel know about the magical competition with a mystery opponent. When he realizes that he is competing against Celia Bowen, an illusionist with *Le Cirque des Rêves*, Isobel offers to join the circus and keep watch over Celia and her magical creations. All along, however, Isobel has had a sense that there is something more to the relationship between Celia and Marco, based on the readings she gets from her tarot cards. When Isobel finally learns that Marco is in love with Celia, Isobel decides to leave the circus, knowing that she will only be in the way. Before she leaves, however, she reverses a protective spell she placed on the circus years before, which starts in motion a chain of events that end in the tragic death of Herr Thiessen, the clockmaker and one of the original *revêurs*.

Tsukiko – A mysterious and very skilled contortionist, Tsukiko arrives unannounced at the home of Chandresh Lefevre to perform for the theater producer, and is immediately hired to join his new project, *Le Cirque des Rêves*. She befriends both Celia and Marco, seeming to discern the relationship between them without needing to ask. Eventually, Tsukiko reveals to Marco that she was Mr. A.H.'s previous apprentice, and that she won the last competition for him. She warns him, however, that one of the competitors must die to end the competition, and tries to get Marco to end his life to save Celia's.

Friedrick Thiessen – Clockmaker Herr Thiessen was commissioned by Ethan Burris to design a dreamlike clock to stand in the center of *Le Cirque des Rêves*. Thiessen designs the clock without knowing where it will be used, and only sees his creation four years later in France, when he attends the circus. Thiessen is so inspired by his visit that he writes a newspaper column about *Le Cirque des Rêves*, which is subsequently translated and published throughout Europe. He and other fans begin to follow the circus around the world, donning black and white clothes with a distinctive red scarf and calling themselves *revêurs*. At the same time, he begins a correspondence with a young woman, who he only finds out later is Celia Bowen, and the two become close friends. Thiessen dies tragically at *Le Cirque des Rêves*, when Chandresh Lefevre throws a knife through a crowd of circus-goers in an attempt to kill Mr. A.H. and misses, tragically killing the clockmaker instead.

Ethan Barris – An engineer and one of the original organizers of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, and one of the few people who know about the competition between Marco and Celia. In fact, it is through Barris that Marco and Celia begin to collaborate: Marco speaks with him about the competition, coming up with the idea of the Labyrinth, a circus exhibition that allows both of the competitors to create and expand on one another's work. He is also aware of much of the magic that protects the people associated with the circus, but has been sworn to secrecy about it. Unfortunately, when his friend and fellow organizer Tara Burgess comes to speak with him about the fact that she is not aging naturally, Barris cannot offer her any real information, and mistakenly sends her to speak with the magician, Mr. A.H. Once Tara speaks with the magician, she is suddenly overcome by the impulse to jump in front of a train, dying instantly. Barris feels somewhat responsible for her death, yet he is still bound to keep his secret.

Tara Burgess – Sisters and librarians who will only talk about their past when intoxicated, Tara and Lainie Burgess are original organizers of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, though their role in the project is unclear, beyond Chandresh Lefevre's insistence that they are experts at "small details." Neither sister is aware of the magic involved in the circus or of the competition between Celia and Marco; they are often suspicious, however, guessing that something mysterious is going on. When Tara Burgess realizes that she is not aging naturally, she attempts to speak with Ethan Barris about it, only to be sent to speak with the man in the gray suit, Mr. A.H. When this encounter ends in Tara's death by apparent suicide in front of a train, Lainie becomes suspicious as well.

Lainie Burgess – Lainie is one of the original organizers of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, along with her sister, Tara. The sisters' role in the project is somewhat hazy, though Chandresh Lefevre claims that they are experts at "small details." Both sisters are ignorant of the magic that unspools at the circus, as well as the grave competition between Celia and Marco. They do harbor some suspicions that something fishy is going on, though. For instance, Tara realizes that she is not aging and attempts to speak with Ethan Barris about her concerns. Ethan promptly sends her to speak with Mr. A.H.—an encounter that ends chillingly in Tara's death by apparent suicide in front of a train. In the wake of her sister's sudden death, Lainie becomes deeply suspicious about the circus as well.

Widget Murray – Winston Aidan Murray and Penelope Aislin Murray, better known as Widget and Poppet, were born in *Le Cirque des Rêves* on opening night. The time and place of their birth somehow endowed them with supernatural powers—Widget is able to read the past, while Poppet can see the future. The twins perform in the circus and end up being responsible for its survival. After Poppet foresees the destruction of the central bonfire, as well as the intervention of a young boy named Bailey Clarke, the twins arrange for Bailey

to be at the circus when the **bonfire** goes out so that he can fulfill his destiny and re-light it. After this unfolds, Mr. A.H. grants Poppet and Widget permission to take over *Le Cirque des Rêves*.

Poppet Murray – Winston Aidan Murray and Penelope Aislin Murray, better known as Widget and Poppet, were born in *Le Cirque des Rêves* on opening night. Poppet can see the future, as the time and place of the siblings' birth somehow endowed them with supernatural powers. Besides performing in the circus, the twins play a significant role in its survival. Poppet foresees the destruction of the central bonfire, as well as the intervention of a young boy who she later identifies as Bailey Clarke. The twins make sure that Bailey is at the circus so that when the **bonfire** goes out, he can fulfill his destiny and re-light it. Once Bailey has re-lit the bonfire and the circus is safe from destruction, Poppet and Widget go to see Mr. A.H. to get his permission to take over *Le Cirque des Rêves*. The twins are a new generation who, along with Bailey, will continue to bring life to the circus without the competition endangering everyone around them.

Bailey Clarke – A young boy from Concord, Massachusetts, Bailey becomes obsessed with *Le Cirque des Rêves* and eventually becomes the new proprietor after Celia and Marco disappear into the **bonfire** and can no longer run the circus. On a dare, Bailey sneaks into the circus before it opens, meeting Poppet for the first time. When he actually attends the circus when it is open, he befriends Poppet and Widget, who eventually give him a lifetime pass to the circus so that he can visit any time he wants. For Bailey, the circus becomes a fantastic escape from his life on the farm, where his family disagrees about whether he will become a family farmer, like his dad, or will attend college at Harvard, as his grandmother wishes. Neither of these options is attractive to Bailey, and he finally decides to run away from home and join the circus. Poppet has foreseen the destruction of the bonfire that keeps the circus running, and knows that Bailey will be the one to re-light it. He is in the right place at the right time, and accepts responsibility for the future of the circus, re-lighting the bonfire and taking over as proprietor. The novel ends with a note from Bailey, along with an email address, suggesting that at least another hundred years have passed since the young man ran away from home at the turn of the twentieth century.

Victor A loyal fan of the circus and member of the *rêveur* community, whom Bailey meets at a train station while trying to catch up with the circus. Victor and fellow *rêveurs* Lorena and Elizabeth take Bailey under their wing and introduce him to other people who love the circus just as much as he does. It is Victor who catches wind that the circus's next show will be in New York, ultimately allowing Bailey to join up with the circus and fulfill his destiny as its caretaker.

Elizabeth A member of the *rêveurs* and a friend of Victor and Lorena's, whom Bailey meets on the train to Boston.

Welcoming him to the group, Elizabeth tells Bailey that a *rêveur* is simply someone who loves the circus more than anything in the world; since Bailey clearly feels that way, he is one of them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lorena One of the circus's many devoted followers, or *rêveurs*. Lorena and her friends Victor and Elizabeth warmly welcome Bailey into the *rêveur* community while in Boston, allowing him to feel like part of a family.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RIVALRY AND COMPETITION

At the center of *The Night Circus* is the competition between two young magicians, Celia and Marco, who must outperform each another with

increasingly complex forms of magic until one of them dies. They do not fully understand the boundaries of this game, however, because they are only pawns, forced into competition by their teachers, Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. Both of these aging magicians—who are not only teachers but also surrogate guardians for Celia and Marco—show little affection for their young wards and have seemingly rejected emotional vulnerability in favor of the single-minded path of victory over their centuries-long rivalry. When Celia and Marco fall in love and rebel against the cruel and isolating rules of the competition, Hector and Mr. A.H. have the opportunity to grasp the value of genuine human connection, yet neither is able to make a meaningful change. Intense rivalry and competition, the novel thus suggests, are fueled by selfishness and blindness to others' needs—and, as such, inevitably lead to isolation.

Both Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. show disdain for those outside of the world of magic, which makes it difficult for them to develop real social or emotional connections to others. While Hector simply takes advantage of his audiences by passing off his magic as illusion for money, Mr. A.H. truly shows disdain for people who don't know that real magic exists: "what's worse is that none of them would listen if you attempted to enlighten them [...] to think it real would keep them up at night, afraid of their own existence." And rather than allow their powerful knowledge and skills to unite them, they have developed a rivalry to determine who is the best magician and teacher. It is unclear exactly how long this competition has gone on, but the men refer to previous challenges, with Hector noting proudly that "the overall record leans" in his favor, while

Mr. A.H. recalls that seven of Hector's past competitors have forfeited the game. Tsukiko, the circus contortionist, reveals to Marco that she was the previous victor, finishing the competition "eighty-three years, six months, and twenty-one days ago," in a duel that lasted thirty-seven years.

This competition between the magicians is played out by proxy, as they pit their apprentices against one another rather than battling each other directly. The stakes of the game are high: the magicians compete to the death, and the victor is simply the magician left standing. The fact that this particular competition pits their children—Celia, who is Hector's daughter by blood, and Marco, who is adopted by Mr. A. H.—against one another makes it all the more disturbing; this underscores how much this rivalry has warped the elder magicians' ability to meaningfully care for or empathize with anyone else, no matter how close they are to them. Celia points out the magicians' cowardice, charging that her father and Mr. A.H. "fight by proxy because you are too cowardly to challenge each other directly. Afraid you will fail and have nothing to blame except yourselves." The apprentices are puppets, allowing the magicians to show off their skills and earn bragging rights without actually taking any risk upon themselves. Again, competition is a mark of selfishness and fear of genuine engagement with the world.

Hector and Mr. A. H. each train their children/apprentices to eschew emotional connection, isolating them on purpose and perpetuating the loneliness and marginalization that they have experienced in their own lives. Celia is the child of Hector's brief relationship with a woman whom he subsequently ignored and shunned until she committed suicide. When Celia then arrives at the theater where Hector is performing with a suicide note from her mother attached to her coat, Hector is unmoved. Instead, he only takes an interest in his daughter when he recognizes her innate magical abilities, seeing an opportunity to use his own child to win one more round against Mr. A.H. Hector's training of Celia borders on abuse, as he slices her fingers and breaks her wrist with a paperweight in order to help her learn to use magic to heal herself. Once the competition is underway, Hector keeps an eye on Celia and often intervenes to berate her for any form of collaboration with anyone else in the circus, which only exacerbates her sense of isolation and pushes her to into a relationship with Marco. Similarly, Mr. A.H.'s apprentice is his child through adoption: he hand-picks Marco from an orphanage yet places him in almost complete isolation throughout his youth, only taking him out to attend magic shows. Mr. A.H.'s main role in Marco's adult life is to interfere in the relationship that develops between the two competitors. He interrupts a conversation between Celia and his apprentice, to which Marco responds, "Thirteen years with barely a word and now you wish to speak with me?" Mr. A.H.'s sole objective in his relationship with Marco is to win this round of competition, even if it means

sacrificing the happiness and even the life of his adopted child. The world of magic imposes a life of solitude and secrets on its members: they must hide their true selves from the world to avoid exposing their supernatural and often terrifying powers. The rivalry between Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. is a direct result of that imposed solitude, as each man is unaccustomed to emotional attachments, and must find solace in the company of another magician. However, rather than form a genuine friendship, each chooses to protect himself emotionally through the antagonistic nature of competition. They fight one another out of fear, not pride—they do not feel confident enough to confront one another, and they fear that a direct battle would end in the loss of each man's only friend and companion in the world.



LOVE

Despite the fact that they are meant to be competing against one another, young magicians Celia and Marco fall in love. Their love is a rebellion against the isolation imposed by their guardians, allowing them to collaborate and enhance the power of their magic. Celia and Marco embrace the vulnerability of an intimate connection in a way their guardians were never able to do. Where competition and rivalry lead only to isolation, love in the novel is presented as a force powerful enough to overcome any obstacle and engender both empathy and self-sacrifice.

The two young magicians are immediately drawn to each other, and their abilities connect them like a shared secret. The same emotional and professional isolation that distanced Hector and Mr. A.H. is what connects Celia and Marco. From the first moment they meet, Marco is drawn to Celia by a sense of admiration for her magical abilities. When she auditions for *Le Cirque des Rêves*, Marco is visibly affected by her skills, and immediately recognizes her as his opponent in the competition. He can hardly disguise his interest in her, providing Celia with “years of glances and comments she had read as no more than coy flirtation.” While Celia does not learn the identity of her competitor for until much later, she is thoroughly impressed by Marco nevertheless: when she enters his first creation for the circus, the Ice Garden, she feels at home immediately, and spends hours exploring the space. She “longs to know how her opponent came up with the idea,” and decides that it is her favorite tent in all of *Le Cirque des Rêves*. Once Celia and Marco get to know each other, they develop a “delicate camaraderie” built on the tension between what is expected of them and what they want for themselves. They have both been taught to work in solitude and cautioned not to worry about their opponent in the competition but are irresistibly drawn to one another. This emphasizes the power of their mutual attraction, and hints at the ultimate ability of their connection to overcome the isolating confines of the rivalry that has been imposed upon them.

Their new emotional connection is not without its pitfalls, however, and Celia and Marco initially have trouble letting down their guard. As magicians, both are accustomed to controlling others' perceptions, and any intimate connection between them would require that they relinquish some amount of control. When she realizes that Marco is her opponent, Celia “feels suddenly exposed” by the connection she does not control. What's more, she knows that Hector Bowen seduced her mother and then abandoned her, leading Celia to promise herself that she “would not suffer so for anyone.” Like Mr. A.H., Marco spends much of his time manipulating those around him from a distance: his role as an assistant for Chandresh LeFevre, the proprietor of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, allows him to control certain aspects of the circus without revealing his identity or intentions. He also must hide his feelings about Celia to his girlfriend, Isobel the fortune-teller, so that she will keep tabs on Celia and the magic she performs in the circus. When Celia and Marco recognize their feelings for one another, they begin to let down their guards, which is a new experience for both of them. As Marco reveals details about himself, Celia wonders why he is being so honest. He replies that “it is refreshing to be truly honest with someone for a change,” indicating one of the first times he is able to do this. Celia also asks him to stop manipulating his looks for her, hoping that he will lose his “false face” and let her see him as he really is. Love, then, is only possible with and encourages a certain emotional vulnerability that competition seeks to stifle.

Marco and Celia collaborate, beginning with the Labyrinth: they create connecting chambers within the tent, hoping to impress and delight one another with ever more impressive magic. Their guardians disapprove of this collective work, of course. Hector calls it a “debauched juxtaposition” and a “tawdry mixing of skills,” but at the same time, it is clear that they are producing their best work together. Marco tells Mr. A.H. that all of the magic he performs is for Celia: “every impossible feat and astounding sight, I have done for her.” He is subverting the competition, and creating exceptional feats of magic out of love rather than rivalry. Their final act of rebellion against their guardians comes when they exit the competition together. Neither Marco nor Celia wants to win the game, and they both offer to commit suicide to save the other's life and end the competition once and for all. They use the circus as a touchstone in order to anchor themselves to a place where they can be alone together in a suspended state of half-life that appears to be indefinite. “I didn't know if it would work but I couldn't let you go,” Celia tells Marco once they have crossed into this new dimension. By escaping together, they both forfeit the competition, neither winning nor losing, and are no longer bound to the isolation of antagonistic rivalry. This willingness to sacrifice for love is the opposite of the selfish nature of the rivalry and competition their guardians have imposed on them. They would rather die for love than continue fighting, much like Tsukiko's competitor, who sacrificed herself to end the rivalry.

The romance between Marco and Celia is built on fundamental themes of youthful rebellion, self-determination, and the desire for a genuine connection to another human being. When he discovers the depth of their relationship, Hector Bowen calls Celia “weak. Weaker than I’d thought” for falling in love with her competitor. On the contrary, however, their love requires a great deal of strength in order to overcome the will of their guardians and their deeply ingrained tendency towards self-protection. It is that strength that empowers them to risk everything for love, which at once sets them free and bonds them together indefinitely.



FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND BELONGING

The Night Circus presents an unconventional view of family structures, as most of the characters have, for one reason or another, separated from their

biological families and adopted the circus as a de-facto family unit. Set in Victorian London, the novel reflects the fact that historically, the circus was known as a refuge for performers who were shunned for their differences or unique abilities and, in turn, looked to the circus community for acceptance and shared experience. As Isobel the fortune-teller affirms, “I loved the circus. I felt like I finally had a home, a place I could belong.” This sense of community is played out in the novel not only in the relationships among the performers, but in the profound connection among the devoted fans of the circus as well. The community in *The Night Circus* provides the performers and organizers a sense of belonging that, for most of them, would not be available otherwise. That this bond is stronger than many blood relations suggests the power and importance of chosen families, which offer refuge to those who feel excluded from their own kin or otherwise marginalized in society.

The novel begins as a story of orphanhood, as neither Celia nor Marco has a mother figure in their life, and their paternal influences are distant and mission-oriented. Celia’s mother committed suicide once she realized that Hector Bowen was unable to love her; Celia recalls her mother “pine for him, steadfastly [...] far beyond the time when he had lost what little interest in her he ever held.” Marco was rescued from an orphanage only to be abandoned by the cold and mysterious Mr. A.H. He describes his guardian as “distant and not terribly forthcoming, but he is the closest thing to family I have.”

Despite being forced into competition, Celia and Marco find a family among the circus performers and organizers. Even the organizers of the circus, who plan the show from a distance and do not live together as the performers do, feel the same sense of family and solidarity. Mr. Barris, the engineer, tells his friend Lainie Burgess that she and her twin sister “are as dear as family to me, all of you. More dear, in some cases.” More than just business partners, they develop a sense of family that is based on mutual support, love, and shared experience. For Poppet and Widget, who were born to two performers on

opening night, the concept of the circus as family is literal rather than metaphorical. Their birth within the magical confines of the circus has also bestowed supernatural powers on them, making them a more integral part of the circus than their own parents. They grow up among the tents and spectators, and Celia watches over them and encourages their special gifts. As an orphan herself, Celia has embraced the circus as family, and reinforces that family structure by playing a maternal role for the twins.

The circus also becomes a kind of extended family for a select group of spectators, known as *rêveurs*, many of whom “follow the circus wherever it may lead.” These devoted fans feel a deep connection to it that helps build a sense of community and belonging; for them, the circus “is wonder and comfort and mystery all together that they have nowhere else.” It is one of these *rêveurs*, the young Bailey, who becomes the new caretaker of the circus once the **bonfire** goes out and Celia and Marco pass into a different dimension. Enamored with the circus, Bailey runs away to join a community that immediately embraces him and offers him a place of value. And for this young man, with new family come new responsibilities: Celia asks him to hold part of the circus within him, which he understands as “an even greater commitment than inheriting responsibility for the family farm.” Bailey accepts this responsibility, which ties him to his new family and community indefinitely. The family that Bailey leaves behind is bound together by duty, responsibility, and expectation, symbolized each night by dinners filled with “silence broken by his mother’s attempts at polite conversation and [his sister’s] occasional sighs.” For this family, their connection is static and unchanging, with the expectation that each new generation will replace the previous one, in an infinite repetition of predetermined roles. There is no room for expressions of joy or the pursuit of dreams, and this is not enough for Bailey. His final farewell to his sister illustrates the ways in which traditional family structure can be both stifling and taken for granted: when Bailey tells his sister that he is running away, she does not believe him. She is unable to recognize the possibility of a fluid and changing family dynamic, and encourages her brother to grow up, associating maturity with a blanket acceptance of life’s circumstances. Bailey responds that growing up “is precisely what I am doing,” countering with his view that family and community can be created by choice.

The Night Circus reinforces the importance of chosen family: run by two orphans whose knowledge and power separate them from the rest of the world, *Le Cirque des Rêves* is much more than just a circus. The family and community that the circus provides is not just a form of refuge, but also a support system in which its members find meaning in their lives and are able to realize their full potential.



TIME AND MORTALITY

The circus, as a place of leisure and youthful joy, is outside the reaches of time, presenting spectators with an uninterrupted present and a sense of immortality. In *The Night Circus*, however, that sense of eternal present is unsettling, as it makes time seem mysterious and uncontrollable. As Isobel explains about fortune telling, “The most difficult thing to read is time.” The novel touches on both the innate fear of death and loss, and the crippling isolation that would accompany immortality, and ultimately reminds readers that time is an uncontrollable and mysterious concept.

The Night Circus breaks with the conventions of chronological time: characters age at different rates, and connections to the circus render some people immortal, while others meet tragic and untimely deaths. Some of the organizers realize that they are not aging at a normal rate and realize that the circus has something to do with it. Mr. Barris is able to accept the situation, in part because he knows about the magic that fuels it. Nevertheless, his altered state of aging presents serious difficulties for him, as he must keep it a secret from those around him. “I move my office every few years, I hire new staff,” he explains to his friend Lainie Burgess, who is also aging slowly but does not know why. “I would tell you if I could,” he adds mysteriously. A suspicious Tara Burgess meets with Mr. Barris to discuss the issue, and he cannot tell her either; unlike Lainie, however, Tara continues to investigate, determined to understand and possibly control her sense of mortality. Tara’s investigation, however, brings her too close to the truth and leads to her swift and mysterious death in the path of an oncoming train. This tragic accident suggests that there is no questioning this glimpse of immortality without the risk of facing death itself. As strong as her magical abilities are, Celia is unable to control the morality of those around her, an issue that weighs heavily on her throughout her life. Only five when her mother committed suicide, there was little she could do to prevent it. And when Chandresh accidentally murders Herr Theissen, Celia attempts unsuccessfully to save him: “I tried. I thought I might be able to fix it.” Despite having a tremendous amount of magical ability, Celia cannot control time nor the inevitable march towards death that defines mortals who are not connected to the circus.

In contrast to the unsettling near-immortality of the circus organizers, Celia and Marco must face the possibility of death as the outcome of their competition. Once Celia and Marco begin to decipher the rules of their competition, they realize that the game only ends when one of the competitors dies. “A winner is not *declared*,” Hector Bowen tells Celia. “The game is played out, not stopped.” Not surprisingly, the two lovers are only interested in being together indefinitely, and this realization is devastating to them, giving them no idea how long they have together. Once they have made love for the first time, Celia “wishes she could freeze time [...] stay forever in this

moment [...] not have to leave.” But the competition and the sense of doom is inescapable for both of them. Marco and Celia both offer to lose the competition so that the other can survive, suggesting that it is not death itself that they fear, but the lack of control over their time together. In addition, Celia is still mourning the death of Herr Theissen, for which she takes some responsibility, and would rather face her own death than lose another person she loves. Finally, Marco and Celia manage to escape both the competition and mortality, using magic to enter an alternate dimension, where they have gained a kind of immortality within the confines of the circus. Even Mr. A.H. “will admit that Miss Bowen found a very clever way out.” Marco and Celia managed this feat only by facing death itself, however—they take control of their mortality in the face of an uncontrollable sense of the future. While most of the circus members have life spans that are well outside of the normal range—Bailey, for example, joined the circus at the turn of the twentieth century, yet in the final chapter he provides an email address to visitors—there is no sense that immortality is the desired outcome for these characters. The loneliness and isolation that both Mr. A.H. and Hector Bowen feel may be attributed, in part, to the fact that they exist outside of the boundaries of typical life and death. Mr. A.H. explains that this advanced age “takes a toll on a person,” and that he is “content to accept inevitabilities, even if I have ways of putting them off.”

The Night Circus touches on many of the most basic fears associated with mortality, including the loss of loved ones and the lack of any sense of control over the future. On the other hand, while the circus provides a certain sense of leisure and escape from the passing of time, the novel also reminds readers of the crippling isolation that would accompany immortality. As Mr. A.H. notes, the goal is to “find darkness or paradise without fear,” and to accept the uncontrollable nature of time and aging.



MAGIC AND ILLUSION

Le Cirque des Rêves differs from the typical circus show that presents spectacle and audience deception as lighthearted entertainment; instead, this circus is infused with actual magic, challenging spectators to question their perceptions of what is real. As a point of pride, the magician Mr. A.H. makes a strong distinction between magic, which is an art to him, and illusion, which he sees as meaningless and deceptive. In *The Night Circus*, however, circus spectators simply delight in the mystery of the show before them, choosing to have faith in something they cannot explain or fully understand. The real magic that binds and protects the circus family is founded in that same faith, giving the magicians a sense of control in a world that might otherwise seem cruel and arbitrary.

Spectators come to *Le Cirque des Rêves* seeking illusion and deception, and whether or not they recognize the magic for what it is, they are captivated by a world that defies logic and

extends their sense of what is possible. With its maze of tents and uncharted path through different cities and towns around the world, *Le Cirque des Rêves* is unreadable and mysterious to spectators, imbuing it with magic from the outset. The novel begins with a pronouncement: “The circus arrives without warning.” There is no explanation, no advertisement or pamphlet to present its origin, meaning, or format. This establishes a sense of anticipation (which is, of course, the subtitle of the novel’s prologue)—something that is its own kind of magic, in that it calls on spectators to engage with and imagine something they have yet to see.

Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. have been trained in magic, a kind of supernatural summoning of energy to manipulate objects, events, and perceptions; yet Hector, who performed under the name Prospero the Enchanter, must disguise his magic as illusion, letting his audience believe they are simply being deceived by sleight of hand. This was a contentious point between them, as the Mr. A.H. described the mix of magic and illusion as “frivolous,” while Hector defended himself, explaining that his spectators “line up to be mystified [...] I can mystify them easier than most.” In his mind, audiences would prefer to believe they are being tricked by an illusionist than be confronted with a truly supernatural power beyond their control and comprehension. Yet whether or not the audience is able to grasp the depth of what they are seeing, they come to see something they do not have access to in their daily lives. When Mr. A.H. discusses the value of magic with Widget, who has recently taken charge of the circus, he wonders about the purpose it serves. Throughout their conversation, the old magician seems to recognize the value of magic, or illusion, or the combination of the two. When Widget explains that he uses magic to tell stories, Mr. A.H. notes, that there is “magic in that [...] You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone’s soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose.” The end result of magic, then, is to offer a sense of wonder and possibility absent from their regular lives.

Magic grants not only a sense of hope, but also of protection from an unpredictable world. From the inside of the circus, there is the less visible but equally important protective magic that Isobel and Marco use to keep those associated with the circus alive, healthy, and in balance. This internal magic helps to offer the members of the circus a sense of control and safety. Isobel the fortune-teller casts a protective spell on the circus, hoping “to keep the circus balanced. To prevent two conflicting sides from causing damage to each other or their surroundings.” When she leaves the circus, however, she reverses her spell, shifting the equilibrium of the circus and destroying the illusory sense of safety and security the performers previously felt. This sets in motion a series of events that ends in the death of the clockmaker Herr Theissen, one of the original *rêveurs* and one of Celia Bowen’s closest friends. Marco has also placed the circus and its associates

under a spell: he uses a notebook filled with “endless pages of glyphs and symbols, ringed in text ripped from other sources, affixed to one another and inscribed over and over.” This notebook is his magical safeguard for the circus, another copy of which he has placed in the central **bonfire**, forging his magic by fire. When Bailey is instructed to re-light the bonfire in order to bring the circus back to life, he must also work on pure faith, not knowing whether or not his thoughts and actions are enough. He repeats what he has learned from Celia, instructions “about focus and intent that he does not entirely understand,” and impulsively throws the entire contents of his pockets into the fire, hoping that something he does will work. His success, however, is a testament to the power of belief, and the value of faith outside of the burden of proof.

By the end of *The Night Circus*, Mr. A.H. recognizes that there “are many kinds of magic, after all.” The members of the circus and their audiences are united in the desire to believe in something beyond their immediate comprehension. This illusion provides a sense of wonder and creativity, giving believers hope in the possibilities in the universe, and empowering them to take risks to make great things happen.



FREEDOM AND AGENCY

Traditionally, the circus has enjoyed a reputation of freedom, as the performers were not bound by location or permanent family connections, and spectators could escape from the banality of their daily lives to the wonders of magic and spectacle. Yet, as the author notes in an epigraph from the novel, the word circus itself is derived “from the Greek *kirkos* meaning circle, or ring,” a shape that is designed to enclose or contain. *The Night Circus* plays on this tension between freedom and imprisonment, as most of the characters find escape and liberty in the circus, while others—Celia in particular—are trapped within the confines of the space and the competition it houses. Just as the circus provides a family structure for many of the performers who would be marginalized in their own societies, it offers a sense of freedom from outside cultural restraints and judgments.

Tsukiko the contortionist, for example, arrives at Chandresh’s home at midnight without warning, offering no explanation of where she has come from or why. Once she has performed for the organizers of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, Chandresh announces, “This is the precise flavor that the circus should be [...] This is kismet, her coming here tonight.” Much later on in the novel, Tsukiko reveals that she once participated in a previous competition between Mr. A.H. and Hector Bowen, and that her opponent “is now a pillar of ash standing in a field in Kyoto.” As the victor, Tsukiko was set free into the world, and has found her place within the circus.

Many of the other members of the circus, like Widget and Poppet, find complete freedom of expression in *Le Cirque des*

Rêves, using the venue to demonstrate their creativity and unique gifts without fear of rejection. Born into the circus, both Widget and Poppet have supernatural powers that they would likely need to suppress in the outside world, yet Widget is given his own tent “as a place to practice putting down his stories.” Later on, once Celia and Marco exit the competition and are no longer responsible for the circus itself, the twins are given complete creative control over it. Their magical abilities are of value, giving them the confidence and liberty to make creative, bold choices. For Bailey, a young boy living in Concord, Massachusetts at the turn of the twentieth century, the circus is a fantasy and a possible escape the expectations of his unsatisfying home life. He first glimpsed *Le Cirque des Rêves* at the age of five, but “he was not allowed to visit the circus. His parents deemed him too young, so he could only stare from afar, enchanted” by the spectacle. When the circus returns five years later, Bailey defies the posted sign threatening exsanguination to sneak in during the day, hoping to explore the secrets of the circus. When he stumbles upon Poppet, she somehow already knows his name and even gives him one of her gloves as a memento of his adventure. From this moment on, the circus becomes a constant for Bailey, each visit an opportunity to explore a new, liberating world. By contrast, at home in Concord, Bailey’s future is in the hands of his father, who demands that he take over the family farm, and his grandmother, who has decided that he will attend Harvard University. Bailey is not enthusiastic about either choice; Harvard “seems to him to be the option that holds the most mystery, the most possibility,” but he is also aware that he has little choice in the matter. He recognizes that he has a responsibility to his family, “repeating the word he has begun to hate.” More than the sense of responsibility, it is the lack of agency that upsets Bailey. Bailey runs away to the circus in the middle of the night, leaving a note for his parents and saying a quick goodbye to his sister. As he leaves, he recalls that “when he was very small his mother once said she wished happiness and adventure for him. If this does not count as adventure, he is not sure what does.” *Le Cirque des Rêves* offers him the freedom, agency, and possibility that neither Harvard or the family farm could offer.

