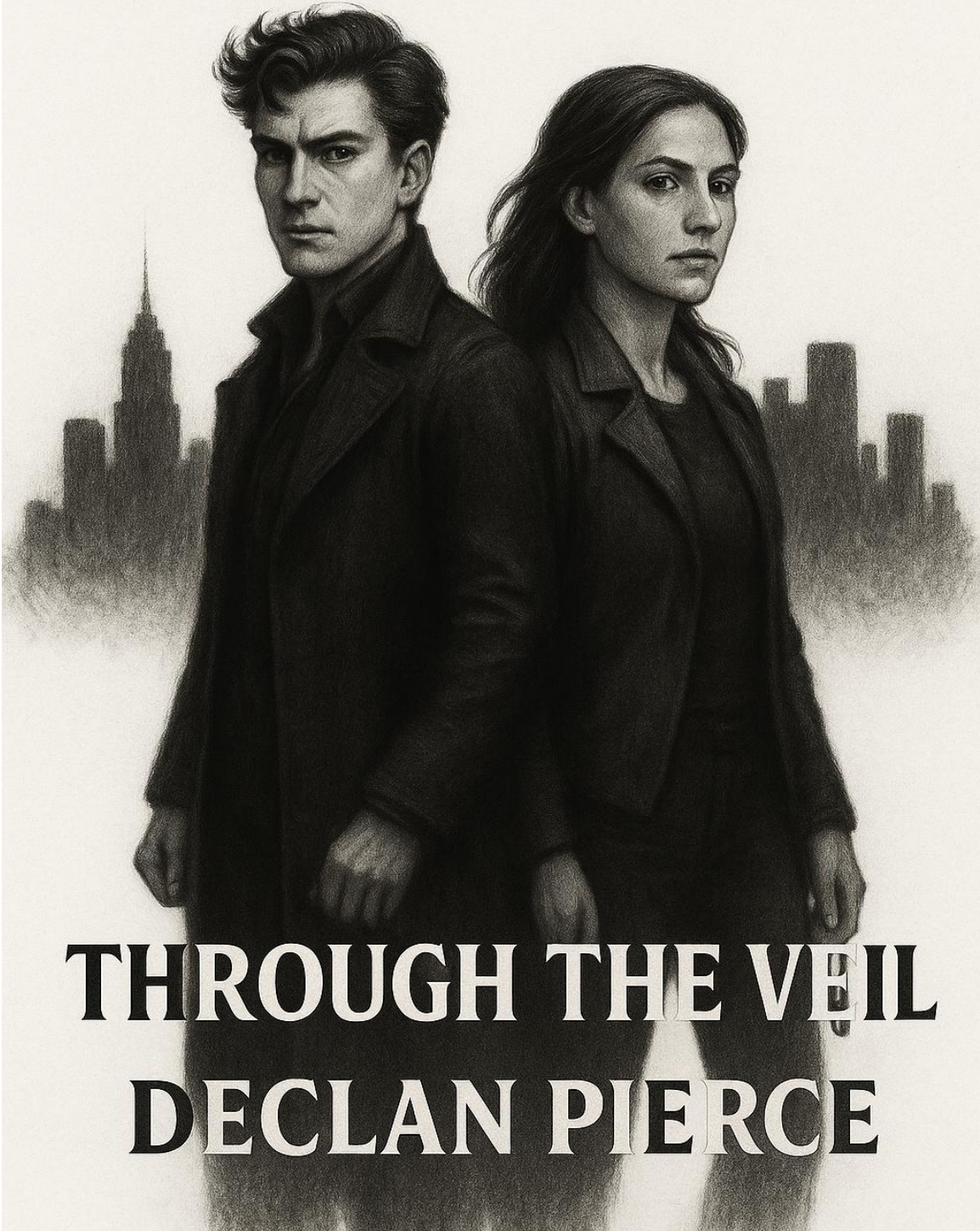


# THE CHRONICLES OF DECLAN PIERCE



## THROUGH THE VEIL DECLAN PIERCE

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## Chapter 1: Echoes in the Glass



Magicians understand control better than anyone.

We rehearse every movement, choreograph every gesture, plant every seed of misdirection, pulling the strings to precisely direct the audience towards a moment of astonishment. Every moment of a trick, including an audience's actions and reactions, is perfectly controlled.

That's what made what was happening with the ring so unsettling.

I wasn't pulling the strings. I had little if any control. Hell, I didn't even know I was part of the trick.

It was supposed to be a short, and likely uneventful trip into the city – a few hours to follow an ancient magical ring-trail I had no idea where would lead me.

The second *Ring of Asha* – one of two ancient artifacts, long buried in rumor and reverence – had apparently risen from the dead. My father acquired the first Ring of Asha many years ago and it has been in our family ever since. I had of course seen it before and vaguely knew of its history, but it had never struck me as anything more than an inanimate trinket from the past. This was no longer the case.

Wearing the ring, I could now feel its presence – as if it had literally come to life. It wasn't glowing or showing any visible signs of coming back to life. It was more like a buzzing energy that I could feel resonating from it. And it had led me here: *Media 6 Headquarters*. A towering, glass-paneled monolith in the heart of the city, too sleek and sanitized for anyone like me to feel comfortable in.

But I wasn't here to feel comfortable.

The lobby was filled with the clatter of heels on tile and the buzz of professional urgency. I moved quietly past the front desk, slipping into the flow of bodies with the kind of presence that avoids notice. A whisper in the stream. No one looked twice.

I didn't have much of a plan, as there was not much to go on. All I had in mind was to get in and hope that maybe the ring I was wearing would pick up on some residual energy trail and point me in the direction of the source of the other. I didn't expect it to lead me to a single office door halfway down the east wing's hallway. Honestly, I'm not truly sure if the ring led me to what I discovered next or if it was just pure coincidence. Either way, I

certainly didn't expect to see a particular name printed in polished gold lettering on the placard of an office door.

**Vivian Roth**, Senior Investigative Reporter – AND - my ex-girlfriend

No freaking way!

