

## A Different Kind of Magic

It felt like a twisted circus.

The blunt sight of graffiti'd pews, banished to the sidelines to cater to convenience. Bright, narrow-sighted bulbs teasing shadows on spent candles. Combined with the occasional moth-eaten bibles here and there, this once-magnificent grotto emanated the feelings of sacrilege and mystique, a fraction of what it once was. Alas, a once-a-weekly Cabaret, a perverse thing happening once every Sunday at midnight, laid host to this once-holy ground.

After the introductory band-fare, the underground show - which was somewhat renowned in this part of town - would wind up its usual cadre of local neophytes, each hoping to reach some sort of recognition, and with it opportunities within our company. One by one, politicians would flaunt their rhetoric, merchants their wares; magicians their prowess and freaks and prostitutes their bodies. Above them all, and most of all, was the Ringmaster, dressed in neon red and sepia gold. He was draped in a cape of midnight and electricity, adorned with a top-hat of soft velvet and hidden by a mask of silvery night. With his powdered face and cool hard smiles, he resembled more as a prophet of cold, steely business than an emissary of comedic talents.

I wouldn't blame him though; that was his job. Men are bound to be weighed down by their role, and he was just another cog in the well-oiled machine...

"Introducing, for the very first time, ladies and gentlemen, the Marvellous, Magical, Macy Matilda!"

In a swipe of mechanisms and shadows, the well-dressed Vaudeville host, whose creepy grin had never failed to cease in the two months I had been charged with supervising this Cabaret, vanished from view. Lo, the audience beheld a young lady, whose flowing hair was a beautiful raven black.

The colour of her dress was a mystique mauve, a tint that gypsies claimed to magnify magical prowess. Her divining table was set up for her, filled with Tarot cards and clairvoyant crystal balls, glowing with what a common street magician would claim "a great and untold power". She stood quietly under the altar, in front of the worn statue of The Virgin and Christ, a marble ruin that would have once been a beautiful centrepiece. Not many noticed, but the mysterious smile they shared was... uncanny.

And from the back of the stage, she walked serenely to the pulpit. Applause.

"Thank you, Mr. Cèschescu. Audience. Now, my children, it's been so long... oho, sit. You are mine until I say we are done, my dear; and my, my, we have lots to do on our agenda, don't we?"

A faint whistle blown from the aisle, and she knew the bait was bitten.

"So let me introduce my act with a question to everyone here: Do you believe?"

A few murmurs fell in the crowd, and I felt an electrifying anticipation sweeping through me. This was the moment, the silence before the jolt that makes or breaks the prospect of a potential career, and from the looks of it, she was about to catch her big break...

“Hah! Why should I?”

A familiar voice piped up from the back of the atrium. The gypsy raised an eyebrow. *Oh no...*

“I don’t give a damn about demons and angels; honestly, no one is. But you know what I *do* think? I think that *you’re fiine, baby!*”

Instantly, the crowd exploded with laughter and around me, there was whistling all around. Tiberius and Jonas gave each other a high-five; dismayed, I looked back at my colleague Marco and his cavalier interns with a disapproving eye. The unconcerned supervisor took off his ear-buds and gave me a shrug, as if it did not occur to him that his charges’ inappropriate jest might be the famous last word that snuffs a poor woman’s dreams of fame and renown.

With a knowing smile, she ignored the jeers, plucked out her deck of Tarot cards and walked towards the edge of the stage, beckoning the offending youngsters to approach her. The crowd fell silent. Jonas, being the proud little scoundrel he is, eagerly pressed the company’s still-unreleased *teleporter* chip and flashed onto the stage. The crowd responded with a surprised gasp. The gypsy remained unfazed.

“What is your name, young one?”

“Why does it matter to you, *bimbo?*”

More laughter. The fortune-teller pursed her lips.

“Very well, then. Unnamed one, you shall have the privilege to be my first act. I shall accomplish the feat of giving you a name, since you do not have any... young man, pick your cards.”

The gypsy walked to the edge of the stage with her back facing the crowd, and Jonas was left a deck of Tarot cards spread out in front of him. The audience looked on with interest as the jeering intern deliberately analyzed the various choices, offering various nuggets of mocking wisdom about why the one the far left was unlucky or the third from the right seemed very *fung-sui*. After finally picking out his three cards, as a last indignity towards the gypsy, Jonas swiftly phased out one of them with a quickly *cloaker* charm uttered under his breath. As far as I could tell, she had not noticed and if she did, she didn’t show it. Warmly, she walked back towards centre-stage, took the two remaining cards back and placed them faced down on the stage floor, for all to see.