In contrast to the freedom and adventure that the circus offers to the other members, for Celia and Marco, it is a place of imprisonment and isolation as long as they are forced into competition. Celia lacks agency throughout the beginning of the novel, arriving like a discarded package at the theater where her father is performing. She has no choice about her future and, once she is involved in the competition, she doesn’t even understand the rules of the game she is meant to play. Her imprisonment is symbolized by the **ring** that Mr. A.H. gives her, which creates a permanent burn in the skin of her finger. Marco’s matching scar on his finger signifies that he, too, spent his youth in one form of confinement or another, rescued from the orphanage only to take on a form of indentured servitude

as Mr. A.H.’s magic student. When Marco asks Mr. A.H. why he did it, he responds, “I thought it preferable to the life you might have had otherwise, regardless of the consequences.” Despite this reasonable answer from his teacher, Marco resents being forced in to the competition. While they are bound to the competition and its home base in *Le Cirque des Rêves*, Marco and Celia enjoy relative freedom to interpret their roles in the game. In spite of their guardians’ disapproval, Celia and Marco take the liberty of collaborating, which brings them closer together rather than fueling any sort of rivalry. Their love gives them a glimpse of freedom, but when they discuss the possibility of running away together, the scars on their fingers burn painfully, reminding them they have no choice in this matter. “I thought I would ask you to run away with me and I meant it,” explains Celia, “The very moment I convinced myself that we could manage it, I was in so much pain I could barely stand.” Any sense of freedom Celia and Marco have within the circus is, like so much of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, an illusion. Their only hope to escape the prison of a magical duel to the death is to lock themselves deeper within the circus, in a state of semi-death, semi-immortality that will render the competition a stalemate. When Widget explains this state to Mr. A.H., she describes it as marvelous, to which he responds, “You think being imprisoned marvelous?” He does not understand that even though they are physically trapped inside the confines of the circus, they have escaped the domineering reach of their guardians and taken their destinies into their own hands; as such, this is the greatest amount of freedom that either Celia or Marco have had in their entire lives.

Located outside of city limits, *Le Cirque des Rêves* presumes to offer audiences a temporary reprieve from their daily lives; more importantly, for the performers it is a permanent refuge from an oppressive outside world. And while they rarely leave the physical space of the circus, these characters find a sense of freedom that they might not otherwise have. For Celia and Marco to achieve that same sense of freedom, however, they must undertake a quest that threatens to destroy them both, risking their very lives to escape the binding placed upon them by their guardians, decades earlier. The fact that Celia and Marco are more than willing to make this exchange for even a minor taste of liberty underscores the importance of freedom and self-determination in *The Night Circus*.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RINGS

In *The Night Circus*, rings symbolize commitment, enclosure, and infinite connection. When Mr. A.H.

agrees to the new round of competition, he gives Celia a ring that burns itself into her finger, symbolizing a commitment that cannot be discarded as easily as a piece of jewelry. After the announcement of her father's death, when Celia receives marriage proposals from fellow magicians, she notes to herself that she is already married, "twisting the ring on her right hand that covers an old, distinctive scar." She later finds that Marco has the same scar, which he received when he was fourteen. When they imagine abandoning the competition or running away together, their scars burn in shocking pain, reminding them of their lifelong obligation to a game that is designed to end one of their lives.

Isobel Martin also wore a ring, but removed it and sold it before arriving in London and meeting Marco. Like Celia and Marco, Isobel was forced into a commitment without her consent, but she managed to escape and find her freedom. Isobel's ring was from an arranged marriage, and one that likely would not have made her happy, as her betrothed "looked for the ring longer than he looked for me," according to Isobel. Her freedom stands in contrast to the magical bond linking Celia and Marco to the competition and to one another.

Not all of the rings in the novel carry the same negative connotations, however. As Friedrich Thiessen explains, the word circus is derived "from the Greek *kirkos* meaning circle, or ring." *Le Cirque des Rêves* is designed as a series of intersecting circles, "contained within a circular fence. Looping and continuous." These rings provide a welcoming embrace, and a safe enclosure from the outside world.



THE BONFIRE

The bonfire at the center of *Le Cirque des Rêves* is what gives the circus life, and keeping that fire burning is essential to the survival of the circus and its performers. The lighting of the bonfire on the opening night of *Le Cirque des Rêves* is a symbolic ritual of birth, inaugurating the circus and its family; it also coincides with the birth of the Murray twins, Widget and Poppet, who become an integral part of the circus family. The fire is also a protective element in the novel: Marco's protective spell, which keeps those associated with the circus unnaturally young and healthy, is written into a notebook that he placed within the bonfire.

When Marco and Celia decide to exit the competition and possibly end their lives, they jump into the bonfire. As a life-giving element, however, the fire does not kill the two magicians, but instead transports them to a magical space within the circus, suspended between life and death like ghosts. The bonfire goes out, and only a ceremonial re-lighting of the fire, using another copy of Marco's notebook with the protective spells, will save *Le Cirque des Rêves* and ensure its eternal life.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor edition of *The Night Circus* published in 2012.

Part 1: Primordium Quotes

☞ "You might be interesting."

Related Characters: Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter (speaker), Celia Bowen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Hector Bowen makes this statement to his daughter, Celia, after observing her shake teacups with her mind, a magical skill that he was not aware she possessed. At the age of five, Celia was delivered to Hector during one of his magic shows, with a note pinned to her coat. The note was from Celia's mother, who had just committed suicide. He is thoroughly uninterested in both the note and the little girl, and tells her that her mother should have named her Miranda (his stage name is Prospero the Enchanter, and Miranda is Prospero's daughter in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), but that she was not smart enough to think of something so clever. This angers Celia and prompts her to shake the teacups with her mind.

This introduction between these two characters illustrates many of their central characteristics: Hector Bowen is a cold and unfeeling man, focused only on the practice of magic and, later, his ongoing rivalry with Mr. A.H., who was once his teacher. Celia's mother loved him, but he ignored her and is even unmoved by her death; his daughter, on the other hand, interests him due to her innate magical abilities. Celia is loyal to her mother, and her father's lack of empathy will frustrate her for the rest of her life, especially once he enters her into a competition that puts her very life at risk.

☞ "You would wager your own child?"
"She won't lose."

Related Characters: Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter, Alexander / Mr. A.H. (speaker), Celia Bowen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

After observing his young daughter's magical abilities, Hector invites his former teacher and longstanding rival, Mr. A.H., to meet her. She impresses the man, levitating a pocket watch and then shattering it. The two magicians then discuss their rivalry and decide to begin a new round of competition, pitting Celia against the competitor of Mr. A.H.'s choosing. Mr. A.H. is skeptical at first, as they both know that the stakes of the competition are high—the loser will not survive. Hector, however, is so confident in Celia's skills that he does not feel he needs to worry about those consequences, and is willing to risk her life. In addition, he hardly sees her as his offspring, except in her capacity for magic; throughout the novel, he will conduct himself not as a father, but as a brutal teacher and coach, depriving Celia of all parental influence and forcing her to focus solely on the competition.

☞ “You will be coming to study with me [...].”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Do you wish to remain here?”

“No.”

“Very well.”

Related Characters: Marco Alisdair, Alexander / Mr. A.H. (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. A.H. is speaking with young Marco—though at this point, the boy's name is still unknown—in the orphanage where the boy has been living. Mr. A.H. came to the orphanage to choose a child to teach, who would eventually become Celia Bowen's rival in his magical competition with Hector Bowen. Mr. A.H. met with a number of children, discarding each of them for reasons unknown. When this young man came in to meet with him, Mr. A.H. tossed his cane at him, and the boy caught it immediately, presumably demonstrating his quick reflexes and calm demeanor.

This first interaction between the two characters sets the tone for their relationship throughout the novel: Mr. A.H. is

authoritative and in control, rarely answering questions or revealing his intentions; Marco is thoughtful and inquisitive, but will also learn to accept his teacher's authority and do what is necessary to get ahead.

☞ “What am I bound to?”

“An obligation you already had, and a person you will not meet for some time.”

Related Characters: Marco Alisdair, Alexander / Mr. A.H. (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Marco is fourteen, and has been training with Mr. A.H. for a while, studying magic in near total isolation, only leaving to attend magic shows and discuss them with his teacher. With little explanation, Mr. A.H. produces a ring, which will burn itself into the skin on Marco's finger, leaving a scar; this is the same process he put Celia Bowen through when she was six, and it binds them together, officially beginning their competition. The young boy asks for details about his obligation, but gets no real answer from Mr. A.H. Thus begins a theme in their relationship, in which Marco accepts his responsibility—even when he does not want to—but repeatedly asks for more information about the competition, and receives none from his teacher.

☞ “I owe you my deepest gratitude, Miss...?”

“Martin. Isobel Martin.”

“Marco, Marco Alisdair.”

Related Characters: Isobel Martin, Marco Alisdair (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Young Marco is now living on his own in London and often spends his time wandering the city, always carrying his

notebook full of notes on magic and manipulation. One evening, he realizes that he has lost the notebook, and, when he begins to look for it, he finds a young woman reading it with interest. They introduce themselves, and Marco quickly learns that this young woman, Isobel, has some knowledge of magic. Crucially, this is the first moment in which the young man speaks his own name to another person—a name he created for himself, because Mr. A.H. never bothered to learn his given name when he plucked him from the orphanage. This is a persona he has created for himself, showing those around him what he thinks they want to see and telling them what he thinks they want to hear.

☞ “My new game, as you so appropriately call it, is a circus.”
 “A circus? How marvelous!”
 “Like a carnival?”
 “More than a carnival, more than a circus, really, like no circus anyone has ever seen.”

Related Characters: Ethan Barris, Lainie Burgess, Chandresh Lefevre (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Chandresh Lefevre, a famous theater producer, has gathered a select group of friends and colleagues together to collaborate on his newest project, a traveling circus. They are all delighted by the idea, but what they do not know is that the circus was an idea planted into Chandresh’s head by Hector Bowen, years earlier, as the venue for his competition with Mr. A.H. While Chandresh and his friends conceive of the original ideas together, it is Celia Bowen and Marco Alisdair—and the real magic that they use in their competition—that give the circus life. Despite the fact that Chandresh will end up having little control over his greatest production, his description of the circus is accurate: *Le Cirque des Rêves* becomes famous throughout the world, with a network of dedicated fans who consider the circus a second home.

☞ “[...] with whom have you studied?”
 “With my father, Hector Bowen. Though perhaps he is better known as Prospero the Enchanter.”

Related Characters: Marco Alisdair, Celia Bowen (speaker), Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Celia Bowen is auditioning to become the illusionist in *Le Cirque des Rêves*, and Marco (who is Chandresh’s assistant) is going through a standard list of questions for all of the applicants. He is trying his best to maintain his composure, however, in light of Celia’s beauty. Chandresh has already noted that Celia looks too young and pretty to be the illusionist, but she is determined to show him what she can do. When she mentions her father by his stage name, both Chandresh and Marco are impressed, as they have both seen him perform and appreciate his work.

Celia thoroughly impresses Chandresh in this audition, and she is immediately chosen as the illusionist for the circus. More importantly, however, Marco realizes that Celia is his opponent in the competition, and is so unsettled by this information that Chandresh sends him home for the day. This introduction sets the tone for Marco’s feelings for Celia throughout much of the novel—he is strongly attracted to her as a person, yet fears her as a rival in the competition.

☞ “Follow your dreams, Bailey. Be they Harvard or something else entirely.”

Related Characters: Bailey Clarke

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Bailey Clarke is an unremarkable young man living in Concord, Massachusetts, at the turn of the twentieth century, when *Le Cirque des Rêves* comes to town. He is dealing with his own struggles at home, mainly the disagreement between his father and his maternal grandmother about his future. His grandmother has determined that he will attend Harvard University, far from home, while his father insists that he will inherit the family farm. Neither asks Bailey for his opinion, and while he expresses some interest in attending Harvard, he does not yet feel strongly about it.

When Bailey goes to have tea with his grandmother in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, she gives him some advice that will stick with him for the rest of his life. She tells him that she does not really care if he attends Harvard, but she wants him to have an adventure, and not to settle for a future someone else has set out for him. Bailey will eventually take this advice, and follow his dreams of becoming part of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, escaping the monotony of his life on the farm.

Part 2: Illumination Quotes

☞ “I’m not certain I understand the rules.”

“You don’t need to understand the rules. You need to follow them. As I said, your work has been sufficient.”

Related Characters: Alexander / Mr. A.H., Marco Alisdair (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

The circus has opened successfully, and the competition between Marco and Celia is well underway. Yet while Celia is the circus’s illusionist, and has a stage for her magic, Marco is working from the sidelines, doing most of his work in secret. He is anxious to speak with Mr. A.H., but never hears from him; the only opportunity he would have to speak with his teacher is at one of Chandresh’s Midnight Dinners, but Mr. A.H. has not attended one of those in a while. So Marco decides to call him—he inscribes a series of symbols and characters on the window of his flat in the shape of an A.

Mr. A.H. has very little to say to Marco, as usual, and when Marco asks him how he is doing, the magician tells his student that his progress is sufficient, leaving Marco confused. He has no idea what the rules are, or how anyone is judging their work, and again Mr. A.H. offers him no answers. Both Marco and Celia are floundering in this state of insecurity, though at least Celia’s father speaks with her on a regular basis. When Mr. A.H. leaves the brief meeting with Marco, he instructs him to never call on him again, reasserting both his authority and the distance between the two.

☞ “Working with others will only drag you down. These people are not your friends, they are inconsequential. And one of them is your opponent, don’t forget that.”

Related Characters: Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter (speaker), Celia Bowen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Celia is standing in front of the Carousel, which she helped Ethan Barris produce—he created the structure for the Carousel, and she used her magic to bring the creatures to life. Her father observes her work and offers his sharp criticism, suggesting that this kind of collaboration—with her opponent or anyone else in the circus, for that matter—will be detrimental to her progress in the competition.

While Hector sees every situation in light of his rivalry with Mr. A.H. and attempts to inspire that same competitive spirit in Celia, she sees her world differently. The circus provides her with both a home and a family, something her father deprived her of for most of her young life. Her collaborations with Mr. Barris and, later, with Marco are more than just rebellion against her father’s wishes—they help her develop non-competitive relationships and some sense of control over her life.

☞ “How much do you know?”

“How much do I know about what?”

“How much has Miss Bowen told you?”

“You’re her opponent. I never would have guessed.”

Related Characters: Ethan Barris, Marco Alisdair (speaker), Celia Bowen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Marco comes to visit Ethan Barris, and very boldly begins their conversation with this question. He suspects that Mr. Barris knows more than he has revealed, especially since the Carousel appears to combine his engineering knowledge and Celia’s magic skills. He is correct, of course: Celia informed him about the magic behind the scenes at the circus and about her competition against an unknown opponent. Mr. Barris expresses surprise that Marco is her opponent, likely because Marco works to blend into the

background, rarely revealing himself or his magical abilities. This short conversation provides both men with useful information. While Marco is able to confirm his suspicions about Mr. Barris' involvement in the competition, Mr. Barris now knows the identity of Celia's opponent, though Marco then swears him to secrecy. This conversation also opens up a new phase in the competition between Celia and Marco: Mr. Barris is able to construct a new tent, the Labyrinth, which allows the opponents to build on one another's magical creations. As the competition continues, Marco and Celia use magic as a way of expressing their affection for one another, growing closer rather than building a rivalry.

“There is a great deal more going on than we are privy to, of that I'm quite sure. I tried to talk to Chandresh, but it was like we were speaking two different languages. I do not like sitting idly by when something clearly isn't right.”

Related Characters: Tara Burgess (speaker), Chandresh Lefevre, Ethan Barris

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Tara Burgess has come to visit Ethan Barris at his office in Vienna, and expresses some concerns related to the circus. In particular, she is unsettled by the fact that no one connected to the circus seems to be aging. This has gone on for a number of years, and it is the reason that Mr. Barris moved his office from London to Vienna, so that outsiders would not notice. Tara is worried and wants to find out what is going on. In addition, Chandresh Lefevre has been drinking more heavily and often forgetting things, which makes it difficult to discuss anything with him.

Mr. Barris seems to be willing to accept this side effect of his relationship to the circus, in part because he knows about the magic behind the circus. He has been sworn to secrecy, however, and cannot offer Tara any specific information. He instead sends her to Mr. A.H. in London, hoping that he can either clarify the situation for Tara or convince her to stop investigating. Unfortunately for both of them, Tara will not make it back from London alive.

“Do you like the circus, Bailey?”

“It's like no place I've ever been [...] Not that I've been many places. But I think the circus is wonderful. I like it very much.”

“That would help.”

“Help with what?”

Related Characters: Bailey Clarke, Isobel Martin (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Bailey has come to the fortune-teller's tent, and Isobel is reading his cards for him. Bailey is concerned about his future, as he is not interested in staying in Concord, Massachusetts, to inherit the family farm, but his father is insistent. He tells Isobel about this, and about his grandmother's plan for him to attend Harvard; when Isobel asks what he wants, he tells her that he doesn't know. However, when she reads his cards, there is nothing about Harvard or the farm: she tells him vaguely that he will have a journey ahead of him, followed by a great deal of responsibility. He interprets this as a future at Harvard, though Isobel has foreseen that he will eventually save the circus from destruction.

Isobel asks if Bailey likes the circus, because she has seen that he will soon become part of it, giving up both his home and family for *Le Cirque des Rêves*. At this point, Bailey does not understand the gravity of Isobel's question, but he responds honestly, that he loves the circus already.

“We are fish in a bowl, dear. Very carefully monitored fish.

Watched from all angles. If one of us floats to the top, it was not accidental. And if it was an accident, I worry that the watchers are not as careful as they should be.”

Related Characters: Tsukiko (speaker), Tara Burgess, Isobel Martin

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Tsukiko and Isobel are attending the funeral for Tara Burgess, who walked in front of a moving train at St. Pancras station in London. Her death was mysterious and thoroughly unexpected, and has put the entire circus family

in a tailspin, trying to make sense of it. Tsukiko asks Isobel how Tara died, and when Isobel replies that she thought it was an accident, Tsukiko dismisses the idea and wonders cryptically if the circus could have driven her insane. Isobel does not believe that Tara would commit suicide, but Tsukiko doubts it could be an accident either.

The tension is mounting within the circus at this point, as some people know what is going on while others are left in the dark. Tara died trying to find out why she wasn't aging, and Tsukiko seems to be aware of this in some way. Her statement serves as a warning of the danger to come in the circus.

“I spent the first several years of my life watching my mother pine for him, steadfastly. Loving and longing far beyond the time when he had lost what little interest in her he ever held. Until one day when I was five years old and she took her own life. When I was old enough to understand, I promised myself I would not suffer so for anyone. It will take a great deal more than that charming smile of yours to seduce me.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen (speaker), Marco Alisdair, Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

Celia is attending one of the Midnight Dinners at Chandresh's house and loses her shawl. When Marco retrieves it for her, he offers her a private tour of the house, giving the two of them a chance to be alone and talk. This is the first time they have been able to talk freely since Marco revealed himself as her opponent months earlier, and they begin to discuss magic and manipulation. Celia refers to Marco as “enchanting,” describing both his magical abilities and his charming personality. She notes that he has gotten both Chandresh and Isobel to fall in love with him, but that she will not be seduced quite as easily.

Celia and Marco have developed feelings for each other, yet there are a number of factors keeping them apart, and the competition is only one of them. Her mother's death has weighed heavily on her, as well as her father's lack of empathy; she now transfers this doubt onto her feelings for Marco, leaving her unsure of how she feels about him.

Part 3: Intersections Quotes

“Thirteen years with barely a word and now you wish to speak with me?”

Related Characters: Marco Alisdair (speaker), Celia Bowen, Alexander / Mr. A.H.

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place at Chandresh's house, at a party celebrating the thirteenth anniversary of the opening of the circus. Marco has been waiting to have a moment alone with Celia, and when she finally passes him in the hallway, he grabs her arm and brings her to a dark and secluded corner. He begins to kiss her neck gently, when suddenly Mr. A.H. appears, and Celia promptly slips back into the party. Surprised and angry, Marco asks his teacher why he has chosen this moment to finally pay attention to him. Mr. A.H. acknowledges that his real motive was to separate Marco and Celia, as both he and Hector strongly disapprove of their budding relationship.

Marco's anger is understandable in this case—he was plucked from the orphanage only to live in near-total seclusion, forced into a competition without his consent, and given almost no control over his life choices. He has tried to communicate with Mr. A.H. many times, but does not even have contact information for his teacher. He does not understand the rules of the competition, yet the one choice he has made for himself—his love for Celia—is forbidden to him.

“I cannot leave. I am not allowed. I must remain here, and I must continue with this *nonsense*, as you so aptly put it. You are going to return to your drinking and your parties and you will not even remember that we had this conversation.”

Related Characters: Marco Alisdair (speaker), Chandresh Lefevre

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

Chandresh has been rifling through the circus paperwork in Marco's office, and he stumbled upon his most prized possession, a notebook filled with names and hair samples of all of the members of the circus, as well as a series of cryptic symbols. Marco describes it as simply a book of record for the circus, when in reality it is the magic notebook (a copy of which he has thrown in to the central bonfire) that keeps the circus running and its members safe. Chandresh is horrified by this discovery, accusing Marco of working with Mr. A.H. (who he refers to only as *him*) and of keeping secrets from him. He fires Marco on the spot, waves a brandy bottle in his face menacingly, and tells him to leave his house.

Marco applied to be Chandresh's assistant at Mr. A.H.'s request, and his position there is an essential part of the competition with Celia; there is no way that he can leave the circus, and he knows that. So just as he has done since the very beginning, Marco takes control of the situation, erasing his boss's memory of the event to ensure that he keeps his job and that Chandresh suspects nothing. Later that evening, he packs everything up and takes it to his own apartment, so that Chandresh does not have the opportunity to discover the magic he is using on the circus.

“If you ever need anything from me, I would like you to ask. I am tired of everyone keeping their secrets so well that they get other people killed. We are all involved in your game, and it seems we are not as easily repaired as teacups.”

Related Characters: Lainie Burgess (speaker), Tara Burgess, Celia Bowen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 340

Explanation and Analysis

Lainie Burgess's request comes at the end of a very revealing conversation with Celia Bowen, in light of the death of Lainie's sister, Tara. Lainie has been meeting with people associated with the circus in search of answers about her sister's tragic death, and learned that Ethan Barris knew more than he let on, but he had been sworn to secrecy and would not betray the confidence of those who told him. Her conversation with Celia is much more productive: Celia tells her the basics of the magic behind the circus, as well as the competition, though she does not give her the names of the people involved.

When their conversation is nearing its end, Lainie's teacup falls from her hand and smashes onto the table. Celia quickly repairs the cup with her mind, restoring it and the tea to its original state. Performing magic in front of Lainie is Celia's way of letting her in on a powerful secret. Lainie, however, is more concerned about her safety and that of her friends. She compares all of them to the fragile teacup, acknowledging both the danger of the competition and the limits of Celia's powers.

“Are you looking for this? It was made by a ring when I was fourteen. It said something in Latin, but I don't know what it was.”

“*Esse quam videri*. To be, rather than to seem. It's the Bowen family motto. My father was very fond of engraving it on things. I'm not entirely sure he appreciated the irony.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen, Marco Alisdair (speaker), Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

Marco and Celia are comparing the scars made by their rings, which are the indelible markings of their commitment to the competition. The rings also bound them to one another well before they ever met, when Celia was six and Marco was fourteen. Yet, while Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. intended for Marco and Celia to be rivals working against one another, the competition has brought them together romantically, pointing to the more traditional interpretation of a ring as a symbol of everlasting love and marriage.

Celia notes the irony of the Latin engraving on the ring, “to be, rather than to seem,” due to her father's tendency to manipulate the perceptions of those around him. As an illusionist, he disguises real magic as stage work, seeming to be something other than what he really is. In addition, Hector Bowen is stuck in a state of semi-being, due to his failed attempt to become immortal. He is only partially visible, and cannot fully interact with the world around him, turning the family motto on its head: he can only seem, rather than be.

☝ “You’re joking.”

“I’m not, I swear I’m not. I wanted to wait until I was sure it was the right thing to ask, the right thing to do, and I’m sure now. It’s important.”

“What do you mean? Important how?”

“I know you’re supposed to come with us. I know that part for certain.”

Related Characters: Poppet Murray, Bailey Clarke (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 356

Explanation and Analysis

Poppet has come to the Clarke family farm to speak with Bailey. He is confused and skeptical because she is coming to ask Bailey to leave home and join the circus. Poppet has been having visions of a disastrous end to the circus, in which the bonfire goes out, and in her visions, it is Bailey that saves them by relighting it. While her visions had been unclear, and Poppet wasn’t sure exactly how Bailey was involved, she is now sure that he must come with them if the circus is to survive.

Bailey has been struggling with his family’s conflicting plans for his future, in which his opinion has not held much weight. He feels stuck in this life on the farm in Massachusetts, and the circus has provided him with a much-needed escape. The idea of leaving his life entirely, however, is more than he can grasp at the moment, which is why he asks if Poppet is joking. Yet Poppet has come to talk to him before he visits the circus that evening in order to give him time to think about the decision, effectively acknowledging his agency in choosing his own future. As much as she needs him to come with her, she will not force him, and he will need to make the decision on her own.

☝ “Staying here won’t make me happy. It will make you happy because you are insipid and boring, and an insipid, boring life is enough for you. It’s not enough for me. It will never be enough for me. So I’m leaving.”

Related Characters: Bailey Clarke (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

Bailey has decided to leave home and join the circus. He has waited until his parents are asleep, and left them a note to say goodbye. He is startled by the sound of his sister’s voice, asking him what he thinks he is doing. She is standing in the doorway in her nightgown, and he asks her to have their parents read the note. Mockingly, she asks if he is running away, and he tells her that he is. They argue, with Caroline telling him that he has been a baby all week, and that he should grow up. Bailey responds that he is growing up, and he doesn’t expect her to understand.

This statement outlines the basic differences between the siblings: Caroline is content with their life on the farm—their grandmother had originally suggested that she go to college, and she dismissed it out of lack of interest—but Bailey is looking for something bigger and better.

☝ “She will win. Do not try to avoid the fact that she is a stronger player than yours and has always been.”

Related Characters: Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter (speaker), Celia Bowen, Alexander / Mr. A.H.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 383

Explanation and Analysis

Hector and Mr. A.H. are discussing the competition during the immediate aftermath of the death of Herr Friedrich Thiessen. Neither man is concerned about the death of the beloved clockmaker, who is still lying on the ground only a few hundred feet away from them. They both consider this a distraction from the competition itself, which is their only real concern. Mr. A.H. notes, however, that the circus is too exposed as a venue, while Hector considers it fun. Hector also says that the circus keeps the competitors apart, and if they were in the same city, Celia would have won the competition already.

This sparks a discussion about which player is stronger and more likely to win: Hector asserts that Celia has always been the stronger one, and that Mr. A.H. should have chosen a player he was willing to lose. In response, Mr. A.H. amplifies the sounds of Celia sobbing over Thiessen’s dead body, noting that her cries do not sound like strength to him.

He mentions how important Thiessen is to Celia, and that his death may break her spirit. While all of this may be true, their conversation reveals more about the two men than it does about their students: even in the face of tragedy, they are singularly focused on the competition and their own interests, effectively ignoring the damage they are doing to those around them.

“I tried. I thought I might be able to fix it. I’ve known him so long. That maybe it would be like setting a clock to make it tick again. I knew exactly what was wrong but I couldn’t make it right. He was so familiar but it... it didn’t work.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen (speaker), Marco Alisdair, Friedrich Thiessen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 385

Explanation and Analysis

Celia has come to Marco’s flat after leaving Friedrich Thiessen at the circus. She shows up covered in his blood, and when Marco asks her what happened, she tells him that she tried to keep the clockmaker alive but was unsuccessful. Chandresh Lefevre threw a knife, intending to kill Mr. A.H., but he hit Thiessen instead; it pierced his chest, and there was probably nothing more anyone could do. Celia, however, did everything she could do fix him, hoping that her magic could undo the damage to his body.

Celia’s magic has its limits: she is able to put inanimate objects back together, and can even heal her own wounds, but even as a young girl, when she would try to fix wounded birds, she could not do it. She compares Thiessen to a clock, which brings to mind the time that she fixed one of the broken timepieces in his studio; but living beings are so much more complex, and as Lainie Burgess once warned her, they are not so easily put back together.

Part 4: Incendiary Quotes

“You are willing to sacrifice me for this. To let me destroy myself just so you can attempt to prove a point. You tied me to this game knowing the stakes, and you let me think it was nothing but a simple challenge of skill.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen (speaker), Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 397-398

Explanation and Analysis

Celia has just left Marco’s flat after spending the night with him for the first time. As she leaves, her father appears in the hallway, calling her a slut and shaming her for falling in love with her opponent. They discuss the competition, and Celia begins to realize the horrible truth about it: there is no declaration of a winner, because the competition ends when one of the competitors dies. Of course, he has known this fact all along, yet he has not bothered to inform her, letting her think it was just a game of skill.

This realization is painful to Celia for two reasons: first of all, she has already fallen in love with Marco, and is now faced with the knowledge that for her to succeed, her lover must die. Perhaps more emotionally difficult, however, is the fact that her own father has chosen to enter her in a competition that may well end in her death. From the very beginning, Hector has acted only in his own interests, and has no qualms about exploiting the people close to him for his own benefit.

“Do you love him?”

“I do.”

“Do you believe he loves you? Love is fickle and fleeting. It is rarely a solid foundation for decisions to be made upon, in any game.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen, Tsukiko (speaker), Marco Alisdair

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

Celia has come to speak with Tsukiko on the circus train, after learning from her father that Tsukiko was the winner of the previous competition. The two women share their scars, and Celia asks her why she has joined the circus, and why she never told her that she, too, was a competitor.

Tsukiko gives only vague answers, as usual, but acknowledges that the competition is more than just the magic each competitor produces, and that it becomes something they carry within themselves.

Tsukiko then asks Celia if she loves Marco, and if she

believes he loves her. This second question plants a dangerous seed of doubt in Celia's mind, even as she insists that he does love her. Tsukiko notes that Isobel also thought that Marco loved her, and that this belief led her to join the circus to help him with the competition. She suggests that Marco may simply be good at manipulating those around him, which strikes a chord in Celia, because her father did the same thing with her mother, driving her to take her own life. This nagging doubt will stay with Celia for a long time, and will nearly tear the competitors apart.

☞ “You said there was a rule about interference.”
 “Interfering with you or your opponent. I can interfere with anyone else as much as I please.”
 “Your *interfering* got Friedrich killed!”
 “There are other clockmakers in the world.”

Related Characters: Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter, Celia Bowen (speaker), Friedrich Thiessen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 426

Explanation and Analysis

Celia is working in her room, trying to understand the magic in Marco's notebook, when her father appears and they begin to discuss the competition. Hector mentions Chandresh, and suddenly Celia puts together the pieces in her mind, and realizes that it was Hector who sent Chandresh to try and murder Mr. A.H. at the circus that evening. Hector responds that he did not convince anyone of anything; he simply made a suggestion to a drunk man.

Celia reminds him of the rule—originally put in place by Hector and Mr. A.H.—about interfering with the competition in any way, and that he is responsible for a man's death. Hector's response, that “there are other clockmakers in the world,” illustrates the extent of his self-absorption and callousness. This is particularly painful for Celia, because she and Thiessen developed a strong friendship. Hector then explains to Celia that she should not make connections to other people, as they will all die eventually, and that emotion will take away her power. This advice gives some insight into Hector's lack of empathy and human connection, as he believes that it will make him less of a magician.

☞ “You were not a diversion.”
 “Did you ever love me?”
 “No [...] I thought perhaps I could, but...”