It couldn't be.

It had to be someone else. But then it all started to make sense. The last time I saw her she was studying to be an investigative reporter. I had no idea this was where she ended up after all these years?

I had to be certain it was in fact the exact Vivian Roth I was desperately hoping it wasn't.

I needed to get inside the office but couldn't risk using my shadow magic in the middle of the day, in a busy office building no less. The building was also probably riddled with cameras. Fortunately for me, I thought to discretely check the office door knob and it was unlocked.

Inside the office, the world was sterile. Clean organized shelves. Frosted windows. A laptop lay flat across a modest desk. And then – on the shelf beside her desk – was the proof I needed.

A framed photograph.

It was Vivian, bright and beautiful. That unmistakable freckle high on her left cheek. Her laugh was frozen mid-motion as she stood among a cluster of co-workers, all wearing Media 6 lanyards and ridiculous party hats.

It was her. The same Vivian Roth I had once let get dangerously close to discovering the secret magical world I belong to. The insatiably curious woman I'd left behind – for her own good as much as mine.

It appeared as though her insatiable curiosity had paid off in the Layworld – now putting it to good use for Media 6.

With the ring in play though, this was bad. I didn't even want to consider the possibilities.

I didn't have time to linger. I casually strolled back out the same way I came in - like just another bee in the Media 6 hive.

There wasn't time to process this new information. I had to be back in Fairmont by dusk to prepare for my set that night at The Marlowe. Simon had texted earlier, asking if I wanted to get drinks afterward – there was a new finger food bar in town with live music he'd been dying to scope out.

Under normal conditions I might have accepted. A good drink and Simon's bold chatter were the closest thing I had to a social life.

But not tonight.

Rain check, I'd texted back. Got plans already.

He sent back a shrug emoji and a gif of a magician dramatically vanishing into smoke.

Classic Simon.

That night the show went on, as it always did. The stage lights hit me like a punch of warmth. I came. I entertained. But my mind wasn't there. Not truly.

It was still in that office. Still staring at that photograph.

Later that night, the streets of Fairmont were quiet again. My flat—set back from the glow of the boardwalk – was exactly as I left it. Dim. Familiar. Quiet.

I walked past the darkened shelves and into my study. The shadows flickered around me, restless as ever. I sat at my desk, flicking a coin between my fingers, the silence pressing in around me.

Then I felt it. A pulse. Faint, but undeniable.

My eyes drifted down to my hand.

The Ring of Asha. I hadn't realized but I had been wearing it all day. It now radiated a slow steady pulse.

I stared at it. Daring it to stop. Daring it to die out.

It didn't.

It got stronger. I could almost feel it beckoning my attention – as if it were trying to suck my consciousness into it.

I resisted for a few moments but then, in a momentary lapse of control, I let it grab me.

Instantly I felt my consciousness turn inward. And then – suddenly – I was somewhere else.

Not physically. After my senses had inverted and re-established themselves - I saw a mirror. More specifically - the reflection of a woman brushing her hair in the mirror. A soft lamp glowed behind her, casting delicate light across the room. More frightening than any of this was the fact that it was an all too familiar woman's face.

**Vivian.**

She hadn't changed much. Same posture. Same long flowing dark hair tucked behind her ears.

But just as I was starting to make sense of what I was seeing, abruptly something changed.

Her eyes darted up.

She began scanning the room frantically as if she had suddenly lost the ability to see. Then she began to squint her eyes staring directly back into the mirror.

Right where my perspective was focused.

She froze. Slowly, a chill visibly rolled through her shoulders. Her face tightened, uncertain.

Like she had just seen a ghost.

And maybe she had.



*Can she see what I'm seeing?*

*Or did she see me?*

*No. That shouldn't be possible.*

*She'd only be able to see what I was looking at...*

These were the questions that were racing through my mind.

I looked down at my hands, curling my fingers but I couldn't see them.

The ring....

I pulled it off immediately. The image vanished and I was instantly back alone in my flat.

I sat in silence, breathing hard. The weight of the ring lingered even after I set it on the desk like it might spring to life again.

There was no question anymore.

She had the other ring.

Of all possible people - Vivian Roth had somehow come into possession of the second Ring of Asha.

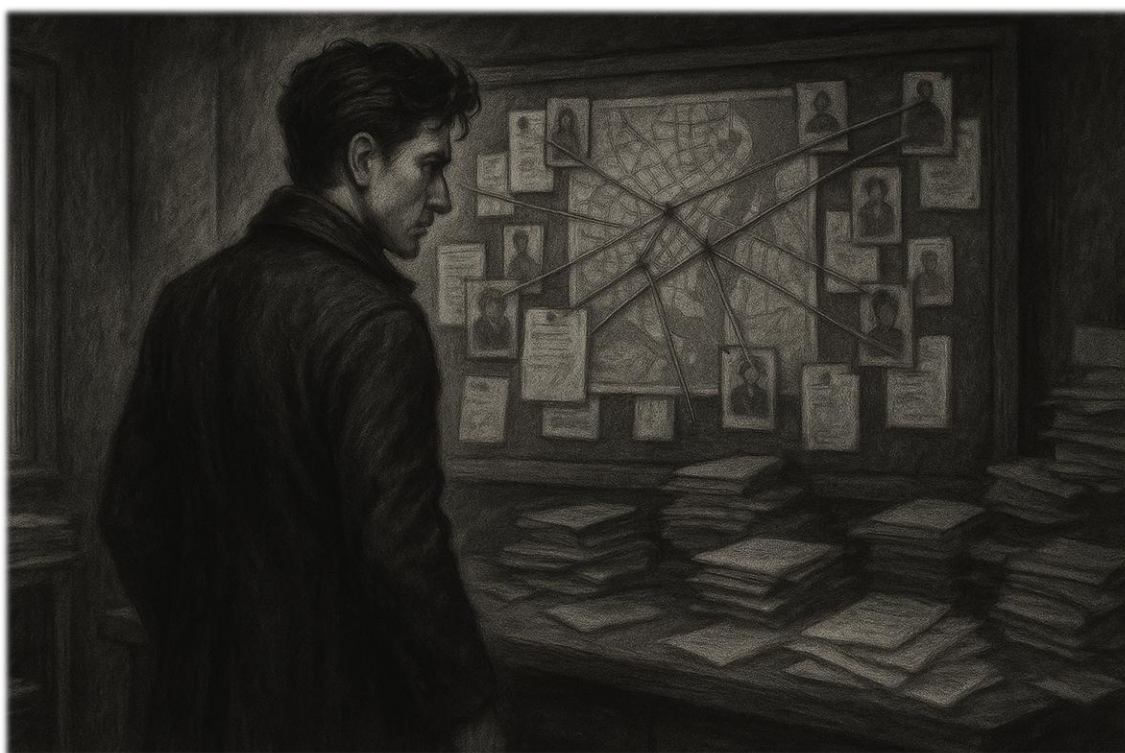
And it appeared as though she might've just felt me watching her.