“Now, my young child, these cards will only reveal you a providence of yourself, nothing more, and nothing less, so let us get started, shall we? This first card will reveal your past, an archetype of the being that nature intended you to be; this is what you *were*.”

Flip. Behold, a grotesque picture of beggars and lepers, each holding begging cups and looking up at the young man with eyes of hurt, desperation, and most of all, despair. With a resolute voice, the fortune-

teller uttered: "Misery." Jonas stood silent, eyes wide, the word resonating between the card and the man and his arrogant smile fading from his face; from what I knew of Jonas and his past, I was not surprised to see him flinch a bit. However, from what I know of him, I know this would not be enough and alas, his continence quite shaken, but not broken. He kept his composure even as a loud murmur erupted from the crowd as they noticed his change in attitude. The gypsy continued.

"The second card will reveal your nature, the essence of the path that you've chosen; this is what you *want*."

Flip. It was a man in tattered clothes, struggling from the jaws of a lion. The card was inverted, with a word on the top of him, upside-down: Strength. By then, Jonas had reclaimed his defenses.

"*Humph!* Lady, all I saw were two over-arching, one-size-fit-all allegations that could've meant *anything!* How useless. And what happened to giving me a name, like you promised, huh? *Humph.* What a fraud..."

With that, he took out the card he had hidden and rested it on his palm face down for everyone to see.

"I bet you didn't even realize I took this!"

A few guffaws, but most are quiet, waiting on what the gypsy would respond to the slight. The fortune-teller sighed.

"Alas, the third card, and the last card, which you decided, unfortunately, to try and hide from the world, is who you truly are. Flip the card over for everyone to see, young man, for this is your name."

Flip. The boy's face instantly turned pale. In an instant the crowd knew why. On the other face of the tarot card was a man, with a jest hat and an ignorant grin; and underneath, a brazen word that burned into everyone's eyes: The Fool. The tides of laughter turns as Jonas scurried away silently, purple from a mix of rage and embarrassment. Not a word was heard from him the rest of the show.

*Touché! Touché!* The audience cheered. Such captivating audacity! The crowd could not have been better mesmerized by fire flickering warmly on a dark, icy night. I took a glance at Marco, and I could see that even the famous cynic was impressed by this performance; not only is he busy scratching checkmarks on the recruitment approval list (which I barely touched), but I could see in the glint of his eyes that he was taking a special liking to her. This was her first –and only– time, but instantly I knew this wouldn't be an ordinary magician's act.

"Gentlemen, *gentlemen!* Alas, I must end my first act with the same question: do you believe? They said that the first Avatars awoke as heroes chosen by the Gods; they were laughed at, and were rejected from society for their belief. They said the Avatars led a hard life, yet they were persistent, travelling around the world, attempting to reveal unconvinced scientists and sceptical philosophers their Godly gifts; one-no, two new 'gifts' to mankind, they called it... And in the end of their struggle, they finally succeeded. They finally *blessed* the world... That's what they say, but do you, my audience, believe in what *they* say?"

Silence. I could feel Marco behind me, torn between his urge to flatter and his sense of logical reasoning. How could you NOT believe? These were not cults that talked about devils and sins and trees of knowledge; the teachings of the Avatars were as true as the *terrakinesis* lectures currently offered in most universities, as true as the as of now out-of-date i-6v robots lining up to file for unemployment and the zero-g warships the army is using to trample through the battlefields of Persia and Iberia. Hints of doubt lingered in the air; for many, it was not just something to be amazed at, it was the undisputed Truth.

“I know what you think, that they taught humanity how to manipulate essences that were once beyond our control, that they revolutionized science, no, the *world*. I shall give this to them, The Avatars, that they are indeed imbued with knowledge. I won’t deny the feats of granting life to machines, or manipulating dark energy to grant people the powers of flight; *change* the world they did, I will not lie, but *blessed*? Not even a bit! In the time they spread their gifts I have rarely seen these powers be used for Good. Alas, the world has become a world of cold-hearted machines, power-hungry cults and monetized rituals; a realm of arcane powers, but with no *responsibility* to guide them. Forgive me for being a paranoid little woman, but I’m worried... where are the angels, the fluff and the lofty, while this world becomes more corrupt every day? Where would empathy, love and the Light fit in this bloodthirsty world of iron and blood? Where would I be? I am but an innocent little girl, and I dread at a future where the uncontrolled science is only used to dominate others...”