Related Characters: Isobel Martin, Marco Alisdair (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that Marco loves Celia, and that all of his work in the circus has been for her, Isobel decides to leave. She waits for Marco outside his flat in London, and asks if they can go in and talk. He will only talk to her outside on the street, because he just wants to hear what she has to say. She apologizes for many of the things that have happened at the circus in the past year, including the death of Thiessen—she was “tempering,” or holding the circus in balance with her own magic, and didn't tell Marco. She also admits that she cannot hate Celia or even dislike her, because she has always treated Isobel so well. Finally, she notes that the circus has been like a home to her.

Isobel describes herself as a diversion for Marco, and he disagrees, though he notes that he never truly loved her. Isobel acknowledges that while he never told her he loved her, she was hoping that he did anyway, and got carried away by wishful thinking. This conversation has an air of finality to it, as Isobel is trying to come to terms with the feelings she has had, but never expressed, since she met Marco over a decade earlier.

☞ “Our instructors do not understand how it is. To be bound to someone in such a way. They are too old, too out of touch with their emotions. They no longer remember what it is to live and breathe within the world. They think it simple to pit any two people against each other. It is never simple. The other person becomes how you define your life, how you define yourself.”

Related Characters: Tsukiko (speaker), Hector Bowen / Prospero the Enchanter, Alexander / Mr. A.H., Marco Alisdair, Celia Bowen

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 458

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tsukiko is discussing the competition with Marco, who has been magically transported back into the circus from his home in London. She reveals to him that she, too, was Mr. A.H.'s student once, and was also bound in a competition that ended in the tragic death of her opponent. She shares with him her feelings about the deep connection she felt with her rival, something that Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. can no longer understand. Like Marco, she loved her opponent, yet knew that one of them would have to die. While Tsukiko appears to be making a profound connection with Marco in this moment, she will soon reveal the hidden motive in her conversation. As she did with Celia earlier, Tsukiko is manipulating Marco, making him think that she empathizes with his situation, yet she will ultimately try to convince him to take his own life and let Celia win, so that the competition can end and the circus can continue without him. So although her words may be genuine in that she's recounting a very real story and the real emotions behind it, she is using this moment of empathy in order to get Marco to step into the fire and die, just as her competitor did.

☛ “You told me love was fickle and fleeting.”

“I lied. I thought it might be easier if you doubted him. And I gave you a year to find a way for the circus to continue without you. You have not. I am stepping in.”

Related Characters: Tsukiko, Celia Bowen (speaker), Marco Alisdair

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 461

Explanation and Analysis

While Tsukiko is talking with Marco, attempting to convince him to kill himself and let Celia win the competition, Celia interrupts their conversation. Tsukiko suggests that Celia leave, so that she can be alone with Marco, but Celia refuses, asking what is about to happen. Tsukiko notes that she has watched Marco and Celia fall in love, and it reminds her of her love for her opponent. She wants Marco to sacrifice himself, because Celia is more essential to the circus, as she holds it within herself.

Celia is confused, and feels betrayed by Tsukiko, who intentionally led her to believe that Marco did not love her. Tsukiko admits that she was trying to make Celia doubt

Marco because she felt it would be easier for them to separate. Tsukiko is taking charge of the situation, because she feels that Celia has been unable to resolve the issue on her own. Marco, meanwhile, has always loved Celia, and is willing to sacrifice himself for her. It is in this moment that Celia realizes the strength of his love for her, and finally stops doubting him.

☛ “But I’m not [...] special. Not in the way they are. I’m not anyone important.”

“I know. You’re not destined or chosen, I wish I could tell you that you were if that would make it easier, but it’s not true. You’re in the right place at the right time, and you care enough to do what needs to be done. Sometimes that’s enough.”

Related Characters: Celia Bowen, Bailey Clarke (speaker), Widget Murray, Poppet Murray

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 478-479

Explanation and Analysis

After deciding to leave home and traveling to Boston and then to New York, Bailey has arrived at the circus just in time to find that the bonfire has gone out, and the circus has been suspended while Celia looks for a new caretaker. This is what Poppet has envisioned for so long, and so Celia knows that it is Bailey who is supposed to re-light the fire and carry the circus within him. But Poppet is suspended within the circus, and it is Celia who has to explain this situation to Bailey, who is unsure that he is the right person to shoulder such a significant responsibility.

Celia is honest with Bailey, agreeing that he is not special and has no magical powers to speak of, but that he is the right person to do the job because he deeply loves the circus and will take care of it. She is not willing to lie to him or trick him into doing this work, because she believes that he needs to make his own, well-informed decision. This sense of agency is important to both characters, as Bailey has struggled with the competing desires of his father and grandmother, and Celia’s entire life has been predestined by Hector and Mr. A.H. Consequently, Celia simply asks him to decide whether or not he will be the one to take over the circus.

Part 5: Divination Quotes

☞ “I’m not going to give you your memory back. I don’t know if I could even if I tried, though Widget could probably manage it. At this point, I don’t think you need that weight on you. I think looking forward will be better than looking back.”

Related Characters: Poppet Murray (speaker), Lainie Burgess, Ethan Barris, Bailey Clarke, Widget Murray, Chandresh Lefevre

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 498

Explanation and Analysis

Poppet has come to talk to Chandresh about the circus, because she, Widget, and Bailey are planning on taking it over, now that Bailey has reignited the bonfire. Chandresh was the one who originally conceived of the idea of the circus, and this is a significant moment that marks a new era for them all. He agrees to sign over the circus to them, noting that Ethan Barris and Lainie Burgess are still involved, and accepting Poppet’s assurances that Bailey will also take good care of the circus.

After they have conducted their business, Poppet gives Chandresh a cat as a gift, and tells him that she will not restore any of the memories he has lost during the running of the circus. Chandresh only has a few vague memories of the circus, and while some of his memory loss may have been due to his excessive drinking, most of it was because Marco erased it to protect him from the truth about the circus. Now, Poppet has chosen to help him focus on the future and on other projects.

☞ “You think being imprisoned marvelous?”

“It’s a matter of perspective. They have each other. They are confined within a space that is remarkable, one that can, and will, grow and change around them.”

Related Characters: Widget Murray, Alexander / Mr. A.H. (speaker), Marco Alisdair, Celia Bowen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 502

Explanation and Analysis

Widget is in Paris to ask Mr. A.H. to sign away his control of the circus, and in this passage they are discussing the fate of Marco and Celia, who are now living within the circus after jumping into the bonfire together. Celia used a spell similar to the one her father used decades earlier, but she used the circus as a touchstone, and so she and Marco now live in a suspended state that Widget describes as “marvelous.” Mr. A.H. is skeptical, and characterizes it as imprisonment, because neither can leave the circus. Widget, on the other hand, presumes they are happy simply because they are together, and they have chosen this path for themselves, rather than having it thrust upon them by someone else like the competition was.

This conversation illustrates the basic values that separate Mr. A.H. from his student. Widget describes their situation as “marvelous” because the circus provides Marco and Celia with a home, a community, and a sense of belonging, just as it did when they were alive. Yet, as Mr. A.H.’s response to their situation demonstrates, he does not value connections with others, and is focused on a more individual set of values, like freedom and autonomy. This gives further and final context to the self-centered nature of his actions throughout the novel.

☞ “You’d be better off letting the whole endeavor fade away into myth and oblivion. All empires fall eventually. It is the way of things. Perhaps it is time to let this one go.”

“I’m afraid I’m unwilling to do that.”

Related Characters: Widget Murray, Alexander / Mr. A.H. (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 506

Explanation and Analysis

Widget has come to ask Mr. A.H. to sign over control of the circus, separating it completely from the competition and allowing it to continue indefinitely. Mr. A.H. does not seem to have any strong emotional connection to the circus, now that Celia and Marco are no longer competing against one another, which was his sole interest in the venue in the first place. He does, however, advise Widget to let the circus go, reinforcing the fact that he does not see its inherent value beyond the competition.

Widget is not interested in this suggestion, as it is myopic and self-centered: Mr. A.H. clearly has not been capable of recognizing the central role the circus has played in the lives

of those working there, nor does he understand the community it has provided for the throngs of *rêveurs* who have loyally followed the circus for years. He attempts to portray himself as older and wiser than Widget, and while he may have seen empires rise and fall in his longer-than-

usual lifespan, Mr. A.H. has little real wisdom to offer. Eventually, he will relinquish control of the circus, and in the hands of a younger generation with less selfish intentions, *Le Cirque des Rêves* will flourish for decades, if not centuries, into the future.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: PRIMORDIUM

The circus arrives unannounced with its black and white tents and the sign that reads, “Opens at Nightfall. Closes at Dawn.” As a crowd draws near at dusk, the lights come on to read *Le Cirque des Rêves*, and the doors open.

New York, 1873: Prospero the Enchanter finishes his magic show to find a five-year-old girl waiting for him with a note pinned to her chest. The girl is his daughter, Celia, and the note is from her mother, who has just committed suicide. He reads the note, unmoved. He considers the girl, telling her that her mother should have named her Miranda, but that she wasn't clever enough to think of it. Angered, the little girl begins shaking the teacups on the table with her mind. “You might be interesting,” he says to her. A few months later, Prospero (whose real name is Hector Bowen) writes a letter to an old friend.

London, 1873: Hector and Celia meet with a mysterious man in a gray suit, whom Hector calls Alexander, although that is not his real name. First, the man criticizes Hector for passing off real magic as illusion, and then the men get down to business. Hector asks Celia to demonstrate her magical skills for the man, and at first she is reluctant, as Hector has told her in the past to keep her magic a secret. However, she impresses Alexander with her abilities: she levitates a pocket watch and then shatters it with her mind. The two men agree to a competition, pitting Celia against the competitor of Alexander's choosing. Alexander places a **ring** on Celia's finger, which shrinks and burns itself into her finger, leaving a scar.

The two magicians then discuss details of the competition and decide on a venue. Hector mentions that he knows of a theatrical producer named Chandresh Lefevre who could organize something appropriate. Alexander is uncomfortable with a public setting, but he finally relents, and the men also decide to have as few rules as possible, hoping to “push boundaries with this one.” Alexander is given the first move.

*The opening of the novel prepares the reader for the visual stimulation of *Le Cirque des Rêves*, which is both enchanting because of its stark beauty and because it is infused with real magic.*



This first meeting between Prospero (Hector) and his daughter sets the tone for their relationship going forward. He is completely uninterested in her as a person, and can only view her as a valuable tool in his rivalry with his friend and fellow magician. Magic will be the only thing that connects Celia to her father throughout her life, and this initial anger she feels towards him will always be a central part of that relationship as well. Meanwhile, the comment about how Celia should have been named “Miranda” is an allusion to Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#), in which Miranda is the daughter of an enchanter named Prospero.



This meeting between Hector, Alexander (Mr. A.H.), and Celia sets in motion the magical competition that is at the center of the narrative. The rivalry between these two men is intense, as Mr. A.H. begins by criticizing the way Hector uses his magic. Yet this does not daunt Hector, who is determined to show off his daughter's skills to a fellow magician. Neither man asks Celia if she would like to be part of a competition, and instead, Mr. A.H. scars her to bind her to something she is too young to understand.



Once again, Celia is given no voice in the competition that will soon take over her life; Hector and Mr. A.H. make all of the decisions as if Celia is not even in the room, let alone at the core of the competition itself. Many of the men's choices, such as the lack of formal rules in the competition, will have a profound impact on Celia's life.



Alexander, whose name is really Mr. A.H., goes to a London orphanage to choose a child as his competitor. When he is presented with a nine-year-old boy with dark hair, the man throws his cane at the child, who catches it without flinching. Mr. A.H. chooses him as his new apprentice and tells him that they will leave right away. The boy asks if he has a choice, and Mr. A.H. responds by asking him if he wants to stay at the orphanage. He doesn't want to stay, so they leave together. When the boy asks if the man wants to know his name, Mr. A.H. responds that the boy's name "will not be necessary."

1875-1880: Both Celia and the nameless boy go through a series of lessons in magic. Celia travels all over the United States and Europe with Hector for his magic shows, though he mainly abandons her in hotels or backstage. His lessons are irregular and unorthodox: Hector has Celia fix broken things with her mind, and he even slices her fingers open so she can heal herself, but Celia learns that she cannot repair living beings. He does not give her any information about the competition, however.

The boy lives in isolation with Mr. A.H. and studies from books and lectures, sometimes leaving the house to visit museums and libraries during off-hours, and occasionally to attend magic shows. Finally, one day the man gives the boy a **ring**, just as he did with Celia, and it shrinks and burns into his finger, as well. Mr. A.H. tells the boy that he is bound to "an obligation" and to someone he hasn't met yet. The boy wonders who it is, but knows not to ask.

1884: At 19, the boy is living in his own flat in London and spends most of his time reading or taking long walks though the city. One evening he loses his notebook while out in the city, and he goes back to find a young woman reading it earnestly. He introduces himself as Marco Alisdair, the name he has chosen for himself, and she tells him her name is Isobel Martin, though he doubts that is her real name. They go out for a drink, and Isobel tells him that she understands some of the magic contained in his notebook; she herself can read tarot cards. Marco decides to show her some of his magic, which entrances her. He manipulates her perception of the world around her, so that the two of them are no longer on a rainy London street, but in a warm, glowing forest. They kiss.

While Hector found a suitable competitor in his own daughter, taking advantage of the innate magical abilities that she inherited from him, Mr. A.H. believes that he can find the right person and train them. The boy he chooses seems confused but also ready to leave the orphanage for a new life, whatever that will entail. Mr. A.H. establishes both his authority and his emotional distance, telling the boy he does not even want to learn his name.



There are some parallels between the training that Celia and the boy receive from their respective teachers: they both suffer from a great deal of isolation, as their teachers focus obsessively on preparing them for the mysterious competition that lies ahead. Celia also suffers some level of physical abuse from her father, under the guise of teaching her to use her magic to heal herself.



The boy's training is less physical and more intellectual, as he develops his magical skills through reading, research, and observing established magicians. When Mr. A.H. decides that the boy (later called Marco) is ready to be a competitor, he burns the ring into Marco's finger, like he did with Celia, again without taking Marco's desires into consideration in any way.



Marco Alisdair is now a young adult, living on his own in London and continuing his studies on his own. Mr. A.H. never spent much time with the boy outside of his lectures, but now the man is nowhere to be found, leaving Marco completely alone. It is in this context that he meets Isobel, a young woman who is also alone in the world, and seems to understand or at least accept his magical studies. He dazzles her with his manipulations, and she provides him with a human connection. This is also the first time he uses his chosen name, taking on his new adult identity.



Hector Bowen has retired from the stage and has devoted himself full-time to training Celia and hiring her out as a spiritual medium. Celia finds the experience excruciating and argues that it is not worth the money her customers pay. Her father restricts her food to keep her thin and waif-like, and she is working so hard that, one day, she faints during a session. Her father finally relents and lets her rest for three days. She wonders about the competition, but he offers her no information except that she will need to practice before beginning.

Back in Marco's flat, Marco shows Isobel a magic charm involving knots and intent. He asks her to think of an item that is important to her, and then reads her mind—she is thinking of a **ring**, an engagement ring from an arranged marriage that she managed to escape in Barcelona. Their conversation is interrupted by a knock at the door.

Isobel hides in the study while Marco answers the door. Mr. A.H. does not enter, but stands in the doorway to inform Marco that he will be applying for a position with Chandresh Lefevre, a theater producer, and Marco recognizes that this is the beginning of the competition. Mr. A.H. mentions that the young man needs a name, to which Marco responds that he has already chosen one. Finally, Mr. A.H. reminds him, looking pointedly at the door of the study, that he should focus on the competition and avoid distractions.

Hector eventually decides to stay in New York rather than traveling with Celia, and he spends most of his time alone, locked in the parlor. One day Celia breaks into the room to find him working on a trick. His hand fades and then returns; he looks up at her and tells her it is none of her business what he is doing, and then slams the door in her face.

Chandresh Lefevre is in his home, throwing a knife across the room at a dartboard covered with a newspaper clipping. The clipping is a review of Lefevre's recent production, which was described as "almost transcendent." The producer is incensed at the word "almost," which to him is a sign of failure. He throws the knife for the last time, and then calls for Marco, his assistant.

Meanwhile, Hector Bowen continues to use his daughter for his own benefit. Instead of passing off magic as stage tricks, he is now able to have Celia pass off her magic as a spiritual connection with the dead. She hates the work, but again, she has no choice in the matter—her father is in control of her life, and even controls her body by severely restricting her eating. He only relents when she is physically unable to continue working—that is, when she can no longer benefit him.



Marco's relationship with Isobel deepens, as he shares his magical knowledge with her. She also gives him some details about her life, including the fact that she escaped an arranged marriage and is, in essence, running away from her past.



As he will do frequently throughout the novel, Mr. A.H. works behind the scenes like a puppeteer: he has arranged for Marco to work of the man who will plan the circus, which will be the venue for their competition. He signals his emotional distance from Marco by standing in the doorway to talk, and by criticizing Marco for his budding relationship with Isobel, which is not part of the competition.



Hector is attempting to use very complex and dangerous magic in search of immortality. Though it would be a good idea to talk about this with Celia, he shuts her out, literally and figuratively.



Chandresh's first appearance in the novel, throwing a knife across the room, foreshadows an incident later in the novel, when he does the same thing at the circus and accidentally kills an innocent man. His call for Marco indicates that the boy has followed Mr. A.H.'s orders and taken on this new job.



Concord, MA, 1897: A young boy named Bailey sits in an oak tree with his sister and their friends, playing Truth or Dare. On his turn, his sister dares him to break into the Night Circus. He agrees, recalling his previous night's experience at the circus, noting that it was like "he had escaped his everyday life and wandered into another world." He squeezes through the fence and wanders through the circus grounds until he comes upon a young girl with bright red hair. She tells him that he is not supposed to be there and helps him leave again. Before he goes, he asks for something to bring back as proof that he snuck in. The girl gives him one of her white gloves, calling him Bailey as he leaves the grounds. He only realizes once he is far from the circus that he never told the girl his name.

Bailey has already been charmed by the otherworldliness of the circus, but it is this daytime visit—while the circus is closed to outsiders—that will make the greatest impression on him. Specifically, it is the red-haired girl, who somehow knows his name, who will draw him back to the circus years later. Their first meeting also presents some irony in the story: while in this scene she asks Bailey to leave the circus because he does not belong, years later the same girl will come to invite him to join the circus, because it is where he is meant to be.



London, 1885: Chandresh Lefevre is known for his exclusive and extravagant Midnight Dinners. This one is different, though, because he invites a select group to help him design and execute a new kind of circus: there is Ethan Barris, who is an engineer and architect, as well as Tara and Lainie Burgess, who "do a little bit of everything" and will be indispensable for their keen eye for detail. There is also Mr. A.H., whose role in the circus is not specified. Once the guests are ready, Chandresh explains his plan and lays out sketches and notes. The guests are enthusiastic, and they all get down to work.

This first Midnight Dinner and planning party brings together some of the secondary characters of the novel: the organizers of the circus, most of whom have no magical abilities and are under the impression that they are simply planning a new and groundbreaking form of entertainment. Mr. A.H. is in attendance, however, and he will maintain a certain amount of quiet control over the circus throughout the novel.



Meanwhile, in New York, Celia Bowen is opening sympathy cards and flowers in memory of her father Hector, who has been announced dead of heart failure. There are letters mentioning his beautiful daughter, and some even include strange proposals of marriage. Celia notes sarcastically that she is already married, touching the ring that Mr. A.H. placed on her finger. She receives one card that only states, "Your move." Confused, she goes to find her father, who is not dead—he is in a state of half-life, only partially visible to others, not unlike a ghost—and asks what it means. Hector only laughs.

The dangerous magic trick that Hector attempted went horribly wrong, forcing him into a state of half-life and forcing Celia to publicly announce his death. Her sarcastic comment that she is already married is a reminder that she has been bound to someone without her consent, though she still does not know to whom. The competition will begin soon, however, since the cryptic note is from Mr. A.H., to let Hector know that the venue will soon be open.



Chandresh conducts his Midnight Dinners about once a month to coordinate the details of his circus project. One evening, a heavily tattooed contortionist named Tsukiko arrives without warning and begins to perform for those in attendance. Chandresh hires her immediately, explaining that she is exactly what he wants for the circus.

Tsukiko the contortionist appears from out of nowhere, with no explanation as to how she knew about the dinner or the circus. She will also exert some subtle control over the circus from behind the scenes, and will help define the future of the circus itself.



In Munich, Ethan Barris meets with a clockmaker, Friedrich Thiessen, to commission a special clock for the circus. He explains that he wants something beyond what Thiessen has ever made before, “*das Meisterwerk*.” Barris specifies that it should be dreamlike, and that money is no issue. Thiessen creates a black-and-white clock that is perfect for the circus, according to Barris, and receives enough money to retire on. The clockmaker does not ask where the clock will be used, and he never thinks to go and visit it.

Both Friedrich Thiessen and the clock he makes for the circus will become emblematic of the venue. He is already a master craftsman, but when given a vague but inspiring request, he creates a true masterwork, which every visitor to the circus will see on their way in. While Thiessen does not wonder about his work and where it is being used, news of the masterful clock will reach him, years later.



London, 1886: The circus organizers are holding auditions for an illusionist, and Celia Bowen is one of the candidates. Marco is supervising the auditions, and when he sees Celia for the first time, he is struck by her beauty. Chandresh comments that she looks too young and pretty to be an illusionist, suggesting that she could be a lovely assistant. Celia simply mentions that she has studied with her father, Prospero the Enchanter, which impresses Chandresh enough to let her audition. She turns Marco’s notebook into a white dove, which takes flight across the theater, and changes the color of her dress in front of Chandresh’s eyes. Chandresh hires her immediately and has Marco dismiss the rest of the candidates. He expresses his condolences for her father’s death and asks what happened to him. Celia only responds that his most recent magic trick “did not go entirely as planned.”

All of the planning for the circus comes down to this moment, when Celia auditions to become the illusionist, therefore bringing both players together in a venue that was secretly designed for their competition. All of this is unknown to Chandresh, however, who believes that he is in control of the circus and these auditions. He nearly dismisses Celia out of hand, based on her youth and beauty, but gives her a chance when he hears who her father is. Like her father, Celia is passing off real magic as illusion, which will be one of her major contributions to the circus.



Marco is visibly shaken by his meeting with Celia, and Chandresh sends him home. He hurries back to search his books to try to understand how Celia performed her magic, and he ends up telling Isobel what happened. He has just realized that Celia is his opponent, and the circus is the venue for their competition. He is worried, however, because she is “too good.” Meanwhile, Isobel draws a single card from her tarot deck to reveal *l’amoureux*, the lovers. Wanting to help Marco, Isobel offers to join the circus as a fortune-teller and keep watch over Celia, writing to Marco as often as she can.

Marco’s first encounter with Celia is upsetting to him for two reasons: he is first struck by her beauty, and then amazed by her magical abilities. Recognizing her as his rival, and a formidable one at that, Marco grows concerned about how he can win the competition. Isobel, on the other hand, can already foresee—thanks to her tarot cards—that these two may fall in love, and her offer to watch over Celia is partially in her own interest.



Concord, MA 1902: Bailey, the young boy who snuck into the circus, is at the center of a family disagreement. His grandmother wants him to go to Harvard, while his father is determined that he will inherit and take over the family farm. Originally, his grandmother wanted his younger sister to attend Radcliffe College, but their father had said no, and his sister gave in immediately. Their grandmother changed her plans, deciding that Bailey would go to Harvard, inviting him to have tea with her in Cambridge on a regular basis.

Bailey’s family is determined to decide his future for him, and the young boy has little to no control over the decisions. In addition, the adults in his life are not concerned with what is best for Bailey, but rather focusing on their own self-interest. His grandmother just wants one of the children to be near her in Cambridge, while his father decrees that his son must take over the farm.



Bailey would like to attend Harvard, and he discusses this with his mother and father, to no avail. At one of their teas, Bailey's grandmother tells him she just wants him to have the opportunity to chase his dreams, whether they be Harvard or something else. His father, however, tells him he has no choice in the matter, and Bailey begins to spend as much time away from his home and family as possible. He is hiding out in the oak tree when he looks up and sees that the circus has returned.

Bailey seems to be inclined towards adventure and escape from the monotony of farm life, which does not seem to emotionally fulfill him. His grandmother inspires him by telling him to follow his dreams, advice that Bailey takes to heart. Too young to leave home yet, however, Bailey must find refuge in his own places outside of the house, including the oak tree, which incidentally gives him a good view of the circus when it is in town.



PART 2: ILLUMINATION

London, 1886: The circus is finally opening, and at midnight on October 14, twelve fire performers light the central **bonfire**. Opening night is a success, and the only strange event is that the wild-cat tamer goes into labor. She delivers a set of twins: Winston Aidan Murray is born six minutes before midnight on the 13th, and Penelope Aislin Murray is born at 12:07 on the 14th. They are known among the circus members as Widget and Poppet. They stay awake for much of the night, surprisingly alert for babies just a few hours old. In the morning, the twins fall asleep in the black wrought-iron cradle that someone has sent for them. No one knows who sent the gift, and it has no card or note, but they all just assume it was Chandresh.

The opening of the circus is a major event, and the hard work that the organizers have put in—even those not associated with the competition—is paying off, as the circus is truly an amazing spectacle. The ceremonial lighting of the bonfire marks it as a central element of the circus, although very few are aware of just how essential it is. The timing of the twins' birth, on either side of midnight, will be significant, as Widget will go on to see the past, while Poppet will see the future.



In the meantime, Marco is nervous and impatient for the lighting of the **bonfire**, which he has organized. Ever since learning that the circus is the venue for the competition, Marco has taken more responsibility for things, and he is convinced that the bonfire will be his strongest tie to the circus. Right before the lighting of the fire, Marco takes out a small notebook, a copy of which is locked in his office. He tosses the notebook into the cauldron right before the fire performers take their places.

Marco's relationship with the circus as the venue for the competition is complex: while Celia will be able to showcase her magical skills, Marco must work behind the scenes. The bonfire is his first significant magical contribution, as the notebook he throws into the fire will provide protection for all of the performers and organizers.



Celia, for her part, is enjoying the first night of performances, and she feels much more comfortable than she expected. Close to midnight, she is swept up in the excitement of the birth of the twins, and she helps out by bring tea and reassuring people that it will be fine. And although she is nowhere near the **bonfire**, she can feel the lighting before she hears the applause; it nearly knocks her off her feet, and Tsukiko has to keep her steady. Celia knows that her competitor has made a move, and she wonders how she should retaliate.

Marco and Celia soon find that they are deeply connected to one another, and in this moment, although she does not know the identity of her opponent, Celia can feel Marco's magic as the bonfire is lit. She considers her next move in the competition, and it seems that both Marco and Celia are nervous about competing, especially as neither knows the rules of the game.



Chandresh spends opening night walking around the circus, making small tweaks to what is already a breathtaking show. Right before midnight, he looks for Marco but cannot find him, and he bumps into the Burgess sisters, Tara and Lainie, instead. They watch the lighting of the **bonfire**, and when the clock strikes midnight, Chandresh begins to feel dizzy and unsettled. Just at that moment, Marco arrives and the sisters ask him for help. Marco tells them it's probably nothing, and he ushers Chandresh away. Concerned, the sisters comment to each other that they really know nothing about Marco.

Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey waits anxiously for the sun to set so that he can go to the circus again. In the evening, Bailey announces that he is going to the circus, and while he is required to invite his sister, he ends up going on his own. He worries that it will feel childish, but he realizes that there are many older children and adults waiting in line with him. He starts by having an apple cider, and although he lives on an apple orchard, he finds that nothing has ever tasted this good. He watches the contortionist (Tsukiko), even though it is almost painful to see, as she folds herself into a small box and closes the lid. It then fills with white smoke until it breaks open, with no one inside.

Bailey walks into a tent promising "Feats of Illustrious Illusion" and sits down. He notices a woman appear next to him, though he cannot understand how she got in. Then, suddenly, the empty chair across from him bursts into flames. The woman sitting next to him winks at him, stands, unbuttons her coat and throws it at the burning chair. It becomes a long strip of black silk that extinguishes the flames immediately. She pulls the fabric off the chair to reveal doves, and then folds the silk into a top hat, which she places on her head. The rest of the performance is equally amazing, and she finishes by simply disappearing from the tiny tent. As Bailey leaves the tent, he sees a figure on a platform, dressed completely in white, moving almost imperceptibly. She is standing on a platform with a plaque that simply says, "In Memoriam."

Marco's only opportunity to see Mr. A.H., his guardian and teacher, is at the Midnight Dinners at Chandresh's house, and the magician is attending those infrequently. Anxious to find out how he is doing in the competition, Marco calls for Mr. A.H. the only way he knows how: by drawing a set of symbols in the frost on his window, all of which form the shape of an A. His teacher arrives the next day, unhappy about the invitation. Marco asks him how he is progressing, and he responds that his work has been "sufficient." Marco says he doesn't understand the rules, and Mr. A.H. says that he doesn't need to. He then tells Marco not to call him again like that, and leaves.

Chandresh still believes that he is completely in charge of the circus, and that Marco is nothing more than his assistant. He does not suspect that Marco is infusing the bonfire with magic in order to protect the circus, or that it is secretly the venue for the competition between Celia and Marco. To keep him unaware, Marco has placed Chandresh under some sort of spell, which often makes him feel dizzy or discombobulated.



A few years older than the last time the circus was in town, Bailey worries that he will not find the circus as enchanting as when he was younger. Not surprisingly, however, Bailey finds that it is as appealing to adults as to young children, and is seduced by the way the circus can improve on even the most familiar aspects of his life, like the apple cider he has tasted so many times on the orchard. He also watches the contortionist, Tsukiko, perform something close to magic.



Bailey's first experience in the illusionist's tent is spectacular, and reveals Celia's incredible showmanship and magical abilities. Again, she is performing real magic, and the audience is left to wonder how she managed to make it all happen; in addition, because the tent is small and cozy, she is able to make a personal connection with her audience, like appearing next to Bailey and winking at him. Celia is clearly enjoying her work, beyond her concerns about the competition. The memorial Bailey sees outside of the tent is dedicated to Tara Burgess, one of the circus organizers who has died a few years earlier.



As the competition has gotten underway, both Celia and Marco are concerned with their progress, and have no information about what is happening or which one of them is winning. Mr. A.H. has established himself as distant and obsessed with control, so it is no surprise that when Marco calls for him, he is annoyed and reluctant to offer him any useful information. Marco is in a difficult place: he is obligated to participate in a competition, yet no one will tell him the rules or how he is being evaluated.



Meanwhile, at the circus, Celia is standing in front of the Carousel when Hector appears to tell her that he does not like it at all. She disagrees, and he tells her she is being reckless because he is only a ghost. She reminds him that he did it to himself, so he cannot blame her. He changes the subject, asking her how much she has told Mr. Barris, the engineer. Celia responds that she has told him as much as he needs to know to help her, and she asks if Mr. Barris is her opponent. He is not, but Hector still considers the collaboration a bad idea, telling her that “working with others will only drag [her] down.”

Celia wants to know who her opponent is, but Hector insists that the opponent’s identity doesn’t matter. She responds that it matters to her, and that she believes he knows who she is. Hector asserts that it is better to do her work without influence from her opponent and without collaborating in any way. Frustrated, Celia asks how she can be judged if she doesn’t know any of the rules. As she talks, the Carousel slows to a stop, with the magical animals looking straight at Hector. Hector lets her know that this is much more than a game, and he tells her to stop asking questions before disappearing.