Worse yet – she might be learning how to use it.

Which meant I was out of time.

Tomorrow, I would have to track her down and recover the ring.

## Chapter 2: Threads on the Wall



It's funny how something as small as a ring can make the whole world feel heavier.

I barely slept that night. Not from fear but from uncertainty – my mind unable to restrain from examining the endless pathways of possibilities regarding Vivian and the ring and how I might handle the outcome.

I woke up the following morning pretending it was just another day. I couldn't just sit in my flat allowing my mind to wander. I took a shower, got dressed and got out.

As I walked, my thoughts kept returning to her face, half-lit by a mirror, and the strange moment of pause – the way her eyes had flicked toward mine as if peering down an invisible thread that connected us.

I wasn't ready to see her, but there was no time to waste. If I didn't get to her soon, someone else might.

I stopped by *The Raven's Brew* that afternoon, more for ritual than anything else. The old café was carved into a sunken brick corner on the edge of Fairmont, its walls steeped in espresso and 90's alternative rock music. I liked it because the vibe was just dark enough to feel somewhat like home. If my flat was my retreat, The Raven's Brew was like a prelude. A quiet place to collect my thoughts before walking into the fire.

I was halfway through my second cup when a familiar voice slid into the air beside me.

"Well, well, Mr. Pierce. First time I see you here, I think – what a coincidence. But twice? Starting to feel like a setup."

**Simon Winters.**

Blond, polished, and dressed like he was heading to a stage show at all hours of the day. He slid into the seat across from me with that same confidence-soaked grin that could win card games and lawsuits alike.

"I'd accuse you of following me," I said, "but you're far too vain to track someone without announcing it."

He raised his cup in salute. "Guilty."

We shared a brief laugh, but I was only halfway present. Simon picked up on it. He truly does have sixth sense about these kinds of things.

"You look off today, Declan," he said. "Something got you distracted?"

"Something like that." I said, stirring my coffee slowly. "Let's just say... someone from my past has made their way back into my present. Someone I thought I'd never see again."

Simon leaned back, eyebrows lifting. "Ah. One of those."

I nodded. "Yeah, It's not that simple though."

"It never is." he replied. He sipped his coffee, allowing his gaze to drift over to the condensation on the window. "You know, it's easy to think the past is some quiet little vault you can lock away. But in my experience? It's more like the finale to a grand illusion – lying dormant, just waiting to pop out and reveal itself at the perfect moment, smacking you right in the face."

"That supposed to be comforting?" I asked.

“Not at all. Profound realizations aren’t necessarily synonymous with comfort. But I will say this—whatever it is, don’t approach it like a performance. No script. No finale in mind. Just be present and pay attention. The truth has a funny way of showing up when you stop trying to shape it.”

I let the silence stretch for a few moments.

“Thanks,” I said eventually.

Simon gave a short nod, then checked his phone.

“Welp, that’s my cue. Try not to get lost in the smoke, my friend.”

Like that, he was gone almost as quickly as he had arrived.

I didn’t head to the city until nightfall. Something about confronting my past felt more honest in the dark.

Vivian lived in a modest Brownstone on the edge of the city’s arts district – old architecture, lots of ivy, and a flickering porch light that hadn’t been changed in months.

I stood across the street for several minutes, watching the building. No sign of her. No movement in the windows. Her apartment was on the third floor. Curtains drawn. I thought for a moment I might get lucky and discover that Vivian had left the ring behind in her apartment, saving me the need to confront her face to face.

At any rate, there was no need to knock.

Instead, I slipped into the alley beside the building, pressed my hand to the cool bricks, and let the shadow take me up.

I unfolded in the darkness like a velvet curtain, scanning the walls crevices for entry points. There's always a crack somewhere – always.

I emerged inside her apartment, through the window of her living room.

The scent of lavender and ink struck me immediately.

The space was small but clean. A couch with a folded throw. Bookshelves lined with investigative biographies and case studies. By all standards it was a relatively normal-looking apartment; with the exception of one particular point of interest.

I soon discovered a rather large corkboard that dominated almost an entire wall. It was covered with printed photos, newspaper clippings, and hand-written notes pinned with surgical precision. Underneath all of this was a map of the city and the surrounding area.

As I investigated closer, I could see that the photos weren't of politicians or CEOs. A few of the photos showed people I recognized from my world.

A pair of women in tailored suits I knew to be part of the Order of Mist, walking out of a bookstore that was a well-known contact point in the magical world.

A man from the Order of Embers, caught mid-gesture in a shadowy alley. I didn't recognize him but the Embers emblem on his lapel was unmistakable.

Viewing Vivian's whole investigative montage up close, I could see now that there were strings of red thread connecting faces with other faces and locations – notes scribbled over almost everything. Some names were crossed out. Others circled.

I noticed a lot of threads emerging from one particular highlighted location with a photo next to it.

It looked like a derelict industrial tunnel, jagged and sunken, with a faint shimmer barely visible in the photo. Beneath it, in thick red ink, she had written:

## **THE VANISHING POINT**

I leaned in.