“*Ahem.*”

The gypsy paused. *About time*. To bash at the Avatars were one thing... but at the establishment...? At the sidelines, Cèschescu looked *clearly* annoyed under his powdered face. I understood why: the only reason why this Cabaret existed was because *he* knew how it works; this place was intended to be where people can have a taste of how hopeless it was to succeed, to discourage them from having useless dreams. This was the sanctuary of despair, and she was breaking the rules. It was only time before he would interfere.

Nevertheless, her words hit home. It’s true, technology and what was termed “meta-physics” had advanced, but it advanced so much in the last two decades that it was impossible to not overlook the “collateral” damage done by such growth. The original laws that eased moral restrictions on technology and business that the government passed in order to maximize the “potential” of the newly-introduced meta-physics are taking their toll, with greedy corporations and corrupt elite becoming more powerful and repressive using these newfound “gifts” for their own gain. Even after the riots and multiple lobbies, the government would not appeal them -whether they didn’t have the power or *are* the power, it remains to be speculated. Either way, the laws became pretty much irrevocable and many of us had no choice but to join their ranks, unwilling knights of an elitist and bureaucratic world that’s becoming more and more absolute.

But what can we do? We know that children in Africa are dying even as fat billionaire heiresses drive through Hollywood in hovercrafts. We know of hardy men like Jonas and Tiberius, who came from families who can’t even afford to see a doctor, who spent their childhoods staring at robot servants carrying groceries for masters too lazy to get out. We know casualties as friends, acquaintances and even families; yet we can only follow and hope that somehow, somewhere, luck would land on one of us, never looking back lest the wheel turns against you. Men are weighed down by their roles, and in this world, you either become bystanders of immorality or die.

The crowd looked at her. Most of us were in the company, and even though there are no such laws against libeling, we knew the virtues of self-censorship: a border that delineated our survival in this world. She had crossed the line, out the border of despair, onto illegal territory. The crowd looked at her, both out of fear and in anticipation. She looked back with a knowing gaze, and continued with a renewed zest...

"...what I was saying is that in the end, I think you feel the same as I do: the world feels a bit darker when powers that oppress grow more powerful... more helpless. Very well; these new tricks and feats of pretenders, these 'sciences', are impressive, I must confess, but tonight I shall show you something that the first two Avatars can never inspire, even after all the shock and awe, wonder and performance... Ladies and Gentlemen, my sheep and flock, I will show you a *miracle*."

*Shrewd move.* The Ringmaster buckled under his lust for wonder and gave her back the stage. Likewise, an excited furor enveloped the crowd, and I heard more than a few cynical jabs spouting out around me. I don't blame them. After all, tell me, what, in this world that it had now become, would be a *miracle*? A flick of a finger to build the highest buildings, a click of a cell phone to demolish it, an everlasting machine powered with magic and backed with science. Now that humans are liberated from natural laws and into the *meta-natural*, what is a miracle now, when all miracles have been performed?

Better question... *who needs* them?

"Oh, *disbelievers*. They say the heart of a disbeliever can only be won. Very well. For my next act, I shall need a volunteer..."

Many men, Marco included, raised their hands. I abstained.

"...say, Mister Cross. If you're willing that is."

"James, that's *you!*" I looked at Marco, and I looked at her. I looked back towards Marco, and I realized that all eyes had followed her fingers into the warm, flustered face of poor Sir James Cross. I looked back at her, gave her a blank blink, and walked awkwardly and self-consciously to greet her presence.

"Ma'am, at your service." I said timidly, knowing the world's gaze rested on my back. Somehow she spontaneously knew my name, but I was so flustered that I did not notice.

"Ah, *Sir James Cross*. You are a knight, I presume. Yet, so young! But, I can *see*... you, a knight of nothing but, a man of unflinching will and righteousness. An attainment of superior status, earned through hard work and temperance. So much fortune, yet such sad eyes, my dear... Your past is tarried by loss, Mr. Cross, with decisions of sacrifice and despair that closed your heart to the world. Might I ask what it could be?"

I gave her a seething look. She touched a tender spot that I never wanted to deal with again, least of all sharing it to the world to hear. She looked back with a matronly fire, betraying nothing.

"Hmm, I see... *Cross*, a lovely name; prophetic even... Tell me, do you believe, Mr. Cross?"

"I'm ath-uh... a-agnostic."

She pursed her lips in disapproval, and for the strangest reason it made me feel guilty. Thinking I might have offended her, I took a panicked breath; but instead of disdain, what I saw was the most radiant smile that I had ever seen. The fierce inferno of doubt that seethed within me was instantly cleansed and I felt naked and pure. It was as if I was prepared to face Judgement. It was too much. I recoiled and directed my eyes onto my feet.