Marco is frustrated by the letters he gets from Isobel because he wants to know more about Celia than Isobel can possibly tell him. He wants to know about her life, her preferences, her performances, everything. But he cannot ask Isobel these things, and so he simply asks her to write as often as she can.

Celia is excited to visit the new tent, as new tents are rare in the circus. She considers canceling her shows to see it, but she dutifully waits until her work is over, visiting The Ice Garden a little before dawn. There is an addendum to the sign that apologizes for any thermal inconvenience, which Celia finds humorous. The tent’s interior is amazing: everything is sparkling and white, and the air feels magical, giving Celia a shiver that she cannot attribute to the drop in temperature alone. Alone in the tent, she explores the flowers and fountains, trees and vines, all made completely of ice. She cannot imagine how much skill it must have taken to create and maintain such a tent, and she wishes she could talk to her opponent about how he made it. She enjoys having the space to herself and stays until the gates to the circus close for the night.

Celia’s father is more communicative with her than Mr. A.H. is with Marco, but she hardly benefits from his frequent visits, as he mainly criticizes her and her choices in the circus. He seems to think that she is rebelling against him, and blames it on the fact that he is not fully alive and cannot control her the way he would like. He takes issue with her attempts to include others in her work, like the collaboration with Mr. Barris.



Like Marco, Celia wants to know more about the competition, but Hector refuses to offer any more information than he has in the past. He criticizes her again for her desire to collaborate, in an attempt to isolate her. Just as she has done since the first time they met, Celia uses her magic to express her anger and frustration towards her father. Hector’s note that this is more than a game points vaguely to the deadly consequences of the competition.



Isobel has become Marco’s eyes and ears within the circus, and he is happy to have someone supporting him in the competition. However, he is already beginning to think of Celia as more than a competitor, and he soon finds that Isobel’s observations are not a real substitute for seeing Celia in person.



Although she will not know for a while who is responsible for the Ice Garden, Celia can feel that this tent is her opponent’s work, and believes that she can get a feel for who this person is through his magic. Just as Marco has begun to realize the complexity of his feelings for Celia, she feels a strong attraction to her opponent, whoever he is. His specialty is the creation of worlds, down to the smallest detail, and Celia appreciates how thorough he is. While their teachers insist that they focus on competing against one another, Marco and Celia are finding that the game is bringing them together through their shared love of magic and the circus.



When the circus comes back around to London again, Isobel comes to Marco's flat to visit. She knocks on the door, and when he opens it she notes that he has changed the locks. He asks why she didn't tell him she was coming to visit, and she responds that she thought he might like the surprise. He does not let her into his flat, and comes out for a walk instead. They go for tea, and he notices something strange on Isobel's wrist. She tries to hide it from him, but it is a bracelet woven with his hair intertwined with hers. He says nothing more, but when she returns to the circus later that evening, the bracelet has disappeared.

Herr Thiessen, the clockmaker, is on holiday in France, visiting vineyards, strolling the countryside, and buying wines to send back home to Munich. He has made clocks for many of the winemakers there and knows them very well. He was visiting one of them when, over a glass of burgundy one evening, the winemaker mentioned that there was an unusual circus a few miles away that Thiessen might enjoy, particularly because of the black-and-white clock that was the circus's centerpiece. The clockmaker is intrigued and decides to attend the circus that very night. He wanders out in the direction that the winemaker indicated, and quickly finds himself in a crowd of people walking in the same direction towards a glowing circus, like moths to a flame.

As Thiessen nears the circus, he recognizes his clock immediately as it looms over the ticket booth. It is just about to strike 7 P.M., and Thiessen stands back to watch the harlequin juggler pull out a seventh ball to mark the hour. He goes to the booth to buy his ticket, and asks the ticket seller whom he might contact about the clock. He explains that he created it, and she refuses to charge him admission to the circus. She gives him a business card with Chandresh's information on it and his address in London. The circus feels comfortable to him, maybe because it fits in so well with the idea he had for the clock. He visits a few tents that evening, drinking eiswine from Canada and watching sword dancers and fire-breathers. He is besotted when he finally leaves that night, and attends twice more before returning to Munich.

Thiessen writes a letter to Chandresh on his return to thank him for giving the clock such a wonderful home. He receives a response some weeks later, expressing appreciation for Thiessen's compliments, and noting that he will be contacted immediately if there is a problem with the clock. The letter does not mention when the circus will return to Germany. Thiessen begins to create a series of black-and-white clocks inspired by the circus, though he believes he does not do the real circus justice in his reproductions.

While the competition is bringing Celia and Marco closer together through their magic, Marco's relationship with Isobel is becoming more complicated and one-sided. She is clearly dedicated to him, but he has shut her out emotionally, which is reflected in the fact that he has changed his locks so she cannot enter his flat. She has made a bracelet from his hair, possibly a magical charm, but he secretly removes it, not wanting her to control their relationship.



Friedrick Thiessen has not thought about the clock he made for Ethan Barris in a long time, and so he is unaware of the impact it has had on visitors to the circus up to this point. When he hears that his clock may be the centerpiece of a traveling circus that happens to be in France, he is curious. This casual moment is the start of an important part of the circus: the development of the rêveurs, a group of devotees who are inspired by Thiessen and his writings about the circus.



Thiessen attends the circus for the first time, feeling a sense of comfort and familiarity already, thus beginning his personal connection to Le Cirque des Rêves. He is treated like a member of the community from the moment he reaches the ticket booth, unable to pay admission because, as the maker of the clock, he belongs to the circus as well. Beyond the magical elements of the competition between Celia and Marco, the circus is enchanting, as the organizers have truly created an escape from daily life, combining marvels from all over the world.



Thiessen's enthusiasm for the circus does not end when he returns to Germany, and when he writes to Chandresh, he hopes to find out when he can attend the circus again. In the meantime, he is inspired by the aesthetics of the circus—which, in their own way, were inspired by the clock he created—and thus begins a new phase of productivity for the clockmaker.



Cairo, 1890: The Murray twins, Widget and Poppet, have their run of the backstage area of the circus, where the performers live together like a family, but they cannot wander into the public areas of the circus without a chaperone. Their father, the wild-cat tamer, insists on this until they are at least eight years old, even though Widget argues that he should consider their combined total age. Celia is chaperoning them this evening, a rare event and one that the twins welcome.

They begin in the Ice Garden, but the twins get impatient and ride the Carousel twice and then get popcorn, though Poppet isn't hungry. Celia asks her if anything is wrong, and she responds vaguely that she doesn't "want the nice lady to die." When Celia presses her for details, Poppet cannot specify much except that she sees things in the stars, and that Widget can see things on people. Celia asks him what he can see on her, and he tells her about a "lady who cries all the time" and a "ghost man with a frilly shirt," before Celia magically makes those visions disappear for Widget.

As Celia digests this new information about Poppet and Widget, she looks past them towards the courtyard and the **bonfire**. The bonfire never goes out; even as the entire circus travels by train, the fire burns steadily in its iron cauldron. Celia is sure that the ceremonial lighting of the fire on opening night set in motion something mysterious and magical that touched everyone in the circus, especially the twins. She then asks Poppet to tell her anything important that she sees; Poppet responds by nodding and, with a serious look on her face, asking for a caramel apple. Widget is out of popcorn, and Celia takes his bag and folds it up until it disappears. She then asks them if they would like to learn to do some of the magic she performs, offering to give them secret lessons when they are a little bit older.

Paris, 1891: Marco shows up at Isobel's tent unannounced, holding a notebook open to a drawing of a tree. He shows her the drawing and demands to know why she didn't tell him about the new tent, the Wishing Tree. She is surprised—Isobel thought maybe it was Marco's creation and wasn't sure whether to write to him about it. She likes it, especially the way wishes are added by lighting candles using ones already lit: "New wishes ignited by old wishes." Marco does not share in her wonder at that moment—he knows that it is Celia's creation and is unnerved. When Isobel asks how he can be certain Celia created it, he replies that he can feel a shift in the air, like the calm before a storm. She then asks if Celia gets that same feeling from his magic, and Marco considers this, pleased by the idea.

Although the circus may feel like a family for many of the performers and organizers, for Poppet and Widget, it is the only family they have known, as they are children of performers and were born on the circus grounds. Celia takes on a maternal role with them, which is interesting, considering that she has been motherless (and effectively fatherless, given that Hector is more of a teacher than a father to her) for most of her life.



This is the first real indication that the twins have developed supernatural powers. Poppet's visions of the future are slightly troubling to her, as she does not completely understand what she is seeing. She is actually foreseeing the death of Tara Burgess, but does not know it yet. When Widget looks at Celia's past to find her mother and father, she feels vulnerable, and closes herself off to him to maintain the privacy she so values.



Once she has learned about the twins' powers, Celia makes the connection between their birth and the bonfire. She realizes the essential role that the bonfire plays in the circus, though she will not find out how important it will become to her life until much later on. She also recognizes how valuable Poppet's visions of the future can be, and this strengthens her relationship with the twins. While Celia was already something of a mother figure to them, her offer to teach them magic will help her keep them close to her, and share information with her, if need be.



Marco's relationship with Isobel continues to deteriorate, as he becomes increasingly focused on Celia, both as an object of attraction and as a rival in the competition. He is angry with Isobel for not letting him know about this new tent, which he is certain is Celia's creation, but Isobel does not have the same intuitive connection to her, and has no idea who created the tent. The feelings he gets when Celia performs new magic are suspiciously intimate, and emphasize the complex combination of rivalry and love that is already blossoming between the two magicians.



Trying to help, Isobel tells Marco that he can do what he wants to the Wishing Tree now that he knows about it. But it doesn't work that way, Marco explains: it is more like a game of chess, and he cannot simply remove her pieces from the board. When Isobel asks what the endgame is, Marco replies that it is actually not like chess at all, but more like a set of scales, with each of them filling up their side in order to tip the scales. Again, Isobel wants to know more, wondering if the scale could break under the weight, and Marco decides that the scales comparison is a bad one, as well.

Frustrated, Isobel asks how long the competition will go on, and Marco says he doesn't know and asks if she would like to leave the circus. She doesn't want to leave, but she wants to understand what is going on, and wants to be as helpful as possible. Marco tells her she is being helpful already, that she is his advantage over Celia. According to Isobel, Celia has not reacted in any perceptible way to the competition. She keeps mostly to herself, reads voraciously, is close to Widget and Poppet, and treats Isobel nicely, as well. She has never done anything out of the ordinary, with the exception of her performances.

Isobel wonders if it is Ethan Barris who created the Wishing Tree. Marco responds that this is beyond the work of impressive mechanics, just as the Carousel must be infused with some of Celia's magic, as well, giving the animals life. Isobel quietly asks if Marco made a wish, a question he ignores. Instead, he asks if Celia still performs on the quarter hour, and plans to go watch her next performance. Before leaving, he sternly tells Isobel to let him know whenever there is a new tent. Isobel tells him she misses him, and Marco leaves without a word. Hours later, Isobel takes out her personal tarot deck and draws a single card. It tells her what she already suspects, and she does not return the card to the deck.

London, 1891: The train arrives in London just after nightfall, and the train cars transform back into circus tents. All of this happens without the help of a crew, although the performers assume there must be unseen stagehands doing some of the work. Once they are set up outside, most of the performers go out to visit friends and enjoy the city. Celia stays behind in her cozy backstage suite, which is filled with books and old furniture, with candles burning on every surface.

This conversation between Marco and Isobel is frustrating for both of them: Isobel desperately wants to help Marco win the competition, yet she does not understand how it works, what he is supposed to do, or how she should be helping. Marco's attempts to explain the competition show that he really doesn't understand either, or at least that he cannot articulate the complexities of it.



Marco's response to Isobel's frustration is telling: he asks her if she would like to leave the circus, revealing his internal desire to have her out of the way. Yet he is conflicted, because he also wants her around to observe Celia. Isobel does not feel she is being useful, as there is not much to tell Marco about Celia. In contrast to Marco's strategizing in the competition, Celia does not seem to be doing anything specific to win the competition.



Isobel is still focused on preserving her tenuous relationship with Marco, doing and saying everything she can to make him happy, despite the fact that he clearly is preoccupied with Celia and the competition. Marco's silence about whether or not he made a wish on the Wishing Tree is one way for him to maintain control over the situation, not letting Isobel know what he is really feeling. His silence when Isobel tells him she misses him is also a way to shut her out, and she begins to realize how he is feeling even before she reads it in her tarot deck.



The circus train perfectly illustrates the ways in which magic is being used in Le Cirque des Rêves behind the scenes, without the other performers or organizers knowing about it. Celia somehow manages to transform the tents into train cars and back again while letting the others believe that there are workers taking care of these monumental tasks.



Tsukiko stops by and invites Celia to join her in a social engagement. Celia agrees, and is pleasantly surprised when they arrive at Chandresh's house. She has never attended one of his Midnight Dinners, and the other guests are surprised but glad to see her there. She feels uncomfortable among people who have known each other for such a long time, but Tsukiko includes her in the conversation, and Mr. Barris pays her so much attention that he is teased about it. Celia secretly commends Mr. Barris's acting—they both act as though they hardly know one another, despite having exchanged letters and spent a lot of time together, collaborating on creations for the circus.

As Celia is enjoying the atmosphere of the Dinner, she notices a movement in the hall and slips out unnoticed to speak to her father, Hector. He chides her for attending a social event, which he considers a misuse of her time and a distraction. He argues that she is losing her focus, while she defends herself by arguing that he does not get to dictate how she spends her every moment. She also notes that the better she knows the people in the Dinner, the better she can manipulate their work. Hector grudgingly agrees, but reminds her not to trust anyone. At that moment, Marco gently informs Celia that dinner is about to begin, and her father vanishes. Aware that it appears that she is talking to herself, Celia explains that she has become distracted by the books in the library.

During the dinner, Celia enjoys her food and observes her fellow guests in an attempt to discern the relationships and feelings between them. Marco maintains a quiet distance from the guests, but the more that Chandresh drinks, the more he watches the handsome young man. She determines that Mr. Barris is in love with Lainie Burgess, though she cannot tell if Lainie knows. Celia finds that Tara Burgess, with her haunted expression, reminds Celia of her own mother.

As the evening goes on, there are lighthearted jokes about unlacing Celia's corset, and even the usually reserved Marco chimes in this time. As Celia leaves with Tsukiko, Marco watches her through the window. He then finishes cleaning up and checks on Chandresh, who mentions Celia only to gauge Marco's reaction. Marco struggles not to react, and they both retire to their rooms. But before Marco goes to his room, he passes by the library, trying to guess what Celia was doing in there alone. He does not notice Hector watching him from the shadows.

Celia's first visit to Chandresh's house for a Midnight Dinner is significant, as she is able to connect with the circus organizers, many of whom she hardly knows. Of course, she has maintained a secret friendship with Mr. Barris, and even let him in on the genuine magic behind the circus, so the two of them enjoy their shared secret. Overall, the dinner provides Celia with a sense of belonging, as she is welcomed as part of the circus family.



Hector Bowen spends much of his time hiding in the shadows, as he is unable to come out and interact with other living beings. Again, his conversation with Celia centers around her desire to be with other people and make human connections, and his insistence that she isolate herself and focus on the competition. She has learned over time, however, and comes up with the valuable idea that she needs to observe the others so that she can manipulate their work. It is clear, however, that Celia is searching for connections and belonging, which are more important to her than the competition and pleasing her father.



The organizers of the circus function as a complex but loving family, and the budding romance between Marco and Celia is not the only emotional entanglement in the story. Despite his deep connection to Celia, Ethan Barris has feelings for Lainie Burgess, and Chandresh has possibly developed some feelings for his attractive young assistant, Marco.



The sense of closeness and intimacy that the Midnight Dinner brings is important, especially for Celia and Marco, who have spent much of their lives in pained isolation, and long to connect with other people. Yet for Marco, the most important connection is to Celia, both as a rival and an object of intense attraction. He is curious about what she was doing in the library, because he still does not know about Hector Bowen's ghostly status.



Herr Thiessen is in Germany when he receives a card informing him that the circus will be outside of Dresden on the 29th of September. He can hardly contain his excitement and spends the day before the circus's arrival wandering around Dresden. When Thiessen finally passes through the gates again, he feels like he is returning home. He goes to the circus nearly every night, and spends his days writing in a journal. He also talks about the circus with others in the local pub, including the editor of the city paper, who convinces Thiessen to show him the journal and, once he has read it, wants to publish excerpts of it in the paper. Thiessen agrees and publishes a number of articles on the circus, which are then published in other German papers, and then translated and published in Sweden, Denmark, France, and London, England.

Thanks to these articles, Thiessen becomes the unofficial leader of a large group of circus fans, who begin to call themselves *rêveurs*. His fellow fans seek him out and often write letters with their own circus stories; some of them commission clocks depicting their favorite parts of the circus. He also inspires their unofficial uniform when he tells some friends that he likes to wear a black coat to the circus, to feel part of the color scheme, and to wear a dash of red to set himself apart from it at the same time. Thus begins their distinctive custom of wearing all black, white, or gray, with a single item of red, like a scarf or hat.

Some of the *rêveurs* follow the circus from location to location, and although the stops are not publicized, certain members receive advance notice and send the news along via small, rectangular cards that announce "The circus is coming..." and note the location, and sometimes the date. Yet even those who do not have the means to travel with the circus are considered *rêveurs*. They provide a sense of community and connection, meeting up at local pubs and waiting for the sun to set and the circus to open. There is something about the circus that stirs their souls and stays with them after it is gone. The circus appreciates these fans, and often they will be waved in without being charged admission, or will receive a free mug of cider or a bag of popcorn.

Thiessen receives dozens of letters from *rêveurs*. He responds to all of them, and some evolve into ongoing correspondences. He receives a letter from a young woman who seems to know the circus more personally than most, and he begins to correspond with Celia Bowen.

It is unclear who sent Thiessen the card informing him of the circus's stop in Germany, but this will be the way in which many of the devoted fans inform each other about upcoming locations, in a kind of internal network. The circus provides Thiessen with a sense of magic, mixed with feelings of home and family, and many other followers will express some of the same feelings about the place. Thiessen's conversation with the editor of the city paper, and his agreement to publish some of his journal entries, is the start of a multinational network of fans, with Thiessen at their center, articulating their devotion to the circus.



The rêveurs, with their specifically chosen color scheme, are a significant addition to the circus's aesthetic: the black and white color scheme is intensified when the circus is filled with its loyal rêveurs, and their individual dashes of red provide a shock of color that sets them apart. It is fitting that Thiessen has inspired this, as his clock is visually the emblem of the circus, and he now spends time creating circus-themed clocks.



While from the inside, the circus provides a sense of family to the performers and organizers, the rêveurs have also created that sense of belonging, and faithfully maintain it even when the circus is not in their city or country. They have developed a network of information about the circus's travels, and organize group trips, helping each other find lodging in foreign cities. They are treated specially by the circus family, as well. This family is inclusive, however, and rêveurs need not travel to the circus to feel a part of it.



One of the most important connections that Thiessen makes at this time is his friendship with Celia Bowen, who he does not know—yet—as the illusionist at the circus.



Marco goes to visit Mr. Barris in his London office, to talk about the circus, and begins their conversation with a simple question: “How much do you know?” After some thought, Mr. Barris realizes that Marco is Celia’s opponent, and acknowledges that she told him about the competition, though only the most basic information. She revealed that everything she does in the circus is real, and asked him what he would design if gravity were no object. Celia and Mr. Barris then began collaborating on the Carousel. Mr. Barris helps to make the magic appear more like a clever feat of engineering—Celia refers to it as grounding, “making the unbelievable believable.” Marco asks if Celia had any hand in the Stargazer, another tent in the circus, but Mr. Barris informs him that it is purely mechanical. Marco calls him a magician in his own right.

Marco has come to see Mr. Barris to ask for his assistance with a new tent. But first, Mr. Barris must agree to keep Marco’s secret and not let Celia know that he is her opponent. Mr. Barris swears to keep Marco’s secret and remain completely neutral. After the two have collaborated on the new tent, Mr. Barris receives a note from Celia asking if she can make additions to it. He informs her that it has been designed so that either side can manipulate it as they wish.

Celia is delighted as she walks through the hallway of the new tent, enjoying the feel of the snow on her skin. She enters various rooms, and in one she hears her father’s voice telling her that this collaboration is abhorrent. She argues with him, and then asks Hector how a winner will be determined, and he tells her that it is not her concern, and that she simply needs to do more. She asks when it will be sufficient for him, and he does not answer. Alone, Celia sinks to the ground and lets the sand slip through her fingers. Meanwhile, in his flat, Marco constructs tiny rooms of paper, connecting to rooms that Celia has created, interweaving his work with hers.

Vienna, 1894: Tara Burgess comes to see Mr. Barris at his office in Vienna. When they greet each other, Tara notes pointedly that he hasn’t aged a day. She tells him that her sister Lainie is in Dublin with the circus, but Tara wanted to travel on her own, visiting friends. She is looking at the models that cover his desk and tables, and they discuss one unfinished project. She asks if he has the plans for the circus in his office, and he tells her that he left them with Marco in London and forgot about them. She asks if he forgets other plans in this way, and points out that there are many strange happenings related to the circus.

This conversation between Marco and Mr. Barris opens up some significant new opportunities for Marco and Celia in the game, but they will be collaborating rather than competing against one another, bringing them even closer together and reinforcing their growing attraction to one another. In addition, working with Mr. Barris will give Marco a venue for his magic, so that he isn’t only working behind the scenes as he has done thus far. Like Celia, he will need Mr. Barris to help him pass off his magic as something believable for circus goers, an arrangement that Mr. A.H. will disapprove of strongly.



Mr. Barris is now more deeply involved in the magical aspects of the circus, and is keeping secrets for both Celia and Marco. While this is exciting for him, Mr. Barris’s secrets, and his promise to keep silent, will backfire on him when the Burgess sisters try to learn the truth about what is going on in the circus.



Marco and Celia have finally found a way to enjoy the competition, despite the fact that they are breaking the one and only rule that Hector and Mr. A.H. have established for them. Hector is more direct in his criticism of their collaboration, and he and Celia argue yet again, reiterating a pattern in their relationship in which she asks for more information about the competition, and he refuses to tell her anything.



The circus has been under a magical spell that has been keeping all of the performers and organizers from aging since the opening night. While this is obviously meant as a protective spell, Tara Burgess has become suspicious and is meeting with Mr. Barris to try to find out more. Her visit begins on a friendly tone, and it takes a while for her to circle around to her question, possibly revealing how nervous she is about the subject.



Mr. Barris finally asks her what she wants to discuss, and she asks him why he left London. He acknowledges that he left for the same reason the Burgess sisters travel so often: he is aging more slowly than he should be. This is what concerns Tara, and Mr. Barris suggests that she just accept it, but she cannot. She feels that something isn't right, and she wants to find out what it is. She also has difficulty distinguishing between when she is asleep and awake, like she is dreaming all the time. Finally, Mr. Barris opens a drawer, takes out a business card, scribbles a London address on it, and hands it to Tara. She can make out the A and H on the card.

Mr. Barris is very forthcoming about the fact that he is not aging, as it is something he cannot deny to Tara. He has accepted it, likely because he knows why it is happening, while Tara is disturbed by her lack of control over her own body. When she wonders why it is happening, Mr. Barris cannot tell her what he knows, because he does not want to break the promises he has made to Marco and Celia and can only send her to speak with Mr. A.H.



In Prague, the circus is closed due to inclement weather, and while many of the performers are enjoying an inclement-weather party, Celia decides to take her umbrella and go into the city, getting her gown soaked along the way. She finds a crowded and brightly lit café and goes in, finding a seat in front of the fireplace next to Isobel. The two women sit and chat about everything but the circus. After ordering tea, Celia looks around and mentions that she has a feeling she is being watched. They discuss the fact that they are rarely recognized in public, and Isobel notes that many of the people whose tarot she reads are more focused on the cards than they are on her face.

Despite the fact that Isobel has come to the circus to observe Celia, the two women have had very few opportunities to talk privately, so this conversation between the two of them is significant, allowing them to get to know each other more intimately. In addition, they are meeting by chance, and in a neutral space outside of the circus, so they are more relaxed, shrugging off their circus roles. Celia's sense that she is being watched, however, makes her slightly less comfortable in this public space, though it is perhaps Isobel who is the one watching her so closely.



At the mention of reading, Celia asks Isobel if she has her cards with her, and Isobel offers to read for her. Celia has never asked Isobel read for her, but today she is curious. Isobel pulls out her personal tarot deck, and Celia notes that they are lovely cards, but there are only seventy-seven of them. Isobel only says that one of the cards is somewhere else. When the waitress brings Celia's tea, Isobel asks if Celia did something to her, and Celia acknowledges that she diverted her attention—she has placed an invisible veil over the two of them, though she still feels that she is being watched.

Celia is an intensely private person, and the fact that she is willing to have Isobel read her tarot cards—in fact, she brings up the topic herself—is an indication of how comfortable she feels with Isobel. Clearly, she does not suspect that Isobel is watching Celia's every move on behalf of Marco. Celia does not let down her guard completely, however, placing a veil over the two of them as Isobel reads for her.



Isobel lays out her cards: cups, the two of swords, La Papessa, and Le Bateleur, which makes Isobel gasp a little. Isobel tells Celia that she carries many burdens with her, and that she is in some sort of conflict with something unseen or hidden from her. She then notes that it will be revealed soon, which catches Celia's attention. Isobel cannot specify, but she adds that she sees love and loss at the same time, like a beautiful kind of pain. Celia thanks her for the reading, and the two women discuss other things until Celia decides she should get back to the circus.

The tarot cards that Isobel lays out for Celia include two significant figures: the Magician and the High Priestess, representing Marco and Celia, respectively. Isobel does not reveal what she knows about the connection between the two, and hides a number of details of her reading from Celia, in part because she does not want to acknowledge the reality and depth of the connection between Celia and Marco.



Outside of the café, Celia is also thinking about her reading and the impending revelation that it promised. She hopes that means she will find out who her opponent is. As she walks in the rain, she realizes that she is both warm and dry, even the hem of her gown. She stops and observes that her umbrella suddenly seems to be repelling the rain around her like an invisible shield, even though she got soaked in spite of the umbrella earlier. Just as she realizes that this is not her umbrella, Marco runs up to her, completely soaked from the rain, with her identical looking umbrella in his hand.

Celia stares at Marco, putting the pieces together in her mind: his ability to blend seamlessly into the background, his distress at her audition, the countless glances and comments that once seemed flirtatious. She begins to laugh, and then composes herself and curtseys for him, handing him back his umbrella and getting drenched immediately once she is out of its magical sphere. He asks her to join him for a drink, and Celia considers it, wanting to discuss so many questions with him despite Hector's warnings against it. But she turns him down, in part because she is drenched from the rain.

Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey continues to wander the circus, stopping to watch the **bonfire** and then buy a bag of chocolates that are shaped like mice. He happens by the fortune-teller's tent and goes in, taking in the décor that reminds him of his grandmother's parlor, until he hears someone inviting him in. Bailey asks the fortune-teller (Isobel) about his future, explaining that his grandmother wants him to go to Harvard, while his father insists that he inherit the family farm. She asks him what he wants, but he doesn't know. She then reads his cards, telling him that he has a journey ahead of him, and a great deal of responsibility. "I'm going to do something important, but I have to go somewhere first?" he asks, surprised by how vague the reading is. He wonders if this means he is going to Harvard.

Isobel continues Bailey's reading, and tells him he is looking for Poppet. She suddenly pays him more attention, and asks if his name is Bailey. When he says yes, she tells him that they have a mutual acquaintance, and that he is at the circus to find her. She then asks if he likes the circus, and he tells her he does, to which she replies mysteriously, "That would help." Bailey offers her one of his chocolate mice as he leaves; once he is outside of the tent, he feels lighter, like the weight of his concerns about the future have been lifted from his shoulders.

This scene outside of the café is an almost immediate fulfillment of Isobel's prophecy, that something hidden will be revealed to Celia. Upon realizing that the umbrella she is using is not hers, and is under a magic spell that helps it repel water, Celia sees Marco, which allows her to put together the puzzle pieces in her head.



There have been many indications that Marco is her opponent, but Celia simply has not recognized them. Marco's ability to blend into the background, working behind the scenes, is a major aspect of his magic, yet it is also what made him an unexpected opponent for Celia. And she now re-interprets behavior she considered flirtatious before as part of the competition, which is only partly true, as Marco is also developing strong romantic feelings for his rival.



Bailey is enjoying an evening at the circus, yet his concerns about his future are always nagging at the back of his mind. His meeting with Isobel, the fortune-teller, will give him a feeling of calm about his future, but he does not understand the context of what Isobel tells him. When she informs Bailey that he will "do something important," he interprets it as a college career at Harvard, but Isobel knows that his future responsibility is related to the circus. Bailey is not yet ready to learn what his true destiny is at this point, and the vagueness of his reading surprises him, but allows him room to interpret it as he chooses, giving him some semblance of agency.



Isobel is much more specific, however, when she mentions that Bailey is looking for Poppet, giving a name to the girl with the red hair whom he met years earlier, when he snuck into the circus. Meeting Poppet again will be crucial in terms of Bailey's future with the circus, especially since Poppet is the one who truly knows how important he will be to saving it from ruin.



Barcelona, 1894: Poppet and Widget have finished their performances for the night and are relaxing in a tent, under a large, black, leafless tree. Widget asks Poppet if she wants to read the future, but she is reluctant because the last time, her vision was confusing and filled with fire and something red, and a man with no shadow. She has not told Celia yet, because the vision makes no sense to her and she is waiting to understand it before talking about it with the illusionist. Poppet also notes that they are going to have company, and that part comforts the two of them.

Poppet then asks Widget to tell her a story, and he tells her a story about a tree. It is a story about the greatest wizard in history, who made the mistake of sharing his secrets with a young, clever, and beautiful girl. When he told her his secrets, they lost some of their power, but they were still strong enough for the girl to use against the wizard, and she trapped him in an old oak tree. The girl flaunted the secrets that she learned, and her power faded, as did she. The wizard, however, became immortal, forming part of the tree and becoming stronger than ever—though, if he could have done it over again, he likely would have held on to his secrets in the first place.

London, 1895: While Lainie is on an extended holiday in Italy, Tara picks up the card Mr. Barris gave her and goes to the Midland Grand Hotel. When she asks for Mr. A.H. at the reception desk, there is no record of anyone by that name staying at the hotel. She wanders the lobby, confused, when a voice next to her greets her by name. She gets directly to the point, asking Mr. A.H. about the circus and explaining her concern about the fact that she has not aged in years. She requests an explanation, to which he responds that the circus “is simply a circus [...] no more than that.” Tara nods in agreement, and when Mr. A.H. asks her if she has a train to catch, she also agrees, though she does not remember what time her train departs.

Mr. A.H. walks Tara to the station, suggesting that she find something to take her mind off of the circus. Again, Tara nods passively, and Mr. A.H. leaves her at her platform, despite the fact that she has not told him what train she is taking. She has already forgotten much about the conversation, except for the feeling that she should focus her attention on something other than the circus. She looks up to see Mr. A.H. on the opposite platform, arguing with someone who appears to be little more than a reflection. As she watches the two men, Tara steps forward, right into the path of an oncoming train.

Poppet and Widget often use their clairvoyance with one another as a kind of game, which seems absolutely normal to the two of them. This time, however, Poppet does not want to look into the future, because what she sees scares her and doesn't make sense yet. Poppet actually is seeing the circus's destruction, complete with the explosion of the bonfire and the arrival of Bailey to re-light it.