There were notes underneath it. In fact, there were notes lying everywhere on a couple of small filing cabinets she had stationed near the corkboard. I began meticulously scanning through the ruffage of evidence Vivian had compiled. She had more than just observations, she had timelines. She had notes detailing locations and times of secret transactions.

It was clear that she thought she was on to some sort of large underground smuggling ring. She'd photographed strange sightings with highly unusual looking people. All the activity was eventually directed to this so-called Vanishing Point, where I assumed Vivian's trail ended.

What were they? And where did they come from?

Vivian had somehow stumbled onto the greatest story a journalist could ever dream of – and it involved my world.

And what's worse - I was oblivious to it all.

This idea probably terrified me more than any of the photos.

Because if I didn't know about any of this – and the Order of Shadows didn't know about it—then someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to keep this hidden.

And yet, Vivian (a normie and ex-girlfriend no less) had got the scoop on everything. Alone. Without magic. Without access to our magical world networks.

Just pure instinct and drive.

I turned and noticed a chair sitting in the corner of the room.

On it sat a small, unassuming box. Inside was a collection of old documents – scans of runes, diagrams, artifact sketches and various texts in a language I didn't recognize. My fingers paused over a torn parchment fragment written in curling silver ink.

The text made no sense.

But the symbols...

They were *Fae*. Many of us in the magical world are familiar with Fae scripts. We have texts that date back to the *Great Divide*. Reading ancient scripts was one thing, but combined



with all other evidence Vivian had, it was starting to look like there was some real connection to The Nether Realm.

Impossible. Right?

This wasn't just a magical lead. Vivian had seemingly stumbled onto an ancient discovery that was nothing more than legend even in my world.

Still, there was no way she could truly know and appreciate what she was stepping into.

I backed away from the board, running a hand through my hair.

She wasn't just in possession of the *Ring of Asha*.

She was investigating a secret not even the Orders knew about.

And that changed everything.

## Chapter 3: The Reach of Shadows



There are places in this world that feel like they were never meant for sunlight.

Places that remain untouched by time, buried beneath years of dust and silence. Forgotten by most, yet somehow... aware.

That's what it felt like as I descended into the remains of what turned out to be an old rail depot at the edge of the city.

Vivian's so called "*Vanishing Point.*"

That's what she had labeled it on her conspiracy wall—circled in red, connected by threads to mysterious sightings, strange runes, and photos of *Mist* operatives.

But even as I stood staring at the desolate premise, I still didn't know what I was looking for.

Only that she probably knew more than I did.

The facility was partially collapsed, leaving jagged corridors and hollowed-out service shafts that led downward beneath the old railyard. The deeper I went, the heavier the air became – humid and stale, charged with something that crawled beneath my skin.

The area was seemingly abandoned, but I wasn't going to take any chances. I checked the perimeter staying safe and unseen in the shadows, weaving between fractured concrete pillars and rusted doorframes as I searched for movement.

That's when I spotted her.

**Vivian.**

She had just entered the lower level of the structure through a rusted stairwell, backpack tight to her frame, her movements careful but determined. I wasn't going to just announce myself, appearing out of nowhere in a place like this. She couldn't see me anyways. So, I followed her from the shadows anxiously waiting to see where she would lead me.

She moved into a narrow corridor and stopped beside a wall – cracked and faded, lined with broken utility pipes and rust. Her right hand came up, almost instinctively, and pressed gently against the surface.

I watched, puzzled.

She didn't move, but her eyes began to shift back and forth—tracking something, as though there was a window in front of her instead of a brick wall.

I continued to watch, trying to wrap my head around what she was doing?

She didn't blink. Her gaze flicked sharply from one side to the other, always in rhythm, always focused – as if watching something pacing. But she was staring at a wall...

I decided to get ahead of her and see for myself what was on the other side of the wall.

I sank into the darkness at my feet and let it carry me ahead, emerging silently in the next chamber – just around the corner from where she stood.

And that's when I saw it.

**A beast.**

It was more like a hellish looking dog actually. Beastly compared to any doglike creature I'd ever seen before. It moved like something born from a nightmare – long furry limbs wrapped in black muscle, shoulders high and twitching, its head low to the ground like a hunting wolf. But it was no wolf.

It had three eyes, laid across its angular skull – two where they should've been, and a third centered on its brow. All of them a deep crimson red.

Its jaw was crooked, pulled back into a predator's sneer, with teeth like glass shards twisted inward.

And it wasn't alone.

An old wiry figure stood nearby. He was wearing a coat that looked like something out of the Pirates of the Caribbean.

His facial features were not of this world though. Pointy nose and ears, porcupine facial hair, pale gray skin and a crooked posture that leaned heavily on a thin cane carved with Fae runes. His beady black eyes were covered up by a pair antiquated looking spectacles. He looked like some kind of goblin man.

He muttered some words I couldn't understand, gesturing occasionally with his staff as the hound paced the open floor.

I narrowed my eyes. What was he?

*A guardian?*

*A handler?*

*A gatekeeper?*

Whatever he was, he was clearly guarding the place.

I retreated back several feet around the corner to check on Vivian and that's when it hit me like secret to a grand illusion.

She was using the ring to look through the wall.

I knew the rings had the power to share tethered visions between wearers. But no one ever said anything about granting the ability to see through walls?

I slid back down the corridor to check on the beast.

It appeared to be pacing, circling some kind of unseen perimeter. I was certain it was guarding something. Something behind them. Something important.

But I couldn't see what it was. The space just... ended. There was just another wall cluttered with old crates, pipes and boxes. There wasn't even a door that I could see. There was a strange color and aura about the place though, but I couldn't focus on it well enough from the shadows to tell what it was.

I retreated once again to my earlier vantage point, but Vivian was already creeping around the corner hiding behind some old busted concrete.

She retrieved a camera from her backpack and was trying to line up a photograph.

This was dangerous.

I started to move but it was too late. Her foot slipped slightly on loose concrete, scraping the floor with a sharp crack.