“Your eyes betray your countenance, Mr. Cross; you know He loves you, and He does too... He wants to know why you’re keeping away from him; he wants you to be happy again. I believe it.”

With that, she tenderly laid her warm hands on my mine and I looked into her eyes for the first time since I was called up; it was golden, like the sacred fire burning eternal. Slowly but surely, I could feel the warmth thawing the cold ice of Lethe I had sealed myself under. Memories so long ago, all the hate, the blame, the shame, the desires... a court filling with Evidence... *Mum, I’m hungry... Pleas –Lester started it. I swear! Not my fa–fess... If only Jennings ha –HAT BASTARD MARTIN, VERMIN! SCUM LIA– My Gloria... Gloria. She smiled at me with the same smile she gave me before that day. Oh, why? She didn’t have to... it my- no, it’s His entire fault! He’d never let someone like her... His fault! His fa–*

A warm soul held on to mine, guiding me back into reality. Macy, like a mother, held my shivering body as I tried to not fall down to my knees. From this distance, she looked a lot older than she was...

“There, there... you’re okay, now. You’ll be okay. There. Oh, *James*, it’s no one’s fault. Such is the walk of fate: full of trials and hardships, joys and tribulations that you have to endure and follow through each step of the way. Look not to the chains, my son. Look to the *glorious* future!”

I looked up at her and suddenly, I didn’t want to let go... “I-I... W-Will you be t-there for me?”

She gave a melodic laugh, and kissed me on the forehead. “Of course, I’ll always be there for you, my son; He’ll be there for you also. Even when times are dark –and indeed, these are trying times– rest your hope onto Him and believe. You are like everyone else: you are special, and you shall inherit the World! Remember that He loves you, no matter what. Believe that He does.”

A tear flowed down my face, and I knew she was right. This world is not just reality, cruelty and hopelessness. It was not just hate, greed and capitalism. Not just Darkness. Not just cold and heartless science. I gave her a smile...

“... What is this? A show, Matilda! You promised a miracle, and all you’ve done is intimidate a client -an esteemed Knight, even- into tears. You will pay dearly for this!”

Under the Columbine, one could see the ghostly white blanket that covered his face crack. *God, someone needs to smite that goblin.* The crowd started giving boos and jeers, and the creepy host Cèschescu smiled... I gave him a dirty look, wiped away my tears and walked up to the pulpit. In a clear, never-been-heard-before (not even by myself) voice, I faced the crowd.

“I believe.”

And at that moment, I felt a rally of residual holy warmth that lingered in this once sanctified place flowing into me, filling me with confidence and vision. A golden light –a symbol of a cross, I was later told– appeared above me as the crowd gasped, and *deus ex machina*, I understood. Behind me, a

brighter light shined fervently as The Marvellous, Magical Macy Matilda's image and voice rang majestically across the stage.

"Gods of Earth and Darkness, lay testament to this! You had chosen your heroes to represent and teach your blessings, and now so have We. Gods of Science, Gods of reason and cynicism, Gods of cold, heartless technology, it has been two thousand years, my lambs. But now, let the Avatar of Light lead our message, just as you've lead yours, into the Glorious future. Ave, Sir Cross. Ave!"

My sight was drowned as the Star transcended into another realm, and what I saw after took my breath away. Each and every one of the men in the audience; tough, year-hardened cynical men whom I confess I once was, each and every one of them had tears, genuine tears of endearment falling down their faces. They smiled at me with a mysterious smile, all of them, and I knew they *understood*. I smiled back.

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"Though Humanity is be defined by our roles in this world as thinkers, conspirators and progress-makers, we need to also overcome them, casting away chains of limitations and transcend our rationality. We must take back our capacity to *believe*. Only then, can humanity succeed."

I bought the church with what little pension I received from retiring my Knighthood. Now, clean and comfortable pews, shining candles and many new Torahs, Bibles, Korans, Sutras and other holy books fill its spacious sanctuary. Yet ever since that day, I never saw The Marvellous, Magical, Macy Matilda ever again. She disappeared, Tarot and all, on the very same spot that the statue of Virgin and Christ will be moved to: the centre of the stage, where it belonged. Nevertheless, I will spread the goodwill of my understanding as the new Avatar of Light, as She intended, and hopefully, under my guidance, this place will once again regain its past glory.

As I continue my work re-inspiring hope of a better tomorrow, I smile a little in hindsight: Macy indeed showed us a true miracle in this modern, Godless world. She performed the miracle of Faith.