Widget tells his sister the medieval legend of Merlin, a powerful wizard was imprisoned in an oak tree by a beautiful girl named Nimue, who wanted to steal his magic. This cautionary tale seems to be reinforce the perspective of Hector and Mr. A.H., that Marco and Celia should not work together because sharing their magic will diminish its power. However, being trapped in the tree allows Merlin to gain immortality and strength, which foreshadows what will happen to Celia and Marco at the end of the novel, when they are similarly trapped.



Tara Burgess's growing concerns about the secrets within the circus bring her in contact with Mr. A.H., who will do just about anything to keep control of the competition and the circus. She is not aware of the danger at this point, and demands an explanation, which history has shown that Mr. A.H. is not willing to offer. He then performs some sort of mind manipulation on Tara, causing her to drop all of her concerns about the circus and agree mindlessly to his suggestions.



At this point in time, Tara Burgess is not in control of her actions, although she is aware of what is going on around her. She can recognize that something strange is going on—Mr. A.H. has brought her to catch her train without asking her which one she is taking—but she does not have the will to resist or question him. It is in this puppet-like state that she walks into the path of the train, committing suicide under the chilling control of Mr. A.H.



In Munich, Herr Thiessen is awaiting the arrival of the circus, as well as a visit from Celia Bowen, with whom he has been corresponding for years now. When she arrives at this home, he is surprised to find that she is the illusionist from the circus; she apologizes for not telling him beforehand, but he admits that he should have known she was a performer from the intimate knowledge she has of the circus. He is happy to finally meet her, and asks why she wrote him a letter in the first place. She responds that she enjoys his writing about the circus, and likes seeing it through his eyes.

The two examine the clocks in Thiessen's workshop, and Celia is particularly interested in one that reminds her of the **bonfire**. It is not working, and Celia asks if she can help. Without touching it, she manages to fix the clock and get it ticking. The two then go out to dinner in Munich; during dinner, Celia wonders why he hasn't asked her how she does her tricks. Thiessen tells her that he doesn't want to know—he wants to remain unenlightened, a sentiment that pleases Celia to no end. He adds that he is more interested in learning about the woman than the illusionist.

The news of Tara's tragic death arrives from London, and everyone associated with the circus attends her funeral in Glasgow. The funeral is quiet, with a tone of thoughtful melancholy. Something is off about Lainie, though no one can put a finger on it. She greets mourners with a smile and even jokes a bit, telling everyone that she feels that her sister will always be in her heart. There are roses of every color and a performer at the cemetery—a woman dressed in white from head to toe, like a living angel.

As Tsukiko and Isobel stand in the rain near the gravesite, Tsukiko asks Isobel how Tara died. Isobel heard that it was an accident, and that Tara was hit by a train. Tsukiko considers this and asks how she really died, which confuses Isobel. Tsukiko wonders if the circus could have driven Tara insane, but Isobel doubts that Tara committed suicide. Tsukiko does not think it was an accident, asking Isobel if anyone in the circus has had any kind of accident, or even the slightest of colds. Isobel is surprised to realize that her friend is right. Tsukiko argues that they are all in a fish bowl, being watched very carefully.

Isobel asks Tsukiko if she has ever been in love, to which she replies that she has had affairs that have lasted decades, and others that have lasted hours. She follows this non-answer with a more cryptic message for Isobel, telling her that it "will come apart," and that the cracks are beginning to show. She asks if Isobel is still using a magic spell to keep the circus in balance; Isobel is, though she is not sure it is making any difference.

Celia has chosen to correspond with Herr Thiessen for years without acknowledging her role within the circus, which demonstrates her need to create a sincere human connection that is in no way related to the competition or her own work. She is able to step out of her role as the illusionist and see the circus from the perspective of an audience member, which separates the experience of the circus from her rivalry with Marco.



Celia feels comfortable enough with Thiessen to demonstrate her magic in front of him, knowing that in this context, he cannot dismiss it as sleight of hand or stage tricks. Yet Thiessen does not want to know the secrets underpinning her work, and when he notes that he is more interested in the woman than the illusionist, this engages with her desire to connect with someone outside of her role in the circus.



Tara's death is both tragic and mysterious to everyone who knows her, and it is the first event in a slow unraveling of the circus. Up to this point, the circus was a safe place and even a refuge for everyone associated with it, but Tara's death has destroyed that sense of safety and comfort.



Tsukiko's pointed questioning about the nature of Tara Burgess's death suggests that she knows much more than she lets on. She suggests that Tara's death was a suicide and that she was mentally unstable. The only person who knows the truth about Tara's death is Mr. A.H., and at this point, no one besides Mr. Barris even knows that she was in London to meet with him. The mysterious circumstances surrounding her death, then, will inspire rumors and fear.



Isobel trusts Tsukiko, and when she asks a question about love, she is looking for advice on her troubled relationship with Marco. Tsukiko can see what Isobel cannot, however, and tells her that it will end. Tsukiko also sees danger in the future of the circus, and looks to Isobel to help keep everyone safe.



Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey leaves Isobel's tent and wanders into a small crowd watching a performance. He can make out a kitten leaping through a hoop, and then a young man wearing a black suit and hat, with white kittens on his shoulders. One of the kittens hops into his hand, and then through the hoop as well, and the audience applauds. Bailey then notices something that makes him stop in his tracks: there is the red-haired girl (Poppet), though of course she is older than the last time he saw her. She is dressed all in white, even wearing a white cap over her bright red hair; she sees Bailey and smiles, clearly recognizing him and glad to see him again.

Bailey watches the rest of their performance, paying more attention to the girl than the kittens, and when they finish, he attempts to speak with her. The crowd pushes him around, though, and he loses sight of the two performers, and is frustrated with himself when he feels a tap on his shoulder. The girl has changed clothes, and looks more like a regular spectator. She calls him by name, but Bailey admits that he doesn't know her name. She introduces herself, and Bailey realizes that she is the Poppet that Isobel mentioned to him.

Poppet asks if Isobel told him anything interesting about his future, and he notes that he didn't understand much of what she told him. Poppet then introduces Bailey to Widget, and the three of them decide to walk through the circus together. As they talk, Bailey observes that the twins seem to get along much better than he does with his sister, and he wonders if it is because they're closer in age. They all discuss what to eat, and Bailey offers some of the chocolate mice he saved from earlier. Widget commends him for being prepared, adding to Poppet that she was "right about him." Poppet only smiles.

Widget splits off to get cinnamon sticks, and while Bailey is alone with Poppet, he asks her how she knew his name the first time they met. She tells him that she saw him coming long before he arrived, and just knew his name. As they enjoy free cocoa, Bailey asks if Poppet sees everything before it happens, and she tells him that it's like looking at a book with pages missing that has been dropped in a pond. They ride the Stargazer, and Poppet begins staring intently at the stars, then suddenly covers her face with her hands to shield her eyes from the bright visions that are giving her a headache. The three decide to lighten their mood in the Cloud Maze.

Although he does not realize it, Bailey has come to the circus in search of Poppet, who is the young red-haired circus girl he met years earlier when he snuck into the circus during the day. The image of this girl has stayed with him since that moment, and he is delighted to find that she seems to remember him as well. What he does not know at this point is that Poppet foresaw his arrival, and has been waiting patiently to see him again.



Bailey believes that meeting the girl again is simply a stroke of good luck, when it is really part of a larger series of events that will lead to him taking over the circus. The girl calls him by name again, although he still has not introduced himself to her, but Bailey is too excited to see her to ask her how she knows his name.



Bailey feels comfortable with Poppet and Widget from the very beginning, giving him a sense of family, closeness, and belonging. He reflects on his feelings towards his real family, noting that he does not have such a positive relationship with his sister. This is the beginning of Bailey's slow realization that the circus is where he belongs, and his biological connections are not nearly as strong as the emotional ties he is creating at the circus.



Bailey is finally getting around to asking questions about how Poppet knows his name. He is surprisingly accepting of her answers, and her admission of supernatural powers—this may be due to the fact that he feels so comfortable with the twins, and that the circus already feels like an alternate universe to him in many ways. Meanwhile, Poppet's visions of the destruction of the circus are becoming clearer and more frequent.



Poppet mentions that Widget can see the past, and he and Bailey discuss how it works. Bailey asks if he will read his past, and Widget tells him about the old oak tree where Bailey feels more at home than in his own house, how he feels alone even when he's with other people, apples, and his insufferable sister. They then enter the Cloud Maze, a huge tent with a large white structure in the middle that people are climbing all over. Widget climbs off immediately, making his way to the top as quickly as possible, while Bailey and Poppet climb more slowly, exploring together. When they get near the top, Poppet tells him that the easiest way down is to jump, and she goes first. Bailey follows after her, keeping his eyes open as he falls.

When they all find each other once, again, Poppet and Widget explain that they have another show at midnight and should be getting back. Bailey is surprised it's so late—he should have been home hours earlier. Before he leaves, Poppet runs to the ticket booth to retrieve a silver ticket for Bailey, giving him unlimited admission to the circus. He promises to return the next night, and Poppet kisses him on the cheek, making him blush. Bailey realizes that he feels like a completely different person leaving the circus than he was when he entered. That night, he dreams that he is a knight on horseback, carrying a silver sword.

London, 1896: The Midnight Dinner is quiet this evening, despite the fact that a number of circus performers are present, including Celia. At the end of the evening, Celia has misplaced her shawl and searches for it while the other guests leave for the night. When she is finally ready to give up, she sees that Marco is holding it. She magically transports the shawl from Marco's arms to around her shoulders and walks past him out the door. He calls after her, asking if she would have that drink with him that they did not have in Prague. She agrees, and they sit down in the dining room with two glasses of wine.

Celia and Marco begin to talk about magic, or “manipulation,” as she calls it, starting with the white **bonfire**. She also calls it “enchanting,” which sparks a conversation about how Marco has gotten both Isobel and Chandresh to fall in love with him. Marco asks how Celia knows about Isobel, and she responds that everyone knows that Isobel is in love with someone, though no one is quite sure whom, and only Celia has figured out that it is Marco.

While Bailey is concerned about his future, his past reveals a lot about why he would want to escape his home: his family life offers him very little comfort or belonging, and he is not particularly close to his sister. He has already begun to find that in the circus, and these feelings will influence his choices in the future, when he is called on to take responsibility for the circus.



This visit to the circus has changed Bailey in a fundamental way: his visit to the fortune-teller gave him a sense of purpose and clarity about his future; he found Poppet, and has quickly developed a crush on her that she may even reciprocate; and he feels like he belongs at the circus, now that he has a ticket for unlimited admission. His dream reveals his growing desire for adventure and responsibility in a world outside of the family farm.



Celia and Marco have not been alone together since their meeting on the street in Prague, when Celia realized that Marco is her opponent in the competition. Yet while Marco is anxious to spend time with Celia, using the shawl as an excuse to get her alone after the Midnight Dinner, she is slightly more reluctant, nearly slipping out of Chandresh's house before he can stop her and offer her a drink.



While Marco's interest in Celia has been obvious to many people in the circus, Celia has secretly been observing Marco as well, and is clearly wary of his charms. Marco also believed that his relationship with Isobel was a secret, but Celia is more observant than he imagined, and he cannot hide this from her.



Marco notes that his charm does not seem to have worked as effectively on Celia, and she tells him about how her father, Hector, seduced her mother and then discarded her, letting her “pine for him” until she took her own life. Celia promised herself she would not be taken in like that by anyone. Marco expresses his condolences and then asks about Celia’s mother. She only remembers her crying and looking at Celia like she was something to fear. Marco, on the other hand, does not remember his parents at all. He has no memories from before the orphanage—he knows only that he was plucked out for some unknown reason and made to study and prepare for this competition. Celia asks him why he is being so honest with her, and he tells her that it is refreshing to finally be honest.

Celia tells Marco that he reminds her of her father, Hector, who also manipulates perception. She tells him he doesn’t have to change his looks for her, and he allows his face to change: his goatee disappears, his cheekbones soften and his eyes fade into a less striking green. Celia felt that he was too attractive before, and she felt a hollowness about him that she found unappealing. She much prefers the real Marco whose face is before her, with the barrier removed from between them. She also realizes that she has seen him before, in the audience at her performances, and how he looked at her like he didn’t know if he was afraid of her or if he wanted to kiss her.

Marco offers Celia a tour of Chandresh’s house, and they begin in the game room, which houses both board games and a collection of weaponry. While they examine the weapons and games, Celia asks Marco when he knew she was his opponent. He didn’t know until her audition, though knowing her identity hasn’t been much of an advantage, in his opinion. She tells him that she knew in Prague, when she took his umbrella—but he already knew that, and she wonders why he let himself be known. He explains that he was tired of hiding from her. She says she should have known it was him all along, because he pretends to be less than he is.

Marco then takes out a deck of cards, and they perform small magic tricks for one another. Marco notes that Celia is better at physical manipulation, and she admits to having a natural talent for it. He asks her if she can manipulate living things, and she responds that she can only make superficial changes, and cannot repair injury to others. She then takes a sword and pierces her hand with it, healing it herself immediately in front of Marco. She tells him about how her father would slice her fingers open so that she could heal them again. Marco realizes that they have been prepared for the competition in drastically different ways, but neither of them can quite understand the point of the competition overall.

Celia is wary of Marco’s charisma because she has seen how painful and damaging it can be to fall in love with someone—her father’s charms and self-centeredness are to blame for her mother’s suicide, and Celia is determined to learn a lesson from that. When she begins to discuss her family, Marco shares information about his early years at the orphanage and with Mr. A.H., eager to be open and honest with someone. He has spent so much time disguising his real self, that this real connection is both new and attractive to him.



Marco usually changes his appearance, either to be more attractive to others, or just to avoid revealing his real self. Celia is resistant to Marco because of his similarity to her father, and rather than a charming and attractive man, she wants to spend time with a real, genuine human being. When Marco shows her his real face, she feels a deeper connection to him, and also realizes that he, too, has a complicated set of feelings for her.



With the weaponry in the background to remind them that they are also opponents in a competition, Celia and Marco share their experiences, which only brings them closer together. They have each been raised in near-isolation, focusing only on this competition, and therefore they both understand each other’s experience. Marco’s desire to connect with Celia intellectually and emotionally is the reason he chose to reveal himself as her opponent.



In a lighter and more flirtatious moment, Marco and Celia demonstrate their magic skills for one another, and even openly discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Celia’s ability to heal her own body is impressive to Marco, although she admits that she cannot repair other living beings, a comment that foreshadows a significant death she cannot undo, later on in the narrative. They also realize that despite being able to manipulate so many things around them (including their own bodies), they have no control over the competition they are in.



Marco brings Celia into a sunken garden room that he has made for Chandresh, in order to give him a project to occupy his time and energy. He manipulates her mind to show her what it will look like when it is finished. She is astounded at how well he can manipulate her perceptions, down to sounds and smells and touch. Marco notes that she is letting him do it, and the proximity helps, as well. He cannot do something so intricate at the circus. When he mentions proximity, Celia comes closer to him, and they stare in to each other's eyes. Celia mentions how clever it was for Marco to use the **bonfire** as a stimulus, though it had consequences—namely, Poppet and Widget's clairvoyance.

They sink into cushions together and share their favorite tents—Marco's favorite is Celia's, of course, while Celia loves the Ice Garden because she feels like she is walking into a dream. She also mentions that she created the Wishing Tree, with its candle-lit wishes, to complement his trees made of ice. They both like working together on the Labyrinth, but Celia mentions that her father gave her a stern lecture about collaboration. Confused, Marco asks how Hector is able to communicate with her, and she explains that he is not really dead. Marco asks Celia if the wishes from the Wishing Tree come true, and she admits that she hasn't tracked all of them. She asks if his wish came true, and he tells her that he doesn't know yet.

Celia asks Marco how he keeps everyone from aging, and he asks her how she moves the circus. Celia explains that the circus moves on a magic train. Marco gives Celia a hand to help her up, and the entire room shakes with the energy between them. They are both out of breath, and instead of touching her again, Marco opens the door and leads her out of the room. As they return to the ballroom, Celia asks how Chandresh is, and Marco tells her that he has been increasingly unfocused, and Marco tries to help him, but it affects his memory.

Marco wishes he could protect the people outside the circus, like the late Tara Burgess, the way the **bonfire** protects the performers. Celia did not realize that the bonfire was protective, and admits that she neglected to consider safeguards at all. She did not realize how many people would become part of the challenge, and be affected by it. Marco reaches out for Celia's hand again, but this time he is focusing their energy together so that they will not break anything. Celia enjoys the feeling, and they stand in silence for what seems like hours. The clock interrupts their moment, and Celia tells Marco that she forgives him for stealing her shawl and leaves.

The fact that Marco has made an entire room for Chandresh, to keep his boss's mind off of the circus, demonstrates the power Marco has over Chandresh. This fact falls into the background as Marco and Celia are focused only on one another. Marco manipulates Celia's perceptions, which feels very intimate to her, especially since they have to be physically close to each other—and Celia has to be a willing participant—for Marco to successfully take over her mind.



Eager to continue sharing their experiences in the competition and the circus, Marco and Celia discuss their favorite tents, revealing that they have been collaborating without knowing it well before Mr. Barris created the Labyrinth for them. They have used each other's tents as inspiration for their own, illustrating the fact that working together has made them better magicians. In addition, the topic of Marco's wish comes up again because, like Isobel, Celia is curious about what is going on inside his head.



Celia and Marco share nearly all of their secrets with one another, reinforcing the collaborative spirit that their teachers so strongly condemn. They can hardly touch one another, however, without causing the room to shake with their energy, and this only augments the tension between them, feeding their desire to be close to one another. As they leave, Celia returns the conversation to the circus.



Celia and Marco are only now realizing that their competition affects everyone around them, and the fact that Celia neglected to even consider safeguards demonstrates how little they understood the competition when it began. However, unlike their teachers, Celia and Marco have developed a sense of empathy, and care about the safety and security of the circus performers and organizers.



PART 3: INTERSECTIONS

London, 1899: Chandresh is throwing an anniversary party for the circus on Friday the 13th, to honor 13 years of performances. The event is exclusive, and only the performers and some special guests are invited. It is also surprisingly colorful, with different colored lights in each room, and every table covered in a bright tablecloth and colorful flower arrangements. Chandresh makes a speech after dinner, and everyone enjoys his remarks, with the exception of his comments about how no one seems to age, except Widget and Poppet. After the speech there is dancing in the ballroom, and Mr. A.H. stays along the sidelines, except when he meets Herr Thiessen and speaks with him briefly, and when Tsukiko forces him to dance.

As Celia passes by Marco in the hall, he grabs her hand, and they are both taken aback by the shift in the air between them. He tells her she looks beautiful, and she asks to see his real face. He shows it to her alone, and they stand in a corner of the hallway looking at each other as other guests slip past, not noticing them. Marco touches her cheek and kisses her neck when suddenly, Mr. A.H. interrupts them, asking Celia if he can speak with Marco. Celia slips away without even looking at Marco, and Mr. A.H. tells him that he disapproves of their behavior. Marco is furious, as he realizes that Mr. A.H. knows Celia and could have told Marco who his opponent was long before he figured it out himself. Mr. A.H. replies that he didn't think it was necessary to tell him.

Marco moves their conversation into the game room, where he asks what Mr. A.H. suddenly wants, after thirteen years of silence. His teacher informs him that he doesn't really want to speak with him—he only wanted to separate him from Celia. Marco takes the opportunity to ask if he is doing well in the competition; Mr. A.H. responds that Marco's progress has been sufficient, and that he should keep his distance from Celia. Marco announces that he is in love with Celia, which makes Mr. A.H. visibly sad. He tells Marco that this will make the competition much more difficult for him. Marco asks when it ends, and Mr. A.H. answers that the previous competition lasted thirty-seven years. Marco insists that he is done with the game, but Mr. A.H. tells him that he cannot quit.

Thirteen years have passed since the opening of the circus, and while it is still the venue for the competition between Marco and Celia, it is also a very successful endeavor in its own right. In keeping with Chandresh's dramatic aesthetic choices, the party's bright color scheme contrasts with the all black-and-white theme of the circus itself. In his speech, Chandresh notes the lack of aging associated with the circus, but his lighthearted comments strike a deep and painful chord for many of the organizers, who are still mourning the death of Tara Burgess.



The party gives Marco and Celia a chance to see each other outside of the circus itself, and they take their first opportunity to have a private moment. Marco lets Celia see his real face, making the interaction more intimate and real for them. Mr. A.H. interrupts their private moment in an attempt to reassert his control over Marco, but this backfires, as Marco realizes that Mr. A.H. and Celia have met before. Once again, Marco is frustrated by how little his teacher has told him about the competition.



Marco notes that Mr. A.H. has not attempted to contact him at all since the opening of the circus—for a teacher and de-facto father figure, Mr. A.H. is neglectful of Marco's emotional needs. However, Mr. A.H. emphasizes the fact that he is solely interested in the competition itself, and not the wellbeing of his student. When Marco announces his feelings for Celia, Mr. A.H.'s only concern is the outcome of the competition. He reiterates the fact that Marco has no choice but to continue the competition, no matter how long it lasts.



Marco throws a billiard ball at Mr. A.H., who steps out of the way as the ball smashes into a stained glass window. He then walks out of the room, past Isobel who heard the entire conversation, and into the ballroom to find Celia. She is dancing with Herr Thiessen, and Marco pulls her away, kisses her on the lips in front of all of the guests, and releases her back to her dance partner. By the time he walks back out of the room, everyone has forgotten what they saw. Mr. A.H. storms out of the party, and as he leaves the building, Widget and Poppet watch him through the window. Widget notes to Poppet that Mr. A.H. has no shadow.

Mr. A.H.'s quick reflexes in avoiding the flying billiard ball foreshadow a later incident in which the man steps out of the way of a flying weapon, allowing another man to die in his place. What happens next will change the relationship between Celia, Marco, and Isobel in significant ways: Marco and Celia no longer truly consider themselves rivals, as their love for one another is now clear. Meanwhile, Isobel is now fully aware of Marco's feelings for Celia, and will no longer function as his accomplice.



Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey is back at the circus, and is exploring the Labyrinth with Widget and Poppet. They come to a room that resembles a large metal birdcage, and soon they become stuck and Poppet turns visibly upset. After a great deal of searching, Bailey finds a key hidden under the seat of a swing and uses it to get them out of the cage and the Labyrinth. Poppet is still upset, but the twins have to run off to their next performance, and Bailey cannot inquire further.

Bailey is enjoying another evening with his new friends, when they find themselves in a situation that temporarily reverses their roles: an element of the circus suddenly feels unfamiliar to the twins, and Bailey finds himself in a position to help them escape. The moment passes quickly, but it will be burned into Poppet's memory as significant.



Bailey enters a new tent to find tables covered in jars and bottles, and when he opens them, each one holds a different scent that evokes a different memory or image in his head: one has the scent of a roaring fire, while another has the ocean and a bright summer's day at the seashore, and another has a garden path. He picks another bottle, and at first there is no scent, but then he is surprised by the smell of caramel and a **bonfire**, and then he feels a sharp pain in his chest, the sensation of falling, and the sound of a girl screaming. Scared, he puts the stopper back in the bottle and looks for one more before leaving. This time he opens a box and feels dry desert air, hears laughter and flute music, and then feels a hand on his shoulder that causes him to drop the box in surprise.

On his own now, Bailey explores a tent he has not seen before, in which certain scents provoke strong memories and even visceral responses from him. The scent and experience related to the circus, however, is not what he expected, causing him pain and fear. Until this point, the circus had been a completely positive experience, and the association between the comforting smells of the bonfire and the caramel, mixed with the uncomfortable sounds and feelings, are unsettling to Bailey. They are, of course, a sign of what is to come.



Bailey leaves the tent and goes to find Poppet and Widget, but first he comes across another statue-person on a platform. It is a woman with long black hair tied with silver ribbons, wearing a white gown covered in words—love letters, actually. As Bailey watches, Poppet taps him on the shoulder and tells him that this woman is her favorite statue. She is called the Paramour.

The Paramour is a reference to the love between Celia and Marco, which by 1902 is in full force. Their relationship is the backbone of the circus, and later on, another character will describe their magical creations as love letters to one another.



Bailey tells Poppet about the tent with the bottles, which Poppet explains is Widget's tent. As they wander through the circus again, Bailey notices the spectators wearing all black and white with a single dash of red and asks Poppet about them. She explains that they are *rêveurs*; Bailey has more questions about them, but they enter a tent that takes his breath away, reminding him of the first snow of winter. Poppet explains that they are in the Ice Garden, and they play hide and seek, though it is nearly impossible to find Poppet in her all-white costume, so he can only chase the fleeting image of her bright red hair.

London, 1900: Chandresh is sitting in his study, wondering what is wrong with him. The circus does not need him anymore, after fourteen years, but he cannot start anything new. The circus has begun to bother him, and his thoughts wander to Marco's office to look at the paperwork. When he pulls out plans for the circus, he notices that all of them have been written over in another handwriting that does not belong to Mr. Barris. He then looks through Marco's desk, finding a single locked drawer that he eventually pries open with a silver knife. When he opens the drawer, he finds a large, leather-bound notebook filled with symbols and markings that Chandresh doesn't understand. He also realizes that each page has the name of someone associated with the circus, including his own, and each one also has a lock of hair.

At that moment, Marco appears in the doorway and asks what Chandresh is doing. Chandresh is startled, but composes himself enough to ask about the notebook. Marco explains that it is a book of records for the circus, but Chandresh calls it nonsense and wonders how long he has been keeping it. Marco tells him he is just doing his job, and that he does not appreciate Chandresh going through his things without his permission. Chandresh accuses Marco of keeping secrets, and Marco responds that his boss cannot imagine the number of things that are being kept from him, going back well before the circus was started, and that Chandresh has never been concerned with the details and left them up to Marco in the first place.

When Chandresh refers to the books, he looks around and finds that there are no longer any papers or ledgers in the office. He then waves the brandy bottle in Marco's face and tries to fire him, but Marco makes the bottle disappear and says that he cannot leave and has no choice about it. He then erases Chandresh's memory of the conversation entirely. When his boss leaves the office, Marco packs up all of his papers and all of his personal items from his room and leaves. But before he does, he brings Chandresh another bottle of brandy. Alone, Chandresh is visited by the ghost of Prospero the Enchanter, an old friend of his, who fills his head with information that he otherwise might have forgotten.

At this point in time, the rêveurs are omnipresent at the circus, and Bailey is will soon become intimately acquainted with the sense of belonging and family that they provide. For the moment, however, they are just a passing thought as he enters the Ice Garden with Poppet. They take the opportunity to play, like the children they are, despite the fact that Poppet's visions of the destruction of the circus are growing more intense.



Chandresh has been under a magic spell for the fourteen years the circus has existed, in large part to keep him from noticing the magical elements that truly run the circus. It is the secret magic behind the circus that sent Tara Burgess to London, leading to her death; it seems that questioning these secrets can be dangerous, if not life threatening. Chandresh's search for answers leads him directly to Marco, his assistant. He is surprised to find that Marco is hiding something in a locked drawer—he has not imagined that Marco had anything to hide from him.



Like Mr. A.H., Marco has had to control those around him—not only does he use his secret notebook to ensure the safety of the circus performers and organizers, but he has to keep it all a secret from Chandresh, often erasing his memory. Chandresh has long ago given up much of the control of the circus, but now that he wants to know more about the endeavor he is running, he discovers something he never would have imagined. Marco is honest with his boss, to the point of rudeness, because he knows he can simply erase his memory afterwards.



Marco finds himself in a difficult position: he did not choose to be part of the competition, or to come and work for Chandresh, yet he must take extreme measures to keep his position and continue competing against Celia. Thus, when Chandresh tries to fire Marco for his secrets and lies, Marco responds angrily, erases his boss's memory, and moves all evidence of his magic from Chandresh's house. Nonetheless, Hector Bowen decides to inform Chandresh of what is happening, in an attempt to gain advantage in the competition.



Meanwhile, Lainie goes to visit Mr. Barris, who has moved his office from London to Vienna, and now to Basel. She asks him what he and Tara talked about when she came to visit him in Vienna before her death, and Mr. Barris is surprised, thinking that Lainie knew. Lainie tells him that just because he could never decide which one he was in love with does not mean that they are interchangeable; Barris replies that he asked Lainie to marry him but she never answered him. But since he asked her after Tara died, Lainie will never know if she was his first choice or not. He tells her that he loves her, and that she and the other organizers are more than family to him.

Mr. Barris tells her that he doesn't want to have a conversation about the circus, just like he didn't want to have it with Tara. Lainie guesses that he knows what's going on, and Mr. Barris admits that he does, and he would not tell Tara because he cannot break the promise he made. He specifies that he has never lied, he simply has chosen not to say certain things. Lainie asks if Mr. A.H. knows, and Mr. Barris responds that there is little he doesn't know about. He then adds that he doesn't mind his situation, moving and hiring new staff every few years. Lainie stays in Switzerland for a few more days to spend time with Mr. Barris before moving on to Constantinople to meet up with the circus.

Lainie meets with Celia at the Pera Palace Hotel in Constantinople. After some small talk, Lainie launches in with her question, asking if Celia knows why Tara went to the Midland Grand Hotel in London. Celia says that she knows whom Tara went to see, but that she doesn't know why she went. Lainie explains that Tara didn't feel right and needed to investigate, but that she made the mistake of asking the wrong questions of the wrong people. Lainie, on the other hand, is asking Celia, whom she knows will not brush away her concerns. Celia explains the basics of the challenge and the function of the circus, but does not name names.

Lainie just listens and sips her tea. Then, as she is about to take another sip of her tea, she lets go of the cup, letting it shatter; Celia immediately puts the pieces back together and pulls the liquid back into the cup, and the people at the tables around them assume the sound was in their imagination. Lainie tells her that she would like Celia to feel like she can tell her anything from this point on. She reminds Celia that everyone in the circus is involved in their competition, and they "are not as easily repaired as teacups."

Lainie is on a mission to find out why her sister died, as she is convinced that there is something going on that she should know about. Her conversation with Mr. Barris demonstrates how close they are: he feels closer to Lainie than to his own family, and is clearly in love with her and would marry her if she said yes. It seems, however, that Lainie is more focused on the death of her sister than romantic entanglements.



Once again, Mr. Barris is put in a difficult situation, as he has promised not to reveal what he knows, even though it would put Lainie at ease to find out the truth. He is caught between his love for his friend and his loyalty to Celia and Marco. In addition, because he is in the know, Mr. Barris is less bothered by the situation and does not mind the veil of secrecy that keeps him moving from city to city; for Tara and now Lainie, however, the main concern is simply not knowing what is going on.



Lainie's search finally leads to Celia, which works in her favor—unlike Mr. A.H., Celia has nothing to fear and is not interested in keeping secrets from anyone involved in the circus. Celia cannot tell her much about what happened to Tara, but she is forthcoming about the competition and the secrets behind the circus itself. The circus and everyone involved in it are important to Celia, and she is not willing to risk her sense of home and family to keep the competition a secret.



This interaction between the two women seems like something of a challenge on Lainie's part: it seems that she drops her cup on purpose, to see what Celia will do. Performing magic in front of Lainie, without passing it off as sleight of hand like she does in her shows, is an intimate act. Lainie then makes it clear to Celia that she does not want any secrets, and depends on her for information.