The hound's head snapped around.

And so did its master's.

The goblin man's voice rang out in a high pitched raspy shrill.

"Tear her apart!" he screamed, slamming his cane into the ground.

The beast lunged.

Vivian froze.

And I reacted instinctively.

I was about thirty feet away, hidden deep in the shadows of the wall across from her, I extended my hand outwards from the shadows.

It was a stretch, but my fingers emerged from the surface directly behind her.

I grabbed a hold of her from under her arms and pulled her into my shadow with all my might.

She screamed.

Then she was gone – pulled backward into the shadow, across space and stone.

She tumbled through the dark and collapsed beside me, gasping.

"Declan?!"

“Yep, no time to explain.”

I stepped out into the open to catch the beast’s attention.

The hound didn’t miss a beat. It snarled, changed directions and started sprinting right towards me.

I dropped into the nearest pool of black, warping through the floor.

I emerged behind the creature and drew my nightstick.

It pulsed in my grip – warm and humming from an enchantment thanks to an old friend of mine from the *Order of Might*. Effortlessly generates nearly five times the striking force of your average police baton.

I swung.

**CRACK.**

The beast yelped.

It turned, its claws swiping at the space I no longer occupied.

I moved again – *Shadow Warp* – appearing to its side, slamming my stick into its ribs.

I could feel its bones give. Phlegm spewed from its mouth.

As it wretched in pain, I struck the beast one last time on the back of the neck. The creature fell limp, motionless.



Before I could catch my breath, I heard a violent sound – *fwoooosshh!* A wave of green fire burst from across the room.

I instinctively ducked into the floor and then jumped out of an adjacent wall.

The goblin man was somehow able to quickly spot me, as if he were able to track my movements. He pointed his cane at me that was now glowing green at its tip. Abruptly another green fireball launched itself in my direction.

I ducked, barely avoiding the blast as it scorched the wall beside me.

“You’re no match for me!” he spat.

I lunged again, twisting through the floor and emerging behind him.

Again, he was somehow able to see my movements even from the shadows. He spun raising his cane to attack - but - Too slow.

I grabbed his wrist and brought my nightstick down hard on his arm.

It cracked upwards unnaturally as he shrieked, dropping his cane.

I reached for him, but he spun and jumped back out of reach surprisingly quickly. My reach managed to scrape the spectacles off his face. He looked down at them for a moment but then turned and sped off, his long cape-like coat fluttering behind him. To my confusion he was running directly toward the back wall behind him.

There was no escape.

Or so I thought.

What I saw next made my jaw drop.

He continued to run directly into the wall but instead of bouncing off of it like ping pong ball – he passed right through it – vanishing in an instant.

I was frozen for a moment but then stepped closer, slowly, still breathing heavy from the adrenaline.

I couldn't detect anything magical about this wall – and yet, he vanished right through it.

I took a few steps forward and then tentatively reached out to touch the wall. My hand passed through like air.

“Wooh” I said taking a couple steps back, examining my hands for any trace of residue.

Behind me, Vivian emerged from the concrete rubble, shaken but standing.

“What the hell are you doing here!? And what the hell was all that!?” she said frantically, trying to keep her voice low.

I picked up the cane.

Its surface was still hot.

“Me? Here? That's a long story” I replied already bending over to inspect the motionless beast lying on the floor. It was indeed lifeless.

“That thing? Your guess is as good as mine.”

Then I stood to look at her directly.

She looked back at me as if she were seeing me for the first time.

“You pulled me through a wall, Declan!” she said still exacerbated.

I shot back a teeth-clenching smile and gave her the slightest shoulder shrug. “Yeah, let’s just say that my magic isn’t entirely the kind you see in stage illusions.”

She stared back blankly at first. “Uh huh, it’s all starting to make sense now.”

She brushed off the dust from her pants and walked up to the wall running her hand through the mirage.

“I knew there had to be something here. I’ve been onto some pretty weird stuff lately, but this – this just keep getting weirder and weirder – and now you.” she said, turning back towards me.

“I’ve been investigating activity I can only define as *otherworldly* coming in and out of this place for months now. This must be the source. But source of what?”

“I have no idea.” I said perplexed by the surprising honesty of my statement. I truly had no idea.

But I was about to.

## Chapter 4: The Veil Unveiled



The silence after the battle clung to the crumbling walls of the rail depot like soot. The only sound was our breathing – Vivian’s, fast and shallow, mine steady but tense. I still had the goblin man’s cane in my hand. Its twisted runes pulsed with a fading green glow, echoing the last spell it had released. I couldn’t decipher the markings, but the weight of the thing was undeniable. Whatever he had been guarding – it wasn’t just important. It was dangerous.

We stood in the corridor where he had vanished just staring at a solid wall cluttered with crates, pipes, and debris that loomed in front of us.

I was still turning over theories in my head when Vivian stepped forward and crouched near the ground. Her hand moved over the goblin man's glasses. I had forgotten they fell to the ground.

She picked them up, studying them as she slowly rose to her feet.

"His glasses," she said curiously.

She held the small, round spectacles delicately, peering at the frames with narrowed eyes. Then, out of instinct or sheer curiosity, she raised them to her face.

She froze for a moment as her eyebrows shot up and her jaw dropped. She secured the glasses firmly to her face and began looking intently at the wall.

"...Declan."

Her voice was breathless.

"Um, you need to see this."

She kept her eyes peered on the wall as she extended her hand, offering the glasses to me.

I took them and lifted them to my face.

Just when I thought my day couldn't possibly have room for anymore "holy crap" moments, putting the glasses on instantly made me aware that I was just getting started – they exposed everything.

Where once stood a simple concrete wall cluttered with discarded crates, barrels and warped metal piping, there was an extended corridor that led into a chamber room. The goblin guy didn't disappear. He simply walked through an *illusion* that was staring us right in the face.

I took the glasses on and off a few times to study the difference in what I was seeing. It was a perfect illusion – a magical Veil hiding the truth that lay behind. Perhaps even more disturbing than that was what stood on the other side.

At the far end of the corridor and at the other end of the chamber was an archway, ornately carved, humming with energy. Through it shimmered a warped ripple of golden-green light, pulsing like liquid sun trapped in crystal.

The magic radiating off it made the hairs on my arms stand up.

I certainly had never seen one or even heard whispers of its actual existence – but I knew what it was immediately.

Vivian stepped forward beside me. "What... what is that?"

I took a slow deliberate breath – weighing the implications of what I was about to say out loud.

"It's a *Waypoint*." I said, trying to remain calm.

"What's a Waypoint?" she said confused.

"A portal – basically"

"A portal?" she responded still grasping for a sensible answer "to where exactly?"

"My guess.... *The Nether*."

She turned sharply toward me.

"Ah jeez, can you say anything that makes any sense?" she said now visibly frustrated.

"What the hell is The Nether?" she barked.

I rubbed my eyes trying to clear my thoughts "Oooh, that's another long story. For now, let's just say it's a place where magic is real, along with every other fantasy creature you've ever heard of from childhood fairytales."

Vivian snapped. "I just watched you magically transform into a shadow. If that's not magic, I don't know what is."

"Like I said, long story."

We stood in silence for a moment longer, both of us digesting a wealth of new information.

Her expression suddenly turned serious. She turned to me, resolute. "We need to see what's on the other side."

“Are you crazy?” I said shaking my head. “Absolutely not. Look, I can’t say for certain what’s on the other side – only that a freaky goblin man is likely there waiting for us. It’s too dangerous. Besides, haven’t you seen enough for one night?”

“Screw that!” she barked back “This could be the only chance we get. Whatever this is, it’s monumental, and not in a good way. I’m sure it’s bad. I’m sure it’s dangerous. But don’t you think that’s all the more reason to try and find out exactly what we’re dealing with here?”

“If we don’t? What then? That goblin freak knows we’re on to him. I may not know everything, but I’ve been deep in this shit long enough to know that there are way more devious players involved in this game than just that guy. By tomorrow, hell by morning, this place will probably be damn near impenetrable – guarded by who knows what.”

“You don’t understand what that place is, Vivian. It’s not just another location. It’s another realm. The Nether is where magic went when it left this world. It’s where the Fae vanished to. You don’t just waltz in looking like, well... like us.”

She crossed her arms, fire in her eyes. “Then I suggest we don’t just waltz on in. Why can’t you use your shadow magic, power... whatever it is.”

I exhaled, rubbing the bridge of my nose. She was right. This would probably be the only chance we had to peek behind the curtain – to know what we were up against.

I gave her a long look, then sighed.

“Fine. BUT, as per your suggestion, we’ll do this my way. I handed her the glasses “Here, you’ll probably need these more than me.”



She put the glasses on gazing back through the wall.

“You ready?” I asked reluctantly.

“Let’s do it.”

We both stepped through the veil, taking only a few steps before pausing in the corridor leading to the open chamber ahead.

I turned back to Vivian “Wait here a sec while I go check ahead. Try not to freak out.”

I sank down into a shadow on the floor aligning and stretching myself out along the bottom corner edge where the wall and floor meet. It’s a method I developed for secretly entering a room where a large shadow moving across the floor might be too easily seen.

I crept ahead along the edge.

Vivian gasped. Not in fear – but surprise.

“Declan, I can see you,” she said, her voice awestruck.

I poked my head out of the floor looking wide eyed back at her.

“What, are you serious?”

“The glasses,” she said. “I can still see your shape. You’re in the shadows – but I can see you moving through them.”

That’s when it clicked.

That's how the goblin man was able to track me during our fight.

He'd known where I was – even in the shadows because he could see me through the glasses.

"The glasses," I replied, trying to keep my voice low "looks like they can see through all types of illusions. Good to know."

I proceeded into the chamber in shadow form and after a quick security sweep of the place I emerged next to the Waypoint.

I signaled and Vivian approached soon after.

The archway loomed before us like the maw of something ancient and divine – its waves of green light almost beckoning us to enter.

"Alright, Vivian, if we're gonna do this, we're gonna need to do it as secretively as possible. We're gonna slide through as a shadow and just pray that it keeps us concealed from whatever is on the other side."

"We're just going to *slide* through as a shadow?" she replied apprehensively.

"Yes, I'll carry you with me. You'll be fine."

I stepped forward and took hold of her hands, pausing to look her in the eyes.

"This might feel little... weird."

She raised a brow. "Define weird."

“Uh, A little bit like drowning into the air itself. You’ll be able to breathe just fine though. Don’t try to fight it. You won’t have any control anyways. Just let it happen.”

She rolled her eyes. “Comforting”

“Let’s just do this before common sense kicks in and I change my mind. “I said as I began to sink slowly.

My body melted downward, fading into the floor as the shadows began to envelope me. I pulled Vivian gently toward me, letting the darkness creep up slowly surrounding her body.

I took a breath, gathering my will. I could see her eyes grow wide as I pulled her fully into my shadow

I didn’t waste any more time thinking about it and slid through the Waypoint as quickly as I could.

I was expecting some sort of sensation but there was none tell of. It felt like nothing more than sliding from one chamber to another.

And that’s all it was - another chamber. This one, however, was lit with the same green radiant light we could see on the other side of the Waypoint.

I did a quick scan of the place and after determining that the coast was clear, we emerged from the shadows near the Waypoint. It was more than just a chamber. It was a massive stone hall. I could see now that the green light was emanating from torches displaying the same green magic flame produced by the goblin man’s cane earlier. Intricate runes lined

the walls, etched in deep grooves that shimmered faintly in the dim glow. The architecture was unlike anything I'd seen – half-ancient, half-organic. Every edge felt alive.

Vivian slid free of the shadow beside me and gasped. “Yep, that was weird.” she said catching her balance.

I took several breaths as I soaked in the environment and that's when it hit me.

### **Magic.**

Raw, unfiltered, omnipresent.