Dublin, 1901: After the end of the illusionist's performance, one man stays behind. Marco asks Celia if she likes the Cloud Maze, which she does, and she asks if Mr. Barris helped him with that. He runs his thumb along the inside of her wrist, and she is overcome with feeling and pulls away before it becomes too much. She asks if he is going to show her some of his magic, since he watched her—she even notes that he was in every audience that evening, and he cannot hide from her in the back row. He tells her that it would be too tempting to reach out and touch her if he sat in the front.

Celia steps closer to Marco. He puts his hand around her waist and spins her around to see the fabric walls of the tent turn into paper and words appear on it: Shakespearean sonnets and other romantic poetry. He asks if she likes it, and she can only nod and ask how he comes up with such images. Marco tells her that he imagines what she might like. Celia responds that she doesn't think he is supposed to imagine how to please his opponent, and Marco responds that he still doesn't know all the rules of the game, so he has chosen to follow his instincts instead.

Celia agrees that she has learned very little about the competition, especially when she asks about how a winner will be chosen. She mentions that Hector still pesters her a lot, and Marco notes that he has hardly seen Mr. A.H. in years, but he is still the closest thing to family that Marco has. Celia's father, on the other hand, regularly tells her what a disappointment she is, though Marco finds it hard to believe that anyone could be disappointed in her.

Marco asks Celia to explain what happened to Hector, and she explains that he is overambitious and wasn't able to do what he had planned—he wanted to remove himself from the physical world. When Marco asks how that would be possible, she uses the example of a glass of wine, asking if the wine were poured into a basin of water, or a lake or even the ocean, if it would be gone. It wouldn't, Marco responds, and Celia tells him that Hector found a way to remove his glass, but he shot for the ocean rather than something smaller and more manageable, and has trouble pulling himself together. Marco asks if this magic can be done properly, and Celia believes that it can be, with a touchstone of some kind, and that that she probably could do it if she had reason to.

Marco's desire for Celia is growing more and more intense, and although they cannot touch each other as much as they would like, they express their feelings for each other via their magic. Again, they have had such similar experiences in their youth, focusing entirely on the study of magic, that this is what brings them together. The Cloud Maze, for example, should be Marco's move in the competition, but is instead a gift to Celia.



When they are in close proximity, Marco can easily manipulate Celia's reality, allowing them to escape from the circus together, if only momentarily. In this instance, Marco creates for Celia a world made of love poems, which may remind readers of the Paramour statue, whose dress was made of love letters. Celia jokes about the competition, but it is a very real concern for their teachers.



Celia and Marco share a sense of bewilderment about the competition, as well as feelings of abandonment by their teachers, who are also the paternal influences in their lives. This is another experience that brings them closer together, as they look to the circus and each other for an emotional connection.



As magicians, Celia and Marco can discuss the logistics of Hector Bowen's magic trick gone wrong, and work out ways to improve on his work. Celia's explanation shows her deep understanding of magic, and suggests that she may be an even better magician than her father, if only because she is more rational than he is. In addition, their conversation about conducting this kind of magic successfully foreshadows later events, when Celia does have reason to want to remove herself from the physical world.



Hector still visits Celia, though he lacks solidity and it bothers him. Celia notes that he might have been more tangible if he had done the magic differently, but she muses that she doesn't think she would want to be stuck in a tree forever. Marco responds that it would depend on the tree, looking around at the tree that Celia has turned a deep red and intensifying the color until Celia has to close her eyes. When she opens them, they are on the deck of a ship made of books, in the middle of the ocean.

Celia looks down at the fingers of Marco's right hand, and he reveals the scar on his finger from the **ring** Mr. A.H. placed there when Marco was fourteen, with an inscription he doesn't remember. Celia tells him it is *esse quam videri*, the Bowen family motto, meaning "to be, rather than to seem." She notes the irony of the motto in light of Hector's botched magic trick, and shows Marco her ring with the same inscription. She then moves the ring to show her matching scar.

Marco asks Celia if Mr. A.H. gave the **ring** and scar to her, and she says yes, when she was only six years old. Celia had never before met anyone who could perform real magic like her father, though the two men were very different. Mr. A.H. told her she was an angel. Marco tells her that is an understatement, and places his hand on hers. The wind picks up, and Marco holds on to Celia to keep her steady. She calls him Mr. Illusionist, and he asks her to call him by his name. She does, and he tries to kiss her, but she turns away, and he can only whisper her name into her ear.

The two hold on to each other as the wind and waves die down around them. Celia apologizes for not letting Marco kiss her, telling him that she has spent her life trying to keep control of herself, but she loses that control with him, and it frightens her. Marco doesn't want her to be frightened, but she means that she is scared of how much she likes the feeling. She is tempted to lose herself with him, but knows that she shouldn't. Marco asks her to run away with him, but Celia reminds him that they can't do that. Marco insists that they can do anything when they are together, but Celia specifies that they can only do anything within the confines of the circus.

Celia's comment about being stuck in a tree is another reference to the Merlin story, in which the magician's lover traps him within an oak tree, which gives him immortality. Many of the characters in the novel disagree about whether or not they would enjoy being immortal, or confined to a single space, yet that is exactly what will happen to Celia and Marco.



Celia and Marco's rings were meant to pit them against one another, yet they now seem more like wedding rings, reflecting their romantic bond. Celia also notes the irony of the family motto in light of Hector's attempts "to seem"—passing off magic as simple illusion, and removing himself from the mortal world—rather than "to be."



The use of names in this scene is significant, as both Celia and Marco use names to create a greater level of intimacy. Mr. A.H.'s use of a term of endearment for young Celia reveals his (perhaps surprising) human side, while Marco's use of the same word expresses his love for her. She acknowledges his magical abilities by calling him Mr. Illusionist, but he would rather just be Marco with her in this moment.



In contrast to Marco's impulsivity with regards to their relationship, Celia is careful not to lose herself, and not to lose her concentration. She does not question her feelings for him, or his commitment to her—at least for the moment—but she recognizes the limitations of their relationship and the possible repercussions of rebelling against their teachers. In a way, they are already trapped within the circus.



Marco doesn't understand, so Celia asks him to imagine them leaving the circus and the competition and starting over. Marco closes his eyes and focuses on all of the minute details involved in leaving. When he does, however, his scar burns with a pain that causes him to collapse on the floor of the circus tent, as the paper ship vanishes. Celia takes his hand and tells him that she has already attempted to imagine it, the night of the anniversary party: she thought she would ask Marco to run away with her, and when she really thought about it, she was in so much pain that she could hardly stand up.

Marco smiles through the pain, delighted that Celia wanted to run away with him. He laughs, noting that he did not imagine his kiss would be quite so effective. He is still in pain, however, and Celia says that Hector told her it's best that they don't concern themselves with one another, and admits that he might be right. Marco says that he cannot stop thinking about her, and Celia agrees with him. She feels him all around her, especially in the Ice Garden.

Marco asks what is stopping them from being together, and Celia reminds him that there are many people tangled up in their competition, and she worries that their relationship will make her lose her concentration. Marco tells her that she needs a power source, like he has with the **bonfire**, rather than constantly controlling the circus on her own. It must be exhausting, he tells her. They stay near each other without touching, and share stories of their lives. When he leaves, Marco hands her his card with his address in London, noting that he is no longer staying with Chandresh. He tells her that he will not let her go, no matter who wins the competition, and then he kisses the **ring** on her finger.

Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey is having trouble herding his sheep in the field when he hears a voice behind him. Poppet snuck out of the circus to come and speak to him. He is struck by how out of place she looks, even in her non-circus clothes: wild and loose red hair, ruffled skirt, and dainty and impractical boots. He asks her if what she has to say can wait until that night, at the circus, and she tells him that she wants to give him time to think about it.

Poppet tells him that he is supposed to go with them, and that she knows this "for certain." Bailey is confused—he wants to know why him, and what he would do, without any special talents like she and Widget have. He doesn't think he belongs in the circus. Poppet disagrees, though she doesn't know why yet. She only knows that he belongs with them. Bailey says that he wants to but can't leave, thinking that it would either solve the argument about his future between his father and grandmother, or it would make it much worse.

Celia recognizes the severe limitations of their freedom because she has already attempted to rebel, and faced the consequences. As powerful as their magic is, they are no match for the binding spell that Mr. A.H. placed on them. In this moment, they can only indulge in their feelings for one another within the narrow confines of the circus and the competition, until they come up with a way to escape unharmed.



In the midst of the painful realization that they cannot be together except as rivals in the competition, Marco is able to find a bright side: he is happy to hear that his feelings for Celia are reciprocated. Again, Celia attempts to be rational, suggesting that they take her father's advice, but they agree that it is nearly impossible.



Celia's comment that there are many people involved in the competition brings to mind her conversation with Lainie Burgess, who specifically reminded Celia of her responsibility to everyone else in the circus. In contrast to their self-centered teachers, both Celia and Marco are deeply connected to the people around them, and do not want to hurt them. Their extreme restraint is clear in the fact that they choose not to touch one another again, despite their intense desire to do so.



Up to this point, Bailey and Poppet have only had contact within the circus, and he is therefore confused and unsettled to see her in the context of his home life. He is participating in the monotonous chores of life on the farm, while Poppet's impractical look reminds him of the otherworldliness of the circus.



Poppet has finally realized the important role that Bailey plays in her visions, and thus in the survival of the circus, which is why she is making such an urgent request. Bailey's worldview is still so small, however, that he is mainly concerned about how his family would react to this decision. Poppet already sees him as part of the circus family, however, which provides a deeper connection.



Poppet explains that if Bailey doesn't go with them, the circus will never be back; there will be no circus without him. She gestures to the sky and says that she only knows that for there to be a circus in the future, he must be there. And that the destruction of the circus is already beginning, even though he cannot see it from the outside. She can see it, though, just like Bailey would be able to recognize that one of his sheep was sick, even when Poppet wouldn't notice. She can tell something is wrong, though she doesn't know what it is.

Poppet reminds Bailey of the time they were in the birdcage room of the Labyrinth and couldn't get out—she has never been stuck in the Labyrinth before, and is usually able to focus and feel the exit, but couldn't that time. Bailey asked what he could do about it, and Poppet reminds him that he was the one who found the key and got them out. She asks if he is happy there at the farm, and if he has ever wanted anyone to come and take him away.

Bailey is surprised that his unhappiness at home is so obvious, and he asks if Widget read that on him. Poppet says no, but he sent along a bottle for Bailey, similar to the ones from his tent. Bailey opens it and is immediately transported to the oak tree: he can smell the acorns, feel the roughness of the bark, and even hear the squirrels. Poppet tells him that Widget wanted Bailey to be able to keep his tree with him, if he chose to go with them. He asks how long he has to decide, and Poppet tells him that they are leaving that night, after the circus closes.

Poppet tells Bailey to arrive before dawn, and he says that he has to think about it. Poppet asks one last favor: if he chooses not to come with them, she doesn't want him to come to the circus at all that night, leaving this as their last goodbye. She kisses him on the lips, and he realizes that he would follow her anywhere. She leaves, and he turns to see that his sheep have herded themselves through the gate without his help.

London, 1901: When the circus arrives in London, Celia wants to go to see Marco immediately, but instead goes to the Midland Grand Hotel. She waits in the lobby for more than an hour before she is approached by the man in the grey suit, Mr. A.H. She speaks to him briefly, he nods, and she curtseys and leaves.

Poppet gestures to the sky in reference to her visions, some of which come to her from the stars. While they are still somewhat vague, Poppet intuitively recognizes their importance, just as Bailey would intuitively know how to care for a sick animal on the farm. She also knows how much Bailey loves the circus, and calls on him to play a role in its survival by becoming part of the circus family.



Bailey believes that he is not special—that is, he has no supernatural or magical powers like the circus performers do—but Poppet makes it clear to him that he has the power to save them. She reminds Bailey of the simple heroism of finding a way out of the Labyrinth as proof that he is special.



Not only does the circus need Bailey to survive, but Bailey needs the circus, as well. He is unsatisfied with his life on the farm, yet has not envisioned a way to escape a future that will be planned out for him by either his father or his grandmother. And Widget's gift to Bailey means that if he leaves with the circus, he can bring with him the good feelings associated with his memories of the oak tree.



Bailey knows that he would prefer to join the circus family, but has not yet recognized that he is free to make that decision. Poppet hopes to convince Bailey by appealing to their mutual attraction to one another, as well. When she kisses him, he realizes his feelings for her, which helps him make his decision.



Now that she and Marco are aware of their feelings for one another, Celia is on a mission to end the competition. This is her objective in speaking with Mr. A.H., though she will not be aware of the true consequences of her actions until much later.



It is Halloween at the circus in London, and the atmosphere is particularly festive, with patrons donning masks handed out by the ticket booth. Isobel is in her tent when Marco comes through the beaded curtain. He has come to tell her that he is in love with Celia, which Isobel has come to expect, because she has read it in her tarot cards for years. After he tells her, Isobel asks him to draw a single card and he does, drawing *La Papessa*.

After Marco leaves, Isobel reaches under her table and takes out a hatbox made from black silk and tied with one black and one white ribbon. She unties the carefully knotted ribbons slowly, pulls the lid off, and pulls out an old black bowler hat. The hat is tied with more ribbons, and is sitting on top of a single tarot card with a folded white handkerchief between them. She thinks about the spell she cast, and how it was only a precaution to guard against the unpredictability of the situation. She has no idea whether or not the spell has done any good; in fact, she says to the hat, "I don't think you're having any effect at all," voicing her doubts out loud.

Isobel thinks about how Marco told Mr. A.H. that everything he has done in the circus was for Celia, and how Isobel has been helping him, keeping them balanced. She pulls the ribbons apart angrily. The card—the angel of *Temperance*—and the handkerchief—embroidered with the initials C.N.B—both fall to the ground. As she reaches down to pick them up, she is startled by the sound of Poppet Murray screaming.

Concord, MA, 1902: Poppet and Widget stand anxiously at the circus gates as the clock chimes three o'clock in the morning. Poppet worries that Bailey was upset that she asked him not to come to the circus if he wasn't planning on leaving with them, but she wanted to make sure that he knew how important it was to them. She also tells Widget that she kissed him, but he already knows, and tells her that she didn't hide it very well. Poppet asks Widget if he talked to Celia, and he says he told Celia that Bailey was supposed to come with them and she said she wouldn't do anything to prevent it.

Poppet asks if Widget remembers riding the Stargazer with her and Bailey when she saw something bright but couldn't tell what it was. Widget remembers, and Poppet tells him that it was the courtyard of the circus, burning and hot. And then Bailey was there, in her vision. She thinks this vision of hers is going to happen very soon. Widget considers kidnapping Bailey, hitting with something heavy and dragging him to the circus and onto the train before he regains consciousness. Poppet doesn't like that idea and tells her brother that they have done what they were supposed to do and can only wait for Bailey now.

Although Isobel already knows about Marco's feelings for Celia, she has been unwilling to accept the reality of the situation. When she hears it directly from Marco, however, she cannot ignore the fact that he does not love her, and that her role in the circus is unnecessary at this point.



Unbeknownst to both Marco and Celia, Isobel has secretly cast a spell to help keep the circus in balance. She foresaw the danger involved in the competition, and wanted to protect the circus, which had become like a family to her. She notes that she doubts her spell has had any effect, but she will soon find out that it was indeed keeping balance within the circus; when she undoes the spell, she will put in motion a series of events that will mark the downfall of the circus.



Faced with the undeniable knowledge that Marco does not love her, Isobel finally expresses her anger, reversing her balancing spell and changing the future of the circus in ways that she could not have imagined. Almost immediately, the world outside of Isobel's tent begins to unravel, signaled by Poppet's scream of horror.



Poppet has done everything she can to convince Bailey to join them in the circus, and now they can only wait to see if he shows up. In addition, the fact that Widget can tell that Poppet kissed Bailey is important—it is on Poppet's mind, revealing that she genuinely reciprocates Bailey's romantic feelings for her. While the kiss helped Bailey decide to join the circus to be near Poppet, she does not know that yet, and is scared of rejection.



Poppet's visions have become increasingly clear to her, and she is sure that the apocalyptic images she envisioned are not far off. She needs Bailey to save them, yet unlike Widget, she does not want to simply kidnap him and force him to join them. It is important to her, and later on to Celia, for Bailey to make his own choice, and to choose to become the one to save the circus. This sense of agency will make his connection to the circus that much stronger.



London, 1901: This Halloween is cold, forcing patrons to wear heavy coats and scarves. Chandresh is at the circus this evening, donning a mask and paying full admission, slipping into the crowd unnoticed. Mr. A.H. is also in attendance for the first time ever, and he does not wear a mask. Chandresh follows him closely, though he somehow loses him in the crowd a few times. He is not aware that he is also being followed, and Marco has disguised his looks enough that his boss would not recognize him even if he were to see him up close. Still, he keeps his distance, though Chandresh is interested in nothing but the man in the grey suit.

Mr. A.H. seems to be enjoying himself at the circus. He visits the fortune-teller, who attempts to tell his future. He also watches the illusionist perform, tours the Hall of Mirrors, rides the Carousel, and strolls through the Ice Garden. Chandresh follows him through the entire night, and Marco follows Chandresh, slipping away for a moment to take care of some business. Mr. A.H. stops to talk to someone, and Chandresh stops to watch him. Time nearly stands still as Chandresh hears a voice telling him that the man in the grey suit is just a figment of his imagination.

Across the circus, an acrobat nearly misses her partner and crashes to the ground, the **bonfire** sputters and blows a puff of black smoke, and Poppet's kitten falls on its back with a howl. In her performance, Celia suddenly feels faint and needs assistance from the audience to stay on her feet. Marco crumples as if he has been punched in the stomach. Chandresh pulls out his silver knife from his pocket and throws it through the air, aiming straight at Mr. A.H., who moves at the last second, almost imperceptibly. The knife lodges itself in the chest of Herr Friedrich Thiessen, whom Mr. A.H. has been talking to, piercing his heart. Mr. A.H. catches Thiessen while Chandresh stares at his hand, confused, and wanders off. The next morning, he has no memory of even attending the circus.

Mr. A.H. lowers Thiessen to the ground, whispering in his ear the whole time and then closing his eyes. The patrons around them only notice that Poppet and Widget have stopped performing and then Poppet begins to scream as Herr Thiessen's blood begins to pool underneath her boots. Mr. A.H. then pulls the knife from the man's chest, stands up, and walks away, silently handing Marco the bloody knife as he passes him.

The fact that it is Halloween night means that the series of events that will transpire—many of which are horrific and bloody—will mainly go unnoticed by the circus attendees, who are prepared for just about anything. It is also important to note that both Chandresh and his assistant, Marco, are wearing masks, but Mr. A.H. is not. He has nothing to fear, despite the fact that Chandresh seems to have malicious intentions.



Although Mr. A.H. considers it nothing more than a venue for his competition with Hector Bowen, he almost seems to recognize and appreciate the wonders of the circus outside of that context. Chandresh, on the other hand, has only one objective with this visit: the ghost of Hector Bowen has been filling his head with ideas in an attempt to gain advantage in the competition. Even now, he is whispering in Chandresh's ear.



This is the moment in which the tenuous circus finally loses its balance, and corresponds to the moment that Isobel reverses her protective spell out of anger at Marco. While she did not believe her spell was having any effect, she and the other members of the circus family will realize—too late, of course—how essential her charm really was. Propelled by forces beyond his control, Chandresh attempts to kill Mr. A.H., but ends up killing Friedrich Thiessen, and innocent man whose death will mark the beginning of the end for the circus.



Mr. A.H.'s reaction to his attempted murder and the death of Thiessen is fairly cold and impassive. This begs the question of whether Mr. A.H. stepped out of the way of Chandresh's knife out of luck, or if he meant for Chandresh to murder an innocent man. Either way, Mr. A.H. wants nothing to do with the aftermath of the crime, and promptly leaves.



Concord, MA, 1902: Bailey is preparing to leave, and he stops at the oak tree to look through his box of treasures, though the only thing he wants to bring with him is Poppet's white glove. He collects his life savings, packs a change of clothes, and waits for his family to fall asleep. He then creeps through the house and finds some paper to write a note to his parents. He explains why he is leaving, not mentioning the argument over Harvard and the farm. He thinks about the time his mother told him that she wished happiness and adventure for him, and thinks that this would definitely count as an adventure.

Bailey is startled by his sister's voice asking him what he's doing—she's in the doorway in her nightgown, watching him. He asks her to make sure his parents read the note he wrote, and she asks if he is running away. When he tells her that he is, she tells him to go back to bed. He tells her that she wouldn't understand anyway. Unlike his sister, staying at home will not make Bailey happy: she will be content with this life, but he is not. He finishes by asking her to marry someone who will take care of the sheep for him. He expects someone to come after him as he walks away from the house, but he is on his own. As he reaches the oak tree, it is later than he expected it to be, and as he looks out at the field, the circus is gone.

London, 1901: As Mr. A.H. walks out of the crowd and towards the gates of the circus, he is met by Hector Bowen, and he tells Hector that the venue is too exposed for the competition, and it is getting out of hand. Hector replies that it is fun this way, and asks if he didn't use enough of his concealment after taking control of the venue. Mr. A.H. responds that he controls nothing, though it was his idea for the circus to travel from city to city unannounced, to protect and benefit the players. Hector tells him that the circus's movement only keeps them apart, and if they were together from the start, Celia would have won already.

Mr. A.H. notes incredulously that perhaps Hector hasn't noticed that Marco and Celia are in love, and that it only would have happened sooner if they were in the same place. Hector tells him he should have been a matchmaker, but that he has trained his player better than that. But it was Celia who invited Mr. A.H. to the circus, he notes as he watches a distraught Marco follow Chandresh through the crowd. Hector says that he told Mr. A.H. to choose a player whom he could lose, because he often becomes too attached to his students. Mr. A.H. responds by asking him how many of his students have chosen to forfeit the game themselves—seven? He wonders if Celia will be the eighth.

Despite his surprise at Poppet's request, there was never really any doubt in Bailey's mind about joining the circus. It had provided him with a sense of family and belonging that was somehow inaccessible back at home on the farm. He is taking the advice that his grandmother and even his mother have given him, and going out in search of happiness and adventure, which the farm could not provide him.



Although much of their struggle can be attributed to simple sibling rivalry, Bailey's relationship with his sister lacks the spirit of love and companionship that he sees in Poppet and Widget. Bailey and his sister are two very different people, and he outlines those differences clearly, explaining why he simply cannot remain at home on the farm for the rest of his life. It is his sister's destiny, and not his, to remain in one place forever. His hopes for an exciting adventure are dashed, however, when he finds the circus gone.



As a man lies dying only a few hundred yards away, Hector Bowen and Mr. A.H. discuss the progress of the competition, showing absolutely no compassion for other human beings. At the very least, Mr. A.H. expresses some concern for the way in which events have played out, while Hector seems to enjoy the chaos and is even less concerned about the casualties of the competition.



Hector seems to be ignoring the signs that Marco and Celia are falling in love and beginning to rebel against their teachers and the idea of the competition itself. Their single-minded focus on their own rivalry—which seems to have lasted more than one lifetime, given the number of competitions they reference, and the length of time each competition could last—makes them overlook the dangers to their students and innocent bystanders. As they discuss the strength of their players, Marco and Celia are grieving Thiessen's death.



Hector says that it will not happen again, because she will win, because “she is a stronger player” than Marco is. But Mr. A.H. amplifies the sounds coming from near Thiessen, so that Hector can hear Celia sobbing over the man’s corpse. He asks if that sounds like a strong player, noting that someone dear to her has just died, and if she has not already begun to break, this could put her over the edge. Hector only responds that the competition isn’t over yet, and he vanishes. Mr. A.H. stops to watch the clock in the courtyard before leaving the circus for the night.

Later that evening, Marco is in his flat, which is full of furniture that Chandresh has abandoned and so many books that there is nowhere to hold all of them. There is a Thiessen clock on the mantel, with tiny books whose pages actually turn. Marco is at his desk going through papers and books, taking notes and making calculations, going back and forth between his books and his notes, writing and re-writing. Suddenly, he is startled by the door: the locks open on their own and the door swings open, causing Marco to spill ink all over his papers.

Celia is in the doorway looking disheveled, her gown covered in blood. She comes in and the door shuts and locks itself behind her, and Marco asks her what happened and if she is all right. She responds that no, she is not all right, making the bottle of ink shatter and spray all over him. She tells him that she tried to heal Herr Thiessen, that she hoped because she had known him so well, it would be like putting a clock back together, but she couldn’t do it. She begins to sob, and Marco rushes to hold her, telling her that he is sorry, over and over.

Marco tells Celia that something threw everything off balance, but he does not know what it was. Celia tells him that it was Isobel and the charm she put over the circus. Celia could feel it, though she didn’t think it was doing much of anything. She just doesn’t know why Isobel chose to stop it. Marco tells her that he finally admitted to Isobel that he loves Celia. He should have done it a long time ago, but he chose that night, and he thought that she took it well, but apparently she did not.

He doesn’t know why Mr. A.H. was at the circus, but Celia tells Marco that she invited him because she wanted a verdict. She wanted him to declare a winner and finish the competition so that they could be together. She wonders how Chandresh knew he would be there, and Marco doesn’t know the answer to that. Chandresh insisted that Marco not accompany him, so Marco followed Chandresh instead and only lost track of him for a few moments to visit Isobel. He was hoping to keep Chandresh from hurting himself, but he never imagined that Chandresh would hurt someone else.

What both Hector and Mr. A.H. do not understand about Celia is that her strength lies in her love and compassion for others, which Mr. A.H. mistakes for weakness. The death of Herr Thiessen is damaging to her emotionally, but she will develop an even stronger resolve to rebel against the restrictions of the competition and find a way to escape with Marco.



Marco’s whole world is made up of pieces of the circus, especially after he removed all of his paperwork from his office in Chandresh’s house to better maintain his secret magical work. The clock on his wall is a reminder of how essential Thiessen has been to the circus, and to the lives of everyone associated with it. His death is the first sign that there is something wrong at the circus.



This conversation between Celia and Marco reflects a number of earlier incidents, in which Celia has noticed, or been warned, that while she can use her magic to fix inanimate objects, she cannot bring human beings back to life. And her reference to clocks is a reminder of how easily she fixed Thiessen’s broken clock when they first met, and how she is frustrated by the limitations of her magic.



Like Isobel, Celia did not recognize the power of the magical charm keeping the circus in balance, nor did she recognize the power of Isobel’s anger. Once again, the competition between Marco and Celia has an intricate web of repercussions, and involves nearly everyone associated with the circus.



The death of Friedrich Thiessen is the result of a series of converging events and choices, including Celia’s desire to resolve the competition, Marco’s decision to inform Isobel of his love for Celia, and Hector Bowen’s plan to use Chandresh to take revenge on his old rival Mr. A.H. And while both Celia and Marco will blame themselves in some way for his death, there is no way that either could see it coming.



Celia looks around at Marco's work and asks him what it is. The books are full of symbols and notes, and in the middle is Marco's notebook with a tree drawn inside. He tells her that it is how he works, how he has bound everyone in the circus. He has placed another copy of this notebook in the **bonfire** at the circus as a safeguard, though he has made adjustments to the one on his desk. He says that he wishes he had included Herr Thiessen in his notebook, though he never considered it before. Celia assures him that if it had not been Thiessen, it would have been someone else, and that there is no way to protect everyone.

Marco tells her he is sorry for her loss, that he didn't know Thiessen as well as she did, but he admired his work. Celia tells him that Thiessen showed her the circus in a way she hadn't seen it before, and that they had corresponded for years. Marco tells her that he would have written her too, but he couldn't put his feelings into words, that they would never have been enough. But Celia responds that he built her dreams instead, while she has built him tents that he doesn't often get to see. She is surrounded by so much of him, and he rarely gets to enjoy her. This is what her father would call working from the outside, and he would hate it, she notes. Marco tells her that he would definitely hate the next room, then.

Marco leads Celia into the adjoining room, which he has filled with models of tents made from newsprint, fabric, bits of paper, and held together with black, white, and red string. There is a tiny model of the cauldron in the middle, complete with a flame, and a web of string hanging from the ceiling, as well. She notes that it is very old magic he is using, and he tells her that it's the only kind he knows, though he doubts that it was ever meant for this particular purpose.

Celia finds the tent where she performs, and sees that it is made of pages of Shakespearean sonnets. She finishes her tour and leaves the room, closing the door behind her and thanking Marco for showing her. Marco tells her that he presumes Hector would not approve, and she tells him that she doesn't care what her father thinks anymore. Marco offers to speak with Mr. A.H., to see if he can provide a verdict, or maybe consider the death of Herr Thiessen a disqualification.

Marco has been poring over his magical notebook for a way to reverse the course of events, or to reinstate Isobel's magical charm, but Celia is the voice of reason in this moment, noting that neither of them have the power to protect everyone around them. Again, they have been forced into a competition without their consent, and only now recognize the amount of responsibility that comes with the competition.



Celia and Friedrich Thiessen developed a special, possibly even slightly romantic, relationship, and his death means that Marco is the only significant romantic interest in Celia's life. Celia and Marco discuss their desire to spend more time together, and use their magic in a way that brings them closer. Again, they do not conceive of their magic as a way to compete against one another, which is antithetical to the way their teachers have set up the competition.



Marco shows Celia exactly how he weaves his magic, through an intricate model of the circus that he manipulates. Unlike Celia, whose magic comes from within and is intuitive for her, Marco has learned his magic from books, and treats it almost like a science.



Once again, Marco uses love poetry as part of the structure for Celia's tent, recalling the time he manipulated Celia's perception to create a world made of the pages of sonnets and love poems for her. When Marco jokes about Hector Bowen's reaction to the room, Celia responds rebelliously, reasserting her resolve not to follow her father's orders.



Celia asks Marco to stop talking about the competition. She says that she is tired of trying to hold things together and control the uncontrollable and denying herself what she wants. She can no longer resist him, and they begin to kiss and undress each other, and Marco pulls her down on the floor with him. They make love on the floor, making the entire room tremble with their shared energy. Marco falls asleep, and when he wakes up, Celia is gone. It is dawn, and she has left her **ring** on the mantel, which he slips onto his pinky finger. He only notices later that she has taken his notebook, the safeguard for the circus.

Celia decides that she no longer wants to talk about the competition, and instead focus on her feelings for Marco, without holding herself back as she has done in the past. They finally allow themselves to become physically intimate with one another, but Celia cannot allow herself to relax and stay with Marco while he sleeps, because she is determined to find a way to remove the two of them from the competition for good.



PART 4: INCENDIARY

Celia is lying in Marco's arms, wishing this moment would never end. She manages to slow down his heartbeat enough to put him to sleep, and as the day dawns, she lets him sleep and gets dressed quietly. She takes her **ring** off and puts it on the mantel, and as she puts on her coat, she looks at the books on his desk. She decides that she needs to learn his systems in order to make the circus more independent and take some of the weight off her shoulders, which might give them the opportunity to be alone together without breaking the rules of the competition.

After finally giving in to her feelings for Marco, Celia is determined to find a way to escape the competition and hopes that she can use her magic, the only weapon she has, to do it. While she is willing to collaborate with Marco in the competition, Celia has decided that this is something she must do on her own, and even takes Marco's notebook without telling him.



Celia takes Marco's notebook with her as she leaves Marco's flat, and as soon as she is out in the hallway, Hector appears, calling her a "deceitful little slut." He then asks her what she is doing with Marco's notebook, and reminds her that she cannot interfere with his work. She notes sarcastically that interference is one of the few things that is officially against the rules, and explains that she is just trying to learn his systems so she doesn't have to control so much of the circus. Hector tells her that she shouldn't be concerning herself with that, and adds that he has overestimated her ability to handle the competition.