It buzzed in my skin, rippled through my blood. The magic of The Nether wasn't passive – it recognized me. I felt as though I was being greeted as a long-lost cousin returning home. I could feel my own shadow power twisting joyfully beneath my skin, eager to explore, dying to be set free.

We had barely begun walking freely through the great hall when Vivian spoke “Still feel a little weird, Declan. Like I'm vibrating on a different frequency or something.”

But I raised a hand, silencing her.

“Shh. We're not alone.”

Entering the chamber at the other end was a band of *goblin men* – all of them with pale gray skin, wiry with pointy ears and noses and all with the same extravagant fashion sense – long intricately designed coats, pointy leather shoes and an excessive amount of bejeweled accessories.

Leading the pack was the one from earlier.

His arm was clutched tightly to his side, clearly broken. He pointed directly at us with his other hand, speaking frantically to the others in a language that sounded more like a blending of high-pitched growls.

Their eyes fixated on us as they became suddenly accompanied by several more hellhounds.

“Oh, shit!” I felt my chest tighten and I immediately grabbed Vivian’s hand, pulling her toward me.

“Welp, Time to go!”

Vivian didn’t have time to argue.

I grabbed her and dropped us instantly into the floor. This time, we weren’t taking things slow. I didn’t even pause to catch my breath. I streaked us back through the Waypoint and continued on out through the veil.

We didn’t stop until we’d reached the tunnel entrance, where Vivian’s car was parked a safe distance from the rail yard. We were fleeing for our lives, but I couldn’t allow us to re-emerge until I was sure we were alone.

After a quick perimeter sweep, I released my grip on Vivian, and we stepped out of the shadows into the night air. Both of us gasped – part from exertion, part from disbelief.

She leaned against the car, hands braced on the hood, staring back at me.

"I take it back," she said panting. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

## Chapter 5: A Thousand Questions



The car door slammed, and the engine roared to life, tires spinning in the gravel as Vivian peeled out onto the dimly lit road. Her fingers gripped the wheel like a vice. She was driving a bit too fast for the slick road conditions we were on, but I wasn't about to suggest she calm down. She had more than several reasons to be freaked out at the moment.

"So, you're telling me you have no idea what the hell all that was back there?" she barked.

"The *hellhounds* or the *goblin men*?" I responded sharply.

“Take your pick!”

“Uh, other than the fact that they’re from The Nether – a place widely considered to be basically inaccessible – No, I have no idea. Although, I’d say my description of hellhounds and goblin men is pretty spot on. Look, I honestly don’t know. This is a first, even for my kind!”

Vivian shot me a disapproving glance. “Your kind huh? Yeah, let’s talk about that mister shadow man. You appear out of nowhere and then pull me into a freakin wall!”

“Technically I pulled you into the shadows and around the wall but, whatever.”

“That’s not any better, Declan!” she shouted back.

“You’re welcome, by the way.” I said unable to resist pointing out how fortunate she was that I showed up when I did.

She huffed out a laugh, half panic, half relief. “Okay, fine, yes – thank you. You saved my ass. But what the hell were you even doing down there anyways?”

“I was looking for you. Actually, that’s not entirely true. I was looking for the Ring.”

**“The Ring?”**

I showed the Ring of Asha that I was still wearing on my own finger. “See, I got one too. The fact that the other one wound up in the hands of a normie is not good news in my world – you of all people.”

“Normie?” she replied looking over at me clenching her brow.

“Yes, Normies, normal people without magic. Look, forget about the rings for sec. We were just in The Nether! Something my kind believes to be impossible. Not even the Orders know about this.”

“Orders?” Her voice pitched upward. “Jesus Christ, Declan! It’s like you’re speaking another language.”

It was a nerve-racking situation. I couldn’t answer a single question without it bringing rise to several more.

“Yes, Orders. In the magic world, we all belong to a certain Order. Think of it like being part of a large extended family who all share the same magical DNA that passes down its own unique magical qualities through an ancient bloodline. There are several different bloodlines and therefore several different Orders in the magical world.

Vivian stared at me like I’d grown a second head. “Wooh.... You’re gonna have to slow walk me through that one later.”

“Right, later. The short version then. I belong to the Order of Shadows – wielders of shadow magic, seekers and beholders of truth, masters of espionage, subterfuge. It’s in our blood. We observe, gather intel, and when necessary, we expose.

She looked at me, deadpan. “Well, that tracks.”



I ignored the jab. “Right... All that craziness back there though – the illusion hiding a portal to another world - that all reeks of the Order of Mist.

“Mist? What, do they spray you with water or something?” she replied, her tone drenched in sarcasm.

“Not mist in the literal sense. Their magic involves illusion, manipulation and perception control. But even they shouldn't have been able to hide something this big from us.”

“And the goblin guys? What, they’re just in on it?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “But the fact that a normie knew all of this was going on before we did... that’s bad. That’s really bad.”

Vivian tapped her fingers anxiously against the steering wheel. “So, I’m not crazy.”

“Crazy? No. Reckless... well...”

She gave a quick exacerbated snort. “Yeah, well, guess I always did have a thing for danger.”

The sharp corners of her mouth lifted into the smallest smile, but it faded fast.

“I’ve been pulling on this thread for weeks, Declan. I knew I was on to something big. I had no idea it would lead to literal creatures from another dimension.”

The city soon came into view through the windshield, the glowing skyline flickering behind thin strands of fog. We allowed the silence to linger, if only to catch our breaths.

Vivian took a side road, and we wound our way into an older district – a patchwork of brownstones nestled under crooked trees and buzzing streetlamps.

We parked in front of her building, and I followed her up to the third floor, where she unlocked the door to her apartment. It was just as I had left it only a few hours ago – cozy but cluttered with notes and knickknacks - distinctly hers.

She tossed her coat aside, flicked on a lamp, and immediately started pulling out folders.

She went directly to her desk and began rifling through files. “It’s been killing me this whole time, but I feel like I’ve seen that goblin guy before.