Hector Bowen's conversation with his daughter borders on abusive in this scene, as he attempts to shame her for her relationship with Marco and therefore keep control over her and the competition. Again, Hector can only see Celia's value in terms of her magical abilities, and even then, her magic is only of value to him as a way of winning the competition and gaining advantage over his rival, Mr. A.H.



Celia asks Hector if this is the point of the game, to see how each of the players deals with the repercussions of magic in a public venue, in a world that doesn't believe in magic anyway; that it is a test of stamina and control rather than skill. Hector replies that it is a test of strength, and that she is weak—weaker than he originally thought. If she is so weak, she says, he should just let her lose because she doesn't want to play any longer. He explains to her that there is no declaration of a winner, that the game doesn't stop. It is simply played out.

Despite defending Celia's strength to Mr. A.H., Hector questions whether or not his daughter actually can handle the weight of the competition, though his concerns come much too late for him to do anything about them. For the first time, Celia overtly expresses her desire to quit, even if that means losing the competition, because she believes that is an option. Finally, however, Hector tells her what she needs to know.



Celia begins to put together the clues in her mind, thinking of all of the vague non-answers Hector has given her in the past, and finally realizes how the competition is supposed to end. She announces that the winner is the one left standing after their opponent can no longer play, and Hector agrees, though he finds it a simplification. Devastated, she turns back to the door of Marco's flat, and places her hand on the door. Hector ridicules her for believing she loves him, because she is above mundane feelings like love. Celia tells her father that he is willing to sacrifice her life "to prove a point," and he has let her think it was a simple game of skill.

Celia asks what will happen to the circus after the competition is over, and Hector reminds her that it is simply a venue, and it serves no purpose after the game is finished. She asks why he never told her this before, and he says that he never imagined she might be in a position to lose—to die, Celia corrects him. He then tells her that she should stop imagining that she will play "whore to that nobody Alexander [Mr. A.H.] plucked out of a London gutter" after the competition is over. Celia ignores this comment and asks what happened to the student who won the previous challenge, and he tells her that the winner is Tsukiko, the circus contortionist.

The circus train is en route from London to Munich, traveling silently and puffing clouds of grey smoke. On board the train, Celia changes out of her bloody gown and puts Marco's notebook away among her own. Wearing a gown that she knows was one of Thiessen's favorites, she walks over to Tsukiko's train compartment and knocks. Tsukiko invites her in, and she is sitting in the middle of her compartment with Isobel's head in her lap. Isobel is sobbing softly, and Celia hesitates in the doorway, saying that she doesn't want to interrupt. Tsukiko tells her she is not interrupting, and asks her to tell Isobel that she needs rest. Isobel wipes her eyes, nods, and gets up to leave, thanking Tsukiko. When she passes Celia, she stops and tells her she is sorry about Thiessen's death, and looks like she wants to hug her, but doesn't.

Once Isobel is gone, Tsukiko offers Celia tea and tells her that the past hours have been difficult for everyone. She has Celia sit down and she pours out the green matcha tea carefully, though without the full tea ritual that she often does for visitors. When Tsukiko sits down, Celia asks her why Tsukiko never told her before. Tsukiko smiles and asks what she's talking about, which frustrates Celia and makes her want to break the woman's tea bowl. Tsukiko points to Celia's scar and asks if she injured herself, and Celia replies that she was bound to a challenge nearly thirty years earlier.

After years of asking for more information about the competition, wanting to understand the rules, Celia is finally learning something that will change the way she and Marco see their roles as competitors, and will reinforce their desire to find a way out of the competition altogether. For the competition to end, one of them has to die—and the other will have to live with the knowledge that he or she is responsible for the death of someone they love very much.



As Celia attempts to wrap her mind around the information she has just learned from her father, her thoughts go to the other people involved in the competition—everyone associated with the circus. But Hector is incapable of understanding how central the circus has become in the lives of the performers, spectators, and organizers. What he tells her next, however, is significant: Tsukiko participated in—and won—the previous competition, which means that she may be able to help Celia learn more about how to escape the inevitable outcome.



Armed with this new information about the competition and about Tsukiko's participation in it, Celia goes to speak with the contortionist and learn as much as she can. Celia is surprised to find Isobel in Tsukiko's compartment, and feels somewhat uncomfortable, knowing that she is partially responsible for Isobel's suffering. The fact that Isobel pulls herself together and offers her condolences to Celia for Thiessen's death shows a level of maturity, goodwill, and empathy on Isobel's part. She cannot bring herself to hug Celia, however, as her feelings of sisterhood have their limits.



Tsukiko has suddenly become a much more central character in the narrative, as she holds the answers to many important questions. However, she is also a complex character and rarely forthcoming, frustrating Celia with her non-answers and feigned bewilderment at Celia's questions. This is Tsukiko's strategy to keep control of the conversation and only offer information when she is comfortable doing so.



Celia asks to see Tsukiko's scar, and the contortionist lowers the neckline of her kimono to reveal a faded **ring**-shaped scar on the nape of her neck, in between various tattoos. She tells Celia that the scars last longer than the competition, and Celia asks if the scar is from one of Hector's rings. Tsukiko does not answer, asking Celia how her tea is. Celia asks why Tsukiko is at the circus, and she responds that she was hired to be the contortionist. Celia is frustrated, but Tsukiko tells her to ask better questions if she wants better answers. So Celia asks her why Tsukiko never told Celia that she knew about the competition, or that she herself had played. Tsukiko says that she made a promise not to reveal herself unless questioned directly.

Finally, as Celia reveals her scar and the story behind it, Tsukiko shares a bit more about herself and her experience. When Celia asks more pointed questions, however, Tsukiko closes up and replies with more non-answers, establishing a pattern. She even criticizes Celia for not asking the right questions; when Celia asks her why she has not been forthcoming about what she knows of the competition, Tsukiko again places the blame back on Celia by saying that she was waiting to be questioned directly.



Celia then asks why Tsukiko came to the circus in the first place, and she responds that she was curious, and there had not been a challenge since she won hers. She adds that she never intended to stick around, but she liked Chandresh, found the venue unique, and wanted to stay and observe. Celia asks her to talk about the game, and Tsukiko tells her that there is more to it than she thinks, and that it is about more than magic. Everything is a part of the competition, and it's something that they carry within themselves, regardless of the venue. It is like chess, but without the discreet squares for each to stand on.

Finally, Tsukiko begins to reveal something of herself, when she talks about the circus and how she enjoyed being a part of it. She does not state this directly, but Tsukiko has also found a sense of belonging in the circus, and later on she will show that she is willing to do just about anything to preserve that. But for the moment, Tsukiko lets Celia know how all-encompassing the competition can be for the opponents.



Tsukiko asks Celia if she loves Marco, and Celia says that she does. Tsukiko then asks if she believes that Marco loves her, and Celia suddenly begins to doubt it, based on the wording of the question. Tsukiko tells her that "love is fickle and fleeting," and that Celia should not use it as a basis for decision-making in the competition. Isobel thought Marco loved her too, and she even came to the circus to assist him. Celia insists that Marco loves her, but even as she says it she continues to doubt it. Tsukiko suggests that he may just be very good at manipulation, lying to people to tell them what they want to hear.

When Tsukiko brings up the relationship between Celia and Marco, she is able to plant a small seed of doubt in Celia's mind regarding Marco's feelings and intentions. Tsukiko paints Marco as unreliable and manipulative, using his recent rejection of Isobel as an example. This strikes a chord with Celia, because she feels that her father manipulated her mother and is to blame for her death.



Celia is heartbroken and can't decide which is more upsetting: that one of them will have to die for the competition to be over, or to think that she means nothing to him and is just a piece on a board, waiting to lose. Tsukiko tells her that it is a fine line between partner and opponent, and it can be difficult to know which face is true. Also, Celia has much more to deal with beyond just her opponent. Tsukiko's own competition was in a more private venue, with fewer people—the space itself is now a tea garden, though she hasn't been back since the competition ended.

Playing on Celia's insecurities about her family's past, Tsukiko is able to erode Celia's confidence in Marco, which is part of the contortionist's strategy to control Celia's next moves in the competition. Tsukiko then shares some details about her own competition, noting that hers was a much more private venue and that she has not returned to the place where her opponent died.



Celia wonders if the circus could continue after the challenge has ended, and Tsukiko notes that it would be a good tribute to Herr Thiessen, but it would be complicated to make it completely independent of Celia and Marco. She notes that Celia has taken on too much responsibility for it all, and if Tsukiko were to stab her, the train would crash. Celia considers it and agrees that it is possible. Tsukiko asks if it would also be problematic if she were to extinguish the **bonfire**, and Celia nods.

Tsukiko tells Celia that there is much work to do if she wants the circus to survive. Celia asks if she is offering to help, and Tsukiko says no—but if Celia is unable to do it, Tsukiko will step in. She will give Celia some time to work it out, but it has gone on for too long already. Celia asks how much time, and Tsukiko cannot give her a number. They sit in silence for a while, and then Celia asks her what happened to her opponent. Tsukiko responds that her opponent is a pillar of ash in Kyoto, unless she has been blown away by the wind.

Concord and Boston, 1902: Bailey walks into the empty field, not fully believing that the circus left without him. There is not even a blade of grass out of place to indicate that it was ever there. He sits down with his head in his hands, and then remembers that Poppet mentioned a train. Deciding that any train would have to go through Boston to get to another city, he runs as fast as he can to the train station, and when he arrives, he finds no trains. He was hoping it would be there, waiting for him, but then he sees two people on the platform—a man and woman in black coats and red scarves.

The woman asks Bailey if he is okay, because he is panting, and he asks if they are following the circus. They are, and he asks if they know Poppet and Widget, but they do not. He explains that they're the twins with the kitten show, and they're his friends. The couple remembers the kitten show and the twins, and they ask how he became friends with them. He says that it is a long story, and they tell him that he can explain on the way to Boston. He tells them that he is trying to follow the circus, and they say that they are doing the same, but won't find out where it is going to be for another day.

Once again, Celia is concerned about the fate of the circus beyond its use for the competition, and is ready to discuss with Tsukiko some ways to preserve it. However, at the same time, Tsukiko is also gathering information on Celia's role in maintaining the circus. Celia is unaware of the fact that Tsukiko has a plan in mind and is ready to take action.



Finally, Tsukiko is direct with Celia, giving her an ultimatum. She does not give her a time frame, but makes it clear to Celia that she is responsible for saving the circus, or Tsukiko will do the work for her. Tsukiko then talks about her opponent, who lit herself on fire as a way of ending the competition. This conversation provides some foreshadowing for the end of the competition between Celia and Marco.



Bailey is too late to leave with the circus, and instead of giving up and going back home, he decides to search for the circus train and meet them at their next destination. This is a new sense of determination for Bailey, who only hours earlier was struggling with his lack of agency in his own future. However, making the decision to join Poppet has emboldened him, and he embarks on a journey to create his own future.



Bailey connects with a group of rêveurs at the train station, who will help him join up with the circus at their new location. They will also provide Bailey with a further sense of community and purpose, reinforcing his decision to make this monumental step towards the future of his choosing. Bailey also realizes that while he does not yet consider himself a rêveur, he has a deeper connection to the circus than most others do.



Bailey asks them how they find out, and they tell him that *rêveurs* have their methods. They introduce themselves as Lorena and Victor, and they are following the circus around North America. Bailey shares his story of how he knows the twins and then another *rêveur*, Elizabeth, joins the group. Lorena introduces Bailey as a fellow *rêveur*, though he is not yet comfortable with the term. Elizabeth asks him if he adores the circus more than anything in the world, and he says that he does. She tells him that this makes him a *rêveur*, even without the customary black-and-white outfit or red scarf.

When they arrive in Boston, they ask Bailey where he is staying, and he tells them he will probably just stay at the station until it is time to travel again. They offer to let him stay with them at the Parker House. Bailey tries to turn them down, but Lorena tells him that Victor is stubborn and will not take no for an answer. When they arrive at the hotel, Bailey is overwhelmed by the opulence of it, and he tells Lorena that he feels like a girl in a fairytale who doesn't have the right shoes but is attending a ball at the castle. Lorena laughs loudly at this, attracting stares from other guests.

The following day, Victor and Lorena take Bailey out to buy a suit. He is measured and fitted for a grey suit that is nicer than his father's best suit, along with a pair of shiny shoes and a hat. Bailey has difficulty recognizing himself in the mirror. They return to the hotel just in time for Elizabeth to join them and bring them down for dinner. There are more than a dozen *rêveurs* at dinner, creating a casual and joyful atmosphere. Lorena notices that Bailey is not wearing any red and plucks a red rose from a nearby vase and places it in his lapel.

Bailey listens to all of their stories of the circus, amazed to be among people who love it as much as he does. He asks if anyone thinks anything is wrong with the circus, and Victor responds that it is not quite the same since Herr Thiessen died. Bailey asks who he is and they explain that he is one of the original *rêveurs*, and that he made the clock just inside of the circus gates. Bailey is surprised that someone outside the circus made the clock, because he always assumed it was born from the circus. Victor continues that Thiessen was also a writer, which is how they met him: they read one of his columns and began to write to him, well before the term *rêveur* was even established.

Bailey is introduced to the culture and community of the rêveurs, whom he had previously recognized within the circus by their black, white, and red uniforms. And while Bailey continues to think of himself as an outsider, not daring to use the term rêveur to describe himself, his new friends and traveling partners assure him that he is part of their tribe simply based on his love for the circus. Bailey struggles with this new sense of belonging.



As this is his first experience with the generosity and sense of community that the rêveurs are known for, Bailey is nervous about accepting help and support from them. When he sees the opulent hotel where he will be staying, he still feels slightly out of place, but appreciates his luck. Comparing himself to a girl in a fairytale seems humorous to his new friend, but Bailey has embarked on a whole new world.



Before he can even catch up with the circus, Bailey is already immersed in a world that seems a million miles away from his home, where he would never have had these kinds of experiences. This is the journey that Isobel mentioned when she read his fortune, and it is a necessary experience to help Bailey transform into the person who will save the circus.



Bailey is finally completely immersed in his element, fully dressed the part and surrounded by people who share his love for the circus. He takes the opportunity to find out more about the cryptic statements that Poppet made to him the previous morning, and learns a lot of the circus's history, as well as the effect of Thiessen's death. Bailey is also surprised that someone outside of the circus, someone who is probably not so different from him, could have had such an impact on the circus.



Lorena tells him that Thiessen made her a clock that looks like the Carousel that she absolutely loves. Bailey asks why the circus has not been the same since Thiessen's death, and wonders if this is related to what he heard from Poppet. They all agree that there is something off about the circus now, though they cannot specify what it is exactly. Bailey asks when he died, and they reply that it was exactly a year earlier. They toast to the memory of Friedrich Thiessen, and continue to tell stories about him through dessert. Victor slips out and comes back with the news that the circus will be in New York next.

Montreal, 1902: After Celia finishes her performance and her audience leaves, there is one man sitting, waiting for her. She sits down across from Marco and tells him that he usually sits in the back. He asks her if she expected him to come so far to see her, and she says that she didn't expect it at all. He tells her that she can't hide, and she insists that she hasn't been hiding. She thanks him for the Pool of Tears, a special place where she feels safe enough to cry when he cannot be with her. Then he mentions that she stole his notebook, for which she apologizes. He is okay with that, as long as it is somewhere safe, but he wishes that she had asked, or even said goodbye when she left his flat.

Celia tells Marco that she is trying to make the circus independent, to untie it from the challenge and from the two of them. She needed to learn his system in order to do that. She does not want to let the circus fade away, because it is too important to too many people. It is wonder and comfort and mystery, and that is something that many people do not get anywhere else, and she wants them to be able to keep it. Marco tells her that he has that when he is with her, and asks to let him help her. She tells him that she doesn't need his help, but he argues that she cannot do it alone.

Marco realizes that Celia is not looking him in the eye, and asks if she doesn't trust him. She responds that Isobel trusted him, as did Chandresh, and she has no reason to believe that he is being honest with her, and not with them, especially since he has the most reason to deceive her, as she is his opponent in the competition. Marco insists that he never once told Isobel he loved her—they were together because he was young and lonely, and he should not have let her believe that he loved her, but what he feels for Celia is much more intense than anything he ever felt for Isobel.

As the rêveurs share stories of the circus and especially of Thiessen's contributions, it is clear that the circus has immense value beyond its use as the venue for the competition between Mr. A.H. and Hector Bowen. It reinforces the fact that the circus should continue after the end of the competition, and that even without Marco and Celia, it will provide a thoroughly magical experience and community for spectators.



As before, Celia recognizes the real face of Marco in her crowd. He enjoys watching her show, but he has also come to visit her because he feels that she has been avoiding him since the evening when they made love at his flat. Celia denies that she is avoiding him, but there is clearly something different about their interaction at this moment in time. Marco is worried that it has to do with the death of Herr Thiessen, but he does not know of Celia's conversation with Tsukiko, which has had a strong effect on her.



Finally, Marco realizes that Celia has been working on her own, and has taken his magical notebook rather than discussing it with him, because she does not trust him. He believes that she cannot achieve her ambitious goals without his help—it is true that their collaborations bring out the best magic in both of them, but at the same time, Celia is a stronger and more intuitive magician, and may not really need Marco's help.



Celia has been put into a difficult situation: on one hand, Tsukiko was very convincing with Celia, easily convincing her that Marco does not authentically love her and cannot be trusted. Marco's long history of manipulating perceptions does not help his case, either. But Tsukiko has her own motives for wanting to separate Marco and Celia, and was not acting in Celia's best interest.



Marco asks if Celia thinks he is cruel enough to do such a thing to her, and she ignores him and rises to leave. He tells her that she is breaking his heart: she once said that she would never suffer the way her mother did, but now she is making him suffer in exactly the same way. She keeps leaving him when he wants her to stay, and it is killing him.

Celia tells Marco that the competition has to kill one of them, and when Marco doesn't understand, she explains to him that the one who survives is the winner, and the loser dies, which is how the game ends. Marco cannot believe it, and she continues to explain that it is a test of endurance rather than skill, and that she is preparing to make the circus self-sufficient, trailing off before she can finish her sentence. Marco finishes for her, realizing that she is planning on taking herself "off the board," much the way her father did. She says that it is the only way to stop the game, and Marco insists that they should just continue playing, but Celia cannot do that. She cannot hold on any longer, and just wants to let him win.

Marco tells her that he doesn't want to win, he just wants Celia, even though she doesn't believe that. Incredulous, he asks her how she can believe that he doesn't love her, and doesn't know who she has been talking to, but he insists that he is telling her the truth. They look into each other's eyes and Marco shows her when he first knew he loved her: they are suddenly standing in a small round room under a chandelier. Then the room changes to the ballroom of Chandresh's house, and Celia tells him that this is when she knew she loved him. They kiss, and the **bonfire** burns brighter, and the circus is perfect for just one moment.

Celia pulls away and tells him that she is sorry. Marco holds on to her, begging her not to leave him. She tells him that it is too late. There are too many people involved, and anything they do has an effect on every single person who has ever been to the circus—hundreds, maybe thousands of people. They are all flies in a web, spun back when she was six, and they cannot disentangle themselves. She asks Marco if he will do her a favor, and he says he will do anything. She asks him not to come back, nearly breaking into tears. She disappears before he can respond.

Back in her room, Celia attempts once again to decipher Marco's notebook. The raven caws, and Celia addresses her father, who has shown up, hovering over her. Hector calls the notebook "a god-awful mess," but Celia explains that it is just because he doesn't understand it. Hector calls it messy work, overly complicated like all of Mr. A.H.'s magic. Celia responds that anyone can do it, if they study enough, which contradicts Hector's lectures about how Celia is unique and special.

In a moment of pain, Marco blames Celia for his heartache, even subtly comparing her to her heartless and self-centered father. Celia is attempting to leave the tent and return to her research into how to save the circus, while Marco claims she is killing him.



Celia shares with Marco the one, most important piece of information about the competition: one of them will have to die for the competition to end. Celia has been carrying this heavy secret around since Hector told her, and this is the other reason why she is not willing to open up to Marco or collaborate with him right now: she does not want to get any closer to him, if one of them is just going to die soon. She has been planning to commit suicide, but only once she figured out how to keep the circus alive.



Once this vital piece of information is revealed, Marco and Celia are able to communicate more clearly, and Marco manages to convince Celia that he does, indeed, love her. He correctly suspects that she has been influenced by someone else, but instead of questioning the motives of those around him, he focuses on winning Celia over by reminding her of some of the more romantic moments they have shared.



For as much as she loves Marco, Celia feels responsible for everyone associated with the circus and is not willing to put them at risk for her own desires. She is held back by her feelings about her mother's death, her conversation with Lainie Burgess, guilt over the death of Friedrich Thiessen, and her maternal feelings towards the Murray twins. She will not put anyone else at risk, even if it means that she cannot be with the man she loves.



Hector Bowen continues to intervene in Celia's life, even as Celia frantically searches for a way to escape from the competition he forced her into as a child. But now, when he discusses Marco's magic spells, Celia knows enough to contradict him, telling her father that he was wrong when he called her special. Magic can be learned, she argues.



Hector replies that Celia is special, and well beyond the kind of magic that Marco is doing. There is so much more that she could be doing, he notes. Celia quotes from Shakespeare, that there “are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” which annoys Hector. She tells him that she is haunted by the ghost of her father, so she considers *Hamlet* an appropriate context for her. She reminds him that he once called himself Prospero, as well. Hector tells her that she is too intelligent for this behavior, and she sarcastically apologizes for not living up to his expectations, asking him if he can bother someone else.

He mentions Chandresh, and Celia realizes that it was Hector who told him that Mr. A.H. would be at the circus the night Thiessen died. He sent Chandresh there. Hector defends himself by noting that he simply made a suggestion to a drunk. Celia tells him that he must have known that Chandresh could do nothing to hurt Mr. A.H., and does not understand his reasoning; she asks about his rule of no interference, and Hector replies that it only applies to the opponents, and he can interfere with anyone else at any time. Angry, Celia tells him that his interference got Thiessen killed, and he coldly responds that “there are other clockmakers in the world.”

Celia throws a volume of Shakespeare at Hector, and it goes right through him and hits the wall of the tent. She demands that he go away, and he tells her that she cannot keep pushing him away. When she turns back to her work, he tells her that she is not really making personal connections with the people of the circus, that they are all going to die eventually, and she should not let her emotions take away her power. She replies that he and Mr. A.H. are both cowards, fighting by proxy because they fear challenging each other directly, afraid to fail. He disagrees, but Celia finishes the conversation by telling him she hates him, and he vanishes.

Marco uses ink to inscribe an A on the window of his flat, and waits for Mr. A.H. When he arrives, he stands in the hallway expectantly. Marco tells him that Celia thinks one of the competitors has to die for the game to be over, and Mr. A.H. confirms this. Marco tells him that winning would be worse than losing, and his teacher responds that he has already warned Marco that his feelings for Celia will make the challenge difficult. Marco asks why he would do such a thing to him, and Mr. A.H. replies that he thought it was better than the life he would have had otherwise. Marco says nothing and shuts the door in his face. Mr. A.H. thinks to knock again, but decides against it and leaves.

Hector Bowen still sees Celia as an extension of himself, in terms of magic, and now that he is retired and only half alive, he must project his self-esteem and ambitions onto her. This is the root of their relationship and the reason he is willing to risk her life in the competition with Mr. A.H.—he is using Celia to build up his own self-image. Celia is no longer interested in pleasing her father—if she ever was in the first place—and reminds him that he is nothing more than a ghost, haunting her.



Hector’s motives for sending Chandresh to kill Mr. A.H. are unclear because, as Celia notes, Mr. A.H. seems to be immune to death and injury, and thus Hector had little to gain from this move. Hector feels no need to explain himself, however, and is unconcerned about his daughter’s objections. Reinforcing even further his self-centered worldview, Hector reminds her that there are other clockmakers in the world, undermining her view of Thiessen as a close friend.



In this part of the conversation, Hector demonstrates his disdain for other people as well as his fear that emotions will deprive Celia of her powers. His immortality has separated him from other people, which is likely the reason he has become so self-centered and bereft of empathy. Celia points out that the competition is rooted in fear, as both Hector and Mr. A.H. are unwilling to risk their own lives or reputations, and instead chose to put others at risk.



Marco feels the need to confirm what Celia has told him, because it seems incredible to him that all of their work is simply leading up to one of their deaths. His comment that winning would be the worst outcome reveals the depth of his feelings for Celia, as he would rather die than live without her; Mr. A.H., meanwhile, is solely focused on the competition, and maintains that feelings only get in the way. He truly believes that he has given Marco a better life, but Marco’s lack of response leaves that in question.



The circus train is on its way from Boston to New York City, and the passengers have mostly fallen asleep or are simply reading or having quiet time in their compartments. Widget and Poppet find Celia's compartment and knock softly on the door to tell her that there is a problem: Bailey was supposed to come along with them. Poppet says that they waited for him and he didn't come, though that may be because they left early. Celia asks Poppet if she had another vision, and Poppet responds that she did, sort of, but that it's not clear and it is in bits and pieces. She hasn't been able to see clearly and nothing has made sense for a year, though Celia calls that an exaggeration.

As Poppet gets more anxious, Celia tells her that she is also very upset by what happened the year prior, but that no one could have done anything to prevent it. Poppet responds that she understands, but wonders about the value of seeing the future if she can't do anything to stop it. Celia tells her that she cannot stop the future, she can only be prepared for it. Poppet responds that Celia could stop things from happening, and Celia replies that Poppet cannot even comprehend the scope of what is going on and would not like it if she did know.

Celia demands that Poppet tell her what she saw in her vision. Poppet closes her eyes to see it again, and tells her that she saw something bright, that everything was on fire, and that Bailey was there. Celia asks for more, but Poppet says that she can't see any more than that, and Celia replies that it is probably because she doesn't want to see anything. She advises Poppet to give her more information if she wants Celia to do something to prevent it. She then takes off her necklace and holds the pocket watch in front of Poppet's eyes, telling her to focus her attention on it.

Poppet's eyes follow the pocket watch Celia holds in front of her, and Poppet starts to sway and then falls backwards. Widget catches her, and he and Celia move her to one of the benches. She then asks what Poppet saw this time, even if it doesn't make any sense to her. Poppet describes a fire, starting with the **bonfire** but bigger and uncontained, like the courtyard is on fire. There is also a loud noise and heat, and Celia is there, with someone else, and it's raining, and then she is both there and not, though Poppet cannot explain what she means by that. And then Bailey is there, after the fire.

While most of the circus members are unaware of what is going on, Poppet is becoming increasingly anxious about her visions, and the fact that Bailey did not leave with them. Celia responds calmly, because she is aware of the possible danger to the circus but does not want to scare Widget and Poppet. She needs to know exactly what was in Poppet's vision, but the girl is unable to give her a complete answer, as her visions still do not make sense to her.



Poppet's concern, about the value of clairvoyance if one cannot take any action, is a valid one. Even when Poppet took direct action to help save the circus—by specifically asking Bailey to join them, so that he would be there to re-light the bonfire—she was not successful. Out of anger and frustration, Poppet pushes the responsibility to Celia, who already has enough to worry about at this point.



Poppet's vision is enough to worry her and Celia, but does not give them any real information about what will happen or when. Celia notes that Poppet may be too scared to see any more than she has, but since Poppet is not able to offer her more information, Celia takes matters into her own hands, hypnotizing Poppet so that she can have more control over the girl's mind.



Finally, Poppet has more information to offer Celia, even though it hurt her to fully engage with her vision. Poppet's vision is only slightly more detailed, giving them a context—the courtyard and the bonfire—and a description of Celia that suggests that she may also be a ghost at that point. Like always, however, Bailey is present at the end, reinforcing Poppet's belief that he is essential to the survival of the circus after whatever disaster she envisioned.



Celia asks Poppet what the man looks like, and she explains it is a tall man in a suit with a bowler hat, but it was hard to tell. Celia tells her that if it is who she thinks it is, he is in London, so Poppet's vision is not as immediate as she thinks. Poppet disagrees, believing it is imminent, and Celia responds that it could be weeks or months or years. Poppet slams her teacup on the table and demands that they do something, that they prepare for it somehow. Celia tells her that she will do whatever possible to prevent the circus from going up in flames, fireproofing it as much as she can. She asks if that is enough for the moment, and Poppet nods.

Suddenly Widget, who has been sitting on the bench silently, asks if what is going on in the circus, the thing that the twins don't understand the scope of, is a game of some sort. Celia smiles and tells him she is disappointed that it took him so long to figure that out. Poppet asks what kind of game, and Widget says it's like chess, though Celia says it is not as straightforward as that. Poppet asks if they're all playing the game, and Widget answers that it is only Celia and someone else, and that they are all extra pieces. Celia corrects him, and then stares into his eyes for a moment until he blinks, with a look of surprise on his face.

Celia apologizes for not being completely honest with them, and asks them to trust her when she says she is trying to make things better. She then ushers them out of her compartment, though Widget lingers for a moment, tells her he is sorry, and kisses her on the cheek. Once they are out, Poppet asks what that was all about, and Widget tells her that Celia let him read her mind, without concealing anything. Meanwhile, in her compartment, Celia is tearing a handkerchief into strips and dropping them into her teacup, lighting it on fire. She practices until the cloth burns without charring.

Bailey takes the first train to New York, and while he sits and watches the scenery, Victor comes and hands him a scrapbook of the circus, with newspaper clippings and letters that go back over a decade. Lorena tells Victor that he has never taken such an interest in a new *rêveur*, and he replies that Bailey reminds him of Thiessen. Elizabeth comes and sits next to Bailey when they are close to New York, and tells him she has never met anyone so young who feels as strongly about the circus as the older *rêveurs* do, and then she takes off the scarf she has been knitting and gives it to him. He tells her he cannot accept it, but she insists, saying it was clearly meant for him.

Although Poppet has seen Marco in the past, she does not know him well enough to recognize him in her vision, but Celia is sure that is who Poppet has seen. The fact that Marco is still in London reassures her a bit, though Celia is obviously going to do as much as she can to prevent the destruction of the circus—she has already begun those preparations, beginning when she took Marco's magic notebook to study his protective charms.



Though Poppet's powers of vision have been significant to the story thus far, Widget's ability to see the past offers some essential context in this moment, allowing him to understand how they arrived at this point. Like Marco, Celia struggles to define the competition to others, but she wants Widget to understand what has been going on. Despite being an intensely private person, Celia actually lets Widget read her mind completely for the very first time.



Widget has seen everything, even the relationship between Celia and Marco, and is able to empathize with Celia's struggles at the moment. The fact that she has revealed herself to Widget also demonstrates how much she trusts and relies on the twins, and that she no longer sees them as children to be taken care of. Once they leave, however, Celia returns to her work keeping the circus safe from ruin.



*Not only is Bailey a bona fide member of the *rêveur* community, the people he has met along the way consider him special, for his deep dedication to the circus. Once again, Bailey is learning a lot about himself along this journey to join the circus, and quickly transforming from a young farmer with an interest in the circus into someone who will be ready and willing to take responsibility for it and continue its traditions. The comparison with Thiessen is significant, as he was another regular person who influenced the destiny of the circus.*



They arrive in New York, and Bailey is struck by how strange everything looks to him and how far from home he is. They meet up with another *rêveur* named August, who tells them that he has good and bad news: the good news is that the circus is right where he predicted. The bad news is that there was a storm the previous night and the circus is closed for inclement weather. In addition, there was some sort of crashing noise around midnight, so loud it nearly shook the house, followed by smoke and a bright flash of light. Upon hearing this, Bailey runs out of the house, through the trees, and in the direction of the tents.

In London, Isobel stands on the street in front of Marco's flat, waiting for hours for him to return. When he sees her, he asks what she is doing in London, because she is supposed to be in the United States. She tells him that she left the circus, and that Celia gave her permission. She asks if she can come up to his flat, and he says no, asking her to simply say what she has come to say. She tells him she is sorry for not telling him she was tempering the circus, and feels that what happened the previous year was partly her fault. He tells her she should apologize to Celia, and she tells him she already has.

Isobel knew Celia was in love with someone, but she thought it was Thiessen, and didn't realize until that night that it was Marco. Celia loved Thiessen, as well, though, and lost him because of Isobel. Isobel felt like she had a home where she belonged. After a while, she didn't feel she needed to protect Marco from Celia, but instead she needed to protect everyone from the two of them and them from each other. It was only ever the two of them, and Isobel was only a diversion. Marco tells her she wasn't a diversion, but that he didn't ever love her. She says she thought he did, even though he never said it to her, but it was wishful thinking. She thought it would be temporary—that if Celia were gone, Marco would come back to her. But Isobel was the one who was temporary.

Isobel and Marco stand in the street in silence for a long time, and then Marco starts up the stairs to his flat, saying goodbye to her. She tells him that the most difficult thing to read is time. She says it was a matter of timing: Isobel's train was late the day they met, and if it had been on time, it would not have happened. She wonders if they were never actually meant to meet. Marco apologizes for not telling her sooner about his feelings for Celia. But he doesn't know what else to tell her.

Bailey's personal journey finally ends when they all arrive in New York City, and find that the circus has also arrived. When Bailey hears news of something catastrophic, he is reminded of what Poppet has said about the destruction of the circus and his role in saving it. While he still does not know what it is he will be called on to do, Bailey still recognizes that it is his time to intervene if he is to fulfill Poppet's prophecy.



For Isobel, the decision to leave the circus was a difficult one: on one hand, it is filled with memories of Marco, who has spurned her for Celia. The circus has served as Isobel's true home for a long time, however, and her fellow performers were like family to her. Before she leaves, however, she must talk to Marco and apologize for her part in the downfall of the circus.



Isobel is working through her feelings about the circus, Celia, and her relationship with Marco. She feels responsible for the death of Thiessen, who also loved Celia. But Isobel cast the tempering charm on the circus with good intentions, hoping to protect the people she loved from the repercussions of the competition. She did this out of love for Marco, and she also convinced herself that he loved her—though he makes it very clear that he did not lie to her, because he never told her he loved her. But Isobel is not angry with him, just sad.



Marco is done rehashing their relationship, and is ready to go up to his flat, leaving her to go on her way. But Isobel continues, wondering if their timing was simply off, and if circumstances would have been different if her train had not been late. Marco does not understand why they are still talking, and he apologizes again to her, but has nothing more to say.



Isobel tells Marco about a boy she read for recently, and everything was in his cards. It was like reading for Celia—his future was the future of the circus. She thought maybe he could save Marco, that everything would end differently, but she was wrong. Marco grows pale and asks what Isobel is trying to say. She says that he had a chance to be with Celia, but the timing isn't right. She then takes her hand from her pocket, and opens her hand to reveal a pile of black crystals, fine as ash. When Marco asks what it is, she blows the ash into Marco's face. When the ash clears, Marco is gone, and Isobel picks up his briefcase and walks away.

In New York, Bailey arrives at the circus, which looks exactly as it did back in Massachusetts, except that the circus is closed due to inclement weather. He can smell something from inside, something burned and wet that makes him nauseous. Once he gets into the circus, he wanders around looking for Poppet, but the grounds are empty. He turns a corner to see the cauldron where the **bonfire** is supposed to be, but the fire is not burning anymore, and there is someone there waiting for him. But it is not Poppet—she is short, with dark hair and a cigarette holder against her lips as she turns to look at him.

It is the contortionist, and she asks him if he is Bailey. He says yes and wonders how everyone knows his name. She tells him that he is late, and when he asks what he is late for, she says she doesn't know if the woman can hold on for much longer. He asks where Poppet is, and the contortionist tells him that she is unavailable, but Bailey cannot believe that Poppet doesn't already know he is there. He asks her name, and she tells him he may call her Tsukiko. He looks past her and tells her that he thought the **bonfire** never went out, to which she responds that it never has before.

Bailey asks what happened, and Tsukiko tells him it is a long and complicated story that she is not planning on telling him. She points to his red scarf and notes that he is a *rêveur* now, and then changes the subject again, telling him that it was a kind of explosion. He asks if the bonfire exploded and how, and she reminds him it is difficult to explain. He wonders why the tents did not burn, and she notes that Miss Bowen must have fireproofed them. He asks who Miss Bowen is, and she tells him that he asks a lot of questions. He responds that she doesn't answer many.

As Isobel is speaking, Marco realizes that she is not just there to say goodbye, and that there is something more dangerous going on. Isobel mentions Bailey, and how she saw that he was destined to save the circus, but she returns to her concerns about timing, noting that she believes it is too late—though she does not specify for what. Her final move, blowing black crystals into Marco's face, is a triumphant use of magic to say goodbye to the man she loved.



Embodying the dream he had after his first visit to the circus, Bailey has come to the rescue, slipping into the circus to find out what has happened and how he can help. He does not find Poppet, who is in a state of suspension until someone re-lights the bonfire, but he does find the empty cauldron and Tsukiko, who has been waiting for him. She knows that he has come to save the circus, though she will do very little to help him.



Bailey is not sure exactly what he needs to do to save the circus, and has always relied on Poppet and, to a lesser extent, Widget, to help him understand what is going on around him. He is slightly less comfortable with Tsukiko's presence, but is clear that there is something going on, and that his help is needed. He and Tsukiko are standing next to the extinguished bonfire, and that is Bailey's first clue that something is wrong.



*Bailey has many questions about what has happened and how he can help, but Tsukiko's makes no effort to clarify the situation, as usual. She does, however, identify him as a *rêveur*, which establishes him as part of the circus community. They both also note that Celia has fireproofed the tents, which she was practicing on the train to New York, thanks to Poppet's warnings about a fire.*



Tsukiko tells Bailey she is only the messenger, and she must bring him to meet with someone. Despite noting that she is the only living person who knows what happened and why he is here, she says he should save his questions for someone else. She leads him to a tent with a sign that says “Fearsome Beasts and Strange Creatures, Wonders in Paper and Mist.” He asks if she is coming in with him, and she reminds him she is only the messenger and will be waiting back in the courtyard. Bailey enters the tent alone.

Marco falls to the ground in a cloud of black ash, coughing from the impact. He gets up and realizes that he is standing in the rain next to the clock at the center of the circus. It is nearly midnight, and the circus is closed for inclement weather, though the rain is hardly more than a heavy mist. Marco sees Tsukiko standing near the ticket booth, and she comes to greet him. He asks how Isobel managed to transport him to the circus from London, and Tsukiko tells him she taught Isobel that trick, asking him if he feels unsteady. He tells her he is fine, and she ushers him out of the wind.

Marco asks where everyone is, and Tsukiko tells him they are at an inclement-weather party. He asks why he is there, and she does not answer him, asking instead what Isobel told him. He doesn't remember much of their conversation, which doesn't bother Tsukiko. Tsukiko then tells him that they have something in common, that they both had the same teacher, which confuses him. She notes her surprise that Mr. A.H. used such an open venue for this competition, that he always preferred seclusion, and that he is probably disappointed with how the challenge has progressed thus far. Marco realizes that Tsukiko won the last competition, and asks when. She tells him it was “eighty-three years, six months, and twenty one days” earlier, on a cherry-blossom day.

Tsukiko tells Marco that their teachers do not understand how it feels to be so intimately tied to another person; “They think it simple to pit two any people against each other,” but the competitors begin to define themselves through each other, and they become necessary to each other to go on. She then asks if Marco loves Celia, and he tells her that he loves her more than anything in the world. She responds that she loved her opponent more than anything in the world, as well. Her name was Hinata, and she set herself on fire, stepping into a pillar of flame like it was water.

Thankfully for Bailey, he will meet with someone else—two people, in fact—who can help to answer his questions and guide him in the right direction. But his journey is not over, and he will have to go alone to find Marco and Celia. This is part of Bailey's rite of passage, which will prepare him for the responsibility of taking over the circus.



The narrative has bounced back and forth between the story of the circus, leading up to the turn of the century, and Bailey's story in the early 1900s. The gap between those perspectives is rapidly closing, and the final scenes of this part of the novel will alternate between the moments before the bonfire goes out, and what happens immediately afterwards. Marco's magical arrival at the circus now places everyone in the same setting.



Marco's presence at the circus means that, in contrast to what Celia told Poppet on the train, the catastrophic events the girl envisioned will come to pass, sooner rather than later. Marco is confused about how he was transported from London to New York, but Tsukiko is much more interested in talking to him about the competition, and how they are going to end it. She reveals to him that she won the previous competition, information that will help her to guide Marco towards a very important decision.



Tsukiko capitalizes on her unique connection to Marco—the fact that they are both students of Mr. A.H., and that she too has endured a competition and its extreme consequences—to convince Marco to commit suicide, thus removing himself from the competition. Like Marco, she loved her opponent very much, and found it difficult to see her solely as a rival. The fact that Tsukiko's opponent died by fire foreshadows the ending of this competition between Celia and Marco.



Marco tells her he is sorry, and Tsukiko informs him that Celia was planning to do something similar for him to let him win. She does not wish that pain on anyone, however. She then asks if he knows the story of Merlin, the wizard in the tree. She tells him that there are many trees that would suffice, but the **bonfire** would be more appropriate. He looks at the bonfire and realizes that the story of Merlin involves him being imprisoned in a tree or a cave or a rock, as a punishment for foolish love. He tells Tsukiko that he understands, and she tells him that she knew he would.

At that moment, Celia arrives and asks Tsukiko what she is doing. She tells Celia to return to the party, because she will not want to be present for what is about to happen. Celia asks what is about to happen, and Tsukiko tells her that she has been surrounded by the love letters she and Marco have built for each other, in the form of tents, and it reminds her of what it was like to be with Hinata. She will not give it up, but the two of them are letting it fade. Celia tells Tsukiko that she thought “love was fickle and fleeting,” and Tsukiko admits that she lied, because it would be easier if Celia harbored doubts about Marco’s love.

Tsukiko gave Celia a year to find a way for the circus to continue without her, but she plans to step in now. She says that Celia is the greater loss to the circus, because she carries it within herself, while Marco uses the fire as a tool. Celia just asks for more time, but Tsukiko refuses. Marco tells her that he would rather burn by Celia’s side than live without her, and Celia screams, but he focuses his attention on Tsukiko and what she is about to do to him. He asks if it will end the game, even if he is trapped in the fire and not dead. Tsukiko tells him that he will be unable to continue, and that is all that matters.

Marco tells Tsukiko to go ahead with her plan, and she bows to him and flicks her lit cigarette at the fire. They do not see Celia run towards Marco and leap into his arms. He pulls her close, and as the pain starts, she whispers for him to trust her. They dissolve into the air in the moment before the **bonfire** explodes, turning into nothing more than light and shadow. They are gone and the circus is in flames, and Tsukiko is alone in the courtyard. Suddenly, the flames die down and go out, and the only sound is the rain hitting the metal of the cauldron.

Tsukiko focuses on how painful it has been to be the one to win the competition, to survive after her competitor is gone. She is leading up to a very direct suggestion that Marco be the one to commit suicide, so that he does not have to live with the pain of Celia’s death. She even reminds him of the Merlin story, which has come up a number of times in the narrative, in which the magician is punished for giving away his magic for love.



Tsukiko brings up the image of using the tents as love letters to one another, a recurring image in the narrative. Marco and Celia have used their magic not as weapons against one another in the competition, but as a way of connecting emotionally and intellectually to one another. Tsukiko has had to intervene and even lie to Celia about Marco’s feelings for her, in order to begin separating them from one another in preparation for the end.



Tsukiko’s first priority is to save the circus, and is willing to make some difficult choices that Celia and Marco would not be able to make. Tsukiko is essentially—though unofficially—calling Celia the winner, as she is the stronger magician with a deeper connection to the circus. However, Tsukiko will find that there is a third option that she had not considered, that does not require anyone to declare a winner and a loser.



Marco has stated before that he would prefer to die than to live without Celia, and with Tsukiko’s help, he plans to do exactly that. Celia’s quick move to join Marco in the fire is surprising, as she has tended to be more careful and even reluctant in their relationship. But with her doubts about Marco’s love erased, she is willing to risk her life to try an innovative magic trick that even her father could not complete successfully.



Celia chooses a location that is familiar to her, and brings herself back to her tent at the circus, feeling slightly dizzy. She notices that she is whole, but that everyone around her is transparent, and that Marco is nowhere to be seen. Marco loses Celia in the moment of the explosion. She can feel him somewhere, but cannot find him as she wanders through the Labyrinth. Marco finally finds himself in the middle of the Ice Garden, and when he attempts to touch a nearby rose, his fingers pass through it. Then, suddenly, he hears a gasp behind him and turns around to see Celia, who immediately tells him is that she loves him. They come together, and he touches her face and pulls her into his arms and tells her he loves her too.

They hold each other as Celia tells Marco that she couldn't let him go without her, and he asks her how she did it. She used the circus as a touchstone, and she didn't know if it would work, but she had to try. He is happy to be with her, and he doesn't feel trapped in the circus, but when he looks around he realizes that the Ice Garden is melting. He tells Celia that the **bonfire** went out, and that she is the only thing holding it together. She nods, and notices how difficult it is to manage without the bonfire. But if she lets go, she knows that it will collapse, so she has suspended it, and it needs a new caretaker.

Bailey enters the tent, which only days before had seemed endless; now, without the mist, he can see everything, though the animals are all suspended and motionless. Standing next to a stag with tall antlers is a man in a dark suit who looks like a ghost, transparent and shadowy, and Bailey wonders if it is a figment of his imagination. The man introduces himself as Marco. Bailey asks if he is dead, and Marco replies, "not precisely." Bailey asks him what happened, and Marco tells him it is a long story, which is exactly what Tsukiko had told him.

Marco then explains that Tsukiko tried to imprison him in the **bonfire**, and there was a change of plans that led to the current situation. Marco is in a less concentrated state, he says, and holds out his hand for Bailey to touch. Bailey's fingers move right through Marco's hand, with only the softest resistance to show that something is there. Marco then tells Bailey to follow him and turns to leave the tent.

As they are about to leave the tent, Bailey asks where they are going, and Marco tells him that someone else wants to speak with him, and she is at the Wishing Tree. Bailey has never been there, and Marco explains how it works: the wisher takes a candle from the box at the entrance of the tent and lights it from another candle that is already burning on the tree.

Similar to the magical spell that her father attempted decades earlier, Celia is attempting to remove herself and Marco from the physical world. Like Merlin, they will be imprisoned inside of a specific location, but they will gain immortality and they will be together, if the magic is successful. At first, Celia and Marco cannot find each other and are worried that they have been imprisoned separately, but they soon find each other, and their final magical collaboration is complete.



As Celia explained to Marco previously, by using a touchstone of some kind, she was able to do what her father could not, and they are both safely encased within the circus. Their actions were not without consequences, however, and now they must find a way to save the circus. Celia mentions finding a new caretaker, and this is where Bailey comes in—but at this moment in the story, as Poppet has noted, Bailey has not joined them and is nowhere to be found.



The narrative returns to Bailey's perspective, immediately after the bonfire has gone out, and he is searching for someone—though he still does not know whom—so that he can find out how to save the circus. He finds Marco, who will guide him to Celia, who will explain how to re-light the fire. Bailey still has many questions about what is going on and why he is the one to help out, but Marco initially gives him the same non-answer that Tsukiko did.



When Marco does try to explain the situation to Bailey, he has a hard time grasping the details of the magic involved, but is receptive to what he does not yet understand. Marco does not spend much time explaining the situation to Bailey, as they have urgent work to do.



Bailey's arrival brings the narrative together into the same time and space; the entire narrative has been building up to the moment when Bailey meets Marco and Celia and learns what he is destined to do in the circus.



Marco leads Bailey into the acrobat tent, but instead of the wide-open space he is used to, he is met with a room full of people, all frozen in place. The inclement-weather party was frozen in time, just like the rest of the circus. Bailey walks carefully through the crowd, stopping to look at Widget and Poppet—he is frozen mid-story, while she has turned her head, as if her attention was caught by something outside the tent. He then enters the Wishing Tree tent, which is about the size of his oak tree back at home, with white candles on the bare branches. Bailey sees Marco with his arms around a woman whom he recognizes as the illusionist. She appears as transparent as Marco.

Celia welcomes Bailey, calling him by name and introducing herself. He asks how she knew he was coming, and she tells him that Poppet mentioned him as part of the events of the evening. She then tells him she needs his help with something—he must take over the circus, because it needs a new caretaker to survive. Bailey is surprised, asking if he is the new caretaker, and she tells him that they would like that. They would all be able to help him, but he would ultimately be responsible for it. He tells her that he isn't special, and she tells him that he is simply the right person at the right time, but sometimes that is all it takes.

Bailey is about to accept this new responsibility when Celia stops him, because she wants to make sure that he is making a free choice without any pressure or obligation. He asks what happens if he says no and walks away, and Celia tells him that the circus will not survive. As they wait for Bailey to answer, the candles flicker, and Celia starts to sway. Marco has to steady her. Bailey asks what he needs to do, and Celia tells him he needs to finish something she started, and to re-light the **bonfire**. When he re-lights the fire, that will power half the circus, and he will need to carry the other half within him. He can leave the circus, but not for extended periods of time. He will be bound to it, and she is not sure if he will ever be able to pass it along to someone else.

Bailey realizes that this is a bigger commitment than Harvard, or even the farm, but he knows his answer anyway. He agrees, and Marco asks if they can make it official, because he is not willing to settle for a verbal agreement. Marco takes off his silver **ring**, passes a candle along it until it is white hot, and places it in his palm. Bailey wonders whose wish he might have used to heat up the ring, and Marco tells him that three years ago, he made a wish on the tree. Bailey asks what he wished for, but Marco doesn't answer. Instead, he reaches out his hand and burns the ring into Bailey's palm. Bailey looks down at the bright red scar on his skin, closes his hand and asks what he needs to do.

Their walk through the different tents on their way to Celia is a strong reminder of the value of the circus outside of the competition. As Bailey walks through the tent where the circus performers are suspended, waiting to come alive when the bonfire is re-lit, he finally finds Widget and Poppet, though they are in no state to help him, or even greet their friend. When he finally makes it in to the Wishing Tree tent, he finds Marco and Celia, in a ghost-like state.



Bailey's arrival is the final part of Poppet's prophecy, and now all of the elements fall into place for Celia. Bailey no longer questions how everyone knows his name, because he is beginning to understand that he is an essential part of whatever is happening. But he is surprised when Celia suggests that he should take over the circus because he does not have the same magical or supernatural powers that Celia, Marco, Widget, and Poppet do.



Celia is honest with Bailey, explaining that he is not special in a magical way, but he is simply the right person for the job. However, she is determined that he have the freedom to choose his future, and gives Bailey the option to refuse this responsibility. This is important because neither Marco nor Celia was given a choice about entering the competition, and each has struggled with their lack of agency throughout their lives. Likewise, Bailey left home to escape the boring and restrictive life his father had planned for him.



Bailey knows what his answer will be, of course, but he is happy to have been able to make the choice. Marco's use of the ring to bind Bailey to the circus is significant, because this is what will make Bailey special—his eternal connection via the scar on his hand. When Marco mentions making a wish on the tree, Bailey asks him what he wished for—just like Isobel and Celia have done. Again, Marco avoids answering the question, but it seems that Bailey's next job will help Marco's wish come true.



Bailey finds Celia's room in the circus and searches through the books to find Marco's notebook. He pulls out the pages with Poppet and Widget's names on them and adds his own name to them. He collects yarn, two cards—a simple playing card and a tarot card—and a pocket watch on a silver chain. He crosses back through the circus, and when he passes Tsukiko, he tells her that he needs to use her lighter. She agrees, though she also tells him to be careful with it, because it is old. She then asks if he is going to try to light the **bonfire** again, and he tells her he is, and asks if she would like to help. She shrugs, telling him she is not concerned about the outcome, which he does not believe. But he knows he must do it himself.

Bailey mumbles some of Celia's instructions, wraps the items up in the yarn, and throws it in the cauldron. He sees Marco's bowler hat next to the cauldron and adds that, and impulsively pulls everything out of his pockets, including his silver ticket, the rose from his lapel, and Poppet's white glove, and throws it all in the cauldron as well. Finally, he pulls out the glass bottle with the memory of his oak tree, and that goes in, too. He lights a candle and throws it in, wishing harder than ever before. He feels a pair of hands resting on his shoulders, and the flames catch. He is blown back on to the ground by the force of the **bonfire**, and all around him the circus springs back to life again. From inside the Wishing Tree, Celia and Marco watch the circus come back to life, and they kiss.

PART 5: DIVINATION

Poppet is at Chandresh's house in London, and when he opens the door, he notes that she is bigger than the last time he saw her, and there were two of them. Poppet explains that Widget is in France as she follows him inside. The house is in disarray, and not quite as grand as she remembers it from her childhood. He asks why she is there, and she asks for a favor. She would like him to sign over ownership of the circus. He responds that it was never his in the first place, but she disagrees, because it was his idea.

Chandresh looks at the list of names, noting Mr. Barris and Lainie Burgess, and he asks who Mr. Clarke is, and Poppet explains that he is a dear friend who will take excellent care of the circus. He signs the document, and as Poppet blows on the ink to dry it, she thanks him. He then walks over to a set of blueprints covering his walls and windows, telling Poppet that he doesn't know what to do with them anymore. They are renovations to the house, but they do not fit together. Poppet rearranges the blueprints until they make sense, telling him that it is a museum, and that it is not the building they are in, but a new one.

In order to re-light the fire, Bailey must gather items of importance to different members of the circus, placing them once again under the protective spell of the bonfire. The second version of Marco's notebook must be updated with his own name, so that he can become part of the circus as well. Once again, Tsukiko observes and comments on the process, and Bailey realizes that she is putting on an act with him, pretending not to care about the circus when she really cares quite a bit.



As Celia has commented to her father, there are some kinds of magic that can be learned, and Bailey has gotten a brief lesson on how to use Marco's magic to re-light the fire. He uses items to represent the different members of the circus, including Poppet's white glove that he has kept with him since his very first visit to the circus, back when he was dared to sneak in during the day. This brings his experiences full circle, as he is now becoming part of the circus that he desperately wanted to explore years earlier. His magic works, and Bailey has fulfilled Poppet's prophecy and given the circus new life.



The final part of the novel deals with the aftermath of Celia and Marco's escape from the competition. The circus is no longer simply a venue for their magical rivalry, and now Poppet, Widget, and Bailey are free to take it in any direction they choose. But first, they must tie up loose ends, especially with the original organizers like Chandresh.



Poppet would like Chandresh to relinquish control over the circus, although he feels that he hardly controlled it in the first place. Chandresh is happy to see that Mr. Barris and Lainie Burgess will still be involved, and signs it over willingly. He has clearly lost his fire and focus, brought down by the weight of all of the secrets and lies involved in the circus and the competition. He cannot even read blueprints without help from Poppet.



As they look through the blueprints, Chandresh starts to call for Marco. He tells Poppet that his assistant just left one day and did not come back, not even leaving a note behind. Poppet responds that she believes his departure was not planned, and that he most likely regrets not being able to finish things up with Chandresh. Chandresh asks why Marco left, and Poppet replies that he left to be with Celia, which makes Chandresh happy. He proposes a toast, but he doesn't have any champagne.

Instead, Chandresh decides to dedicate a room of the museum to them, and they find a room with round walls and a small koi pond in the center. He asks what is in Poppet's bag, and she tells him she brought him a present. She pulls out a small black-and-white kitten named Ara. As he plays with the kitten, she tells him that she is not going to give him his memory back, and he asks what she is talking about. She tells him not to mind her, and leans over and kisses him on the cheek. As her lips touch him, he suddenly feels better than he has in years, and his mind clears. The two spend hours working on the blueprints, with Ara playing by their side.

Widget is in Paris with Mr. A.H., who is talking about the nature of stories. He sadly notes that stories have changed: there are no more battles between good and evil, no quests with clear goals and happy endings, and now all the stories overlap and blur. Widget has a brief conversation with the waiter in French, and Mr. A.H. asks how many languages Widget speaks, but Widget cannot remember exactly. He tells him that Celia helped him learn some of the patterns, and Mr. A.H. says he hopes she was a better teacher than her father, Hector. Widget responds that she and her father are very different people, from what he hears, and he comments that Celia has never forced him or Poppet into absurd competitions.

Mr. A.H. tells Widget that, once upon a time, he and his student had a difference of opinion about the ways of the world, and he developed his own methods and began teaching them. They began to pit their respective students against one another, and over time the competitions became more complex. This most recent one was interesting, he notes, and Celia found a clever way to get them out of it. He misses his student, however, and notes that Marco was possibly the best student he ever had. Widget asks if he thinks Marco is dead, and Mr. A.H. asks if Widget thinks Marco is alive. Widget tells him that he knows Marco is not dead, just as he knows that Hector is not dead either, and is standing at the window near them.

Chandresh's memory has also been severely affected by his many years working with the circus, and still calls for Marco from time to time. When Poppet explains—in a very basic way, excluding all references to magic—why Marco did not come back, Chandresh is happy for him, because as much as he liked Marco, he knew that he was in love with Celia.



With Chandresh signing over the rights to the circus, a new era has dawned, and Poppet makes the bold decision to clear Chandresh's memory, healing him and allowing him to focus on other projects, as he did before the circus. She also gives him a kitten to play with, just as he used to do for her when she was young. This signals a significant turning of the tables for these two, as Poppet is now a responsible adult, and Chandresh is past his prime and in need of comfort and support from her.



Meanwhile, in Paris, Widget's conversation with Mr. A.H. has a very different tone: the old magician is pontificating about the changing ways of the world. It will take much more work for Widget to convince Mr. A.H. to sign away his rights to the circus, despite the fact that the man only valued it as a venue for the competition. Mr. A.H. is also curious about Celia and Marco, because he has no contact with them now. Widget's response to Mr. A.H.—that Celia has never forced the twins to compete against one another—is an apt insult to the man.



Finally, however, Mr. A.H. is interested in talking about the competition, and gives Widget some background information that even Marco and Celia never knew. For example, Hector Bowen was once Mr. A.H.'s student, and the rivalry was born of a disagreement between them. When he talks about Celia's magic trick, he sounds proud of her creativity and magical abilities, and even admits that Marco was one of his best students. This is a side of Mr. A.H. that was inaccessible to Marco when he was his student.



Widget explains to Mr. A.H. that Marco and Celia are not dead, and they are inside of the circus. When Widget describes this as “marvelous,” Mr. A.H. asks if he really considers imprisonment to be “marvelous”; Widget replies that Marco and Celia are together and “are confined within a space” that will “grow and change around them.” Marco has been teaching Widget his illusion technique—and Widget adds that Marco thought of Mr. A.H. as a father. Mr. A.H. asks if Marco told Widget that, and Widget replies that Marco didn’t use any words, but he let Widget read him. Marco also forgives Mr. A.H. for what he did, because he now has Celia, thanks to the competition.

Mr. A.H. comments that perhaps he chose too well, that they were too well matched, and now they can never be separated. Widget sees that as unromantic, and Mr. A.H. notes that he was romantic in his youth, but that was a long time ago. Widget mentions that Mr. A.H. has no shadow, and he replies that not many people notice that. Widget asks if Mr. A.H. is going to end up like Hector, and he responds that he hopes not—he would like to be able to accept the inevitability of mortality, just as he hopes Celia and Marco will.

Widget asks Mr. A.H. if magic is enough to live for, and he responds that what most people see is not magic, because most people have no idea of what is possible in the world and wouldn’t listen if someone attempted to explain it to them anyway. Widget argues that some people can be enlightened, and Mr. A.H. agrees, but notes that very few people are open to learning, or have natural access like Poppet and Widget. Then he asks what Widget does with his talent, and Widget informs him that he tells stories. When Widget says that this is not important and not why he is visiting, Mr. A.H. interrupts him to say that it is important, that there may be a story that takes up residence in someone’s soul, or changes them in some way, and that is a kind of magic.

Widget accuses Mr. A.H. of trying to distract him, and he asks if the game is finished. Mr. A.H. says that it has not been properly completed due to unforeseen circumstances. Then Widget says that he has come to tie up loose ends and take over the circus. Mr. A.H. notes that it is not that simple, and that Widget would probably be better off letting it “fade away,” but Widget is adamant. Widget feels that Mr. A.H. owes it to the circus, since he put them all at risk for a simple bet with Hector Bowen. Mr. A.H. acknowledges the validity of the argument, but says he owes Widget nothing. Widget asks him to name his price, then, and Mr. A.H. just wants a story from him. Widget takes a sip of wine and begins his story: “The circus arrives without warning.”

When Widget describes Celia and Marco’s situation in glowing terms, Mr. A.H. recoils at the idea of being imprisoned. For him, freedom and control are of the utmost importance, while Celia and Marco are mainly concerned with being surrounded by people they love. This reinforces the differences between these characters, and the reasons why they were unable to communicate effectively, despite the fact that they truly did love each other.



Mr. A.H.’s desire for freedom and control may be linked to his advanced age, as he has outlived so many people that he is no longer able to maintain deep personal connections and shuns the idea of romantic entanglements. This would explain his hope that he, Hector, Celia, and Marco are all able to find refuge in mortality at some point.



Mr. A.H. and Widget get into a profound conversation about the value of magic, and Mr. A.H.’s first concern is that most people are not clued in to the magic in the world around them, or open to the possibilities that are beyond their understanding. This is what sets Bailey apart: he is open to what he does not yet understand, and that has gained him access to the circus and the magic behind it. And when Widget describes his own powers in terms of storytelling, Mr. A.H. sees universal value in that, as well.



Although their conversation is quite interesting, Widget has come to visit Mr. A.H. for a very specific reason, and does not want to lose sight of that. In response to Widget’s request to take over the circus, Mr. A.H. suggests that he let the endeavor die off, showing how little he knows about the true value of the circus and its impact on people around the world. Finally, Mr. A.H. agrees to sell the circus to Widget for a story—and the story that Widget chooses to tell is The Night Circus, beginning with the first line of the novel.



In the future, someone roams the circus in the pre-dawn hours, wondering how to spend the final moments before closing. Turning to look at the clock, they notice beneath it there is a memorial plaque, with the names of Friederick Stefan Thiessen and Chandresh Christophe Lefevre. Someone is watching from the ticket booth, and she hands the person a business card with *The Cirque des Rêves* on one side and Mr. Bailey Alden Clarke, Proprietor on the back, along with his email address. The person thanks the woman and walks towards the gates. Before leaving, they turn back to the ticket booth, but it is closed, with the grate pulled down over it. They walk out onto the grass, wondering which side of the fence is the dream.

This final passage serves as an epilogue, and although there is no specific time marker for this section, the fact that the proprietor's email address is given suggests that it is set in the late 20th century, or possibly even the 21st. Yet Bailey Clarke is still in charge of the circus, thus suggesting that he has become immortal or that his lifespan is linked to that of the circus. The unnamed character prepares to leave the circus, reflecting on the profound aesthetic experience it has provided.





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