I stepped up beside her as she spread out a series of photos and documents on the table. Surveillance shots, map sketches and diagrams.

She stopped at a photo and removed it from the bunch. “Yep, take a look at the guy in this photo and tell me I’m not crazy.”

I took the photo and looked at it intently. It was the goblin man alright, but he didn’t look nearly as goblinlike as he did in the tunnels underground. He looked much more passable for a human being in terms of general features. But his face was unmistakable – the same cryptic eyes, the same pointy nose. It was him, no doubt about it. I soon realized that it was the same mysterious looking man I saw in the photo earlier that evening in Vivian’s apartment. This man was no man at all.

“No, you’re not crazy” I said still staring wide eyed at the photo. “It must be some sort of transformation magic that allows him to pass for human. Its *Mist* magic.”

“Well, that’s not disturbing at all. I’ve been trailing him for days, Declan. He’s been meeting with all sorts of shady looking people. Here, take a look” she said handing me another small stack of photos.

It was the same goblin man meeting various people. A couple were clearly mist agents (no surprise there). Most of them, I was unfamiliar with, but I could tell they were all Mist initiates. They all have that same creepy soulless look to them.

Vivian pulled out another photo – grainy but clear enough to recognize the same goblin man.

“This one was taken outside an abandoned textile plant on the outskirts of the city,” she said. “He wasn’t alone. He was delivering something. A crate. I still haven’t been able to get close enough to see what was inside. He must be a gatekeeper of sorts”

I glanced down at the photo. “He’s a gatekeeper, all right. Probably not just guarding the Waypoint, but what’s coming in and out of it. It looks like some type of super-secret trade agreement has been worked out between goblin dude and the Order of Mist and Lords who knows who else.”

Then I noticed another photo of the same man from the one earlier – The one who was wearing the coat with the embroidered symbol from the Order of Embers.

I blurted it out as my fingers clenched onto the photo “the Order of Embers.”

“Another Order?” Vivian said rolling her eyes.

"Yep, these ones wield fire magic. Their power is destructive like you've never seen – perhaps outmatched only by their own arrogance. If they're involved, this is bad, extremely bad."

Vivian tensed up for a moment holding her breath. "Uh, I'm pretty sure I've seen this fire magic before."

"What?" I reacted in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's kind of how I got the ring. This whole thing started as an investigation into what I thought might be an underground criminal smuggling network. Nothing concrete – Just a bunch of shady activity that I was looking into. I was trailing a lead one night and realized I wasn't the only one trailing her. Long story short, she was actually running from someone. She accidentally discovered me hiding and handed me this ring. She told me to protect it with my life and then took off running. Moments later, her stalker jumps out stopping her in her tracks. They exchanged a few words that I couldn't make out. Next thing I see, fire guy starts shooting fire out of his hand like he's the human torch. He burned her to a pile of ash in seconds.

"Holy shit, Vivian!" I interjected running my hands through my hair. "This just keeps getting worse and worse."

She continued. "Tell me about it. It was the most horrifying thing I've ever seen. When it was over, the fire guy bent over to check the ashes like he was looking for something. I'm pretty sure he was looking for the ring. He left, visibly aggravated. I, on the other hand, was frightened stiff. But I knew I was onto something big that I couldn't just let go. Somehow, I

was able to pull myself together. I thought my heart was going to explode at any minute, but I managed to trail him to the old train depot. That's how my whole investigation started.

Vivian sat down hard on her couch rubbing her face.

"I've been using the ring," she said. "To help my investigation... but I guess you know that already. Too bad I can't take pictures with it."

I nodded.

"But it's not just any magic ring, Vivian?"

"No," I said. "It's one of the two Rings of Asha. I pointed at the ring on my finger. "This one has been in my family for years. The one you're wearing was lost over a thousand years ago. All we truly know about them is that they allow the wearers to transmit what they are seeing to each other."

"Really?" she replied "Huh, I've just been using it to see through walls. Although I have had a couple of weird visions pop up in my head since wearing it."

"That was me, Vivian! I saw your reflection in the mirror and knew you had the ring. That's how I knew to come look for you."

She looked up at me slowly. "Then what happened in the mirror... all I saw was a pair of hands that weren't my own."

“Those were my hands, Vivian! You were seeing what I was seeing. You’re able to actually use the ring. And you’ve somehow tapped into a power we didn’t even know the ring had.”

“But I didn’t even try.”

“Which makes it all the more disturbing. Because you’re not... well, you’re not like me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You mean magical?”

“Well, yes, dammit! Magical artifacts like these require extremely particular focus and concentration to direct the magic. You shouldn’t be able to use it so easily. Magic like this requires training.”

“So, what, I’m special?”

“You’ve always been special, Vivian. This definitely takes it to a whole new level though.”

Vivian smirked. “Charming.”

I gave a tired smile. “Come on, Let’s try it again.”

She looked confused.

“The *ring-vision*. Try to link with me.”

I hurried around the corner into the kitchen and yelled back. “Try to tell me what I’m looking at.” I pulled out my nightstick and stared at it intently. “Just lean your thoughts toward me and allow your consciousness to fold inward.”

“Umm, okay.” She replied hesitantly.

There was silence for a few moments, and then her voice abruptly rang out in excitement.

“I can see your stick! Woooooh, this is freaky.”

I broke my attention and walked back into the living room.

“Vivian” I said, my voice brimming with sincerity “This is big.”

Vivian slumped back down on the couch and crossed her arms. “So, what now?”

“Well, I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but we have to take this information to my father.”

Her brows shot up. “Your dad? I thought you hated that guy?”

“I don’t hate him. He’s just... difficult. He’s the head of our Order. If we’re going to get to the bottom of whatever those misty bitches are planning, he needs to know.”

“And me? I’m just going to come along for the ride?”

“You’re in way too deep now,” I said “Besides, there’s no way you can be considered a Normie anymore. Hell, you learned on your own how to use an ancient magical artifact in a way we didn’t even know was possible. This could be a huge advantage for us.”

“And what if your dad doesn’t see it that way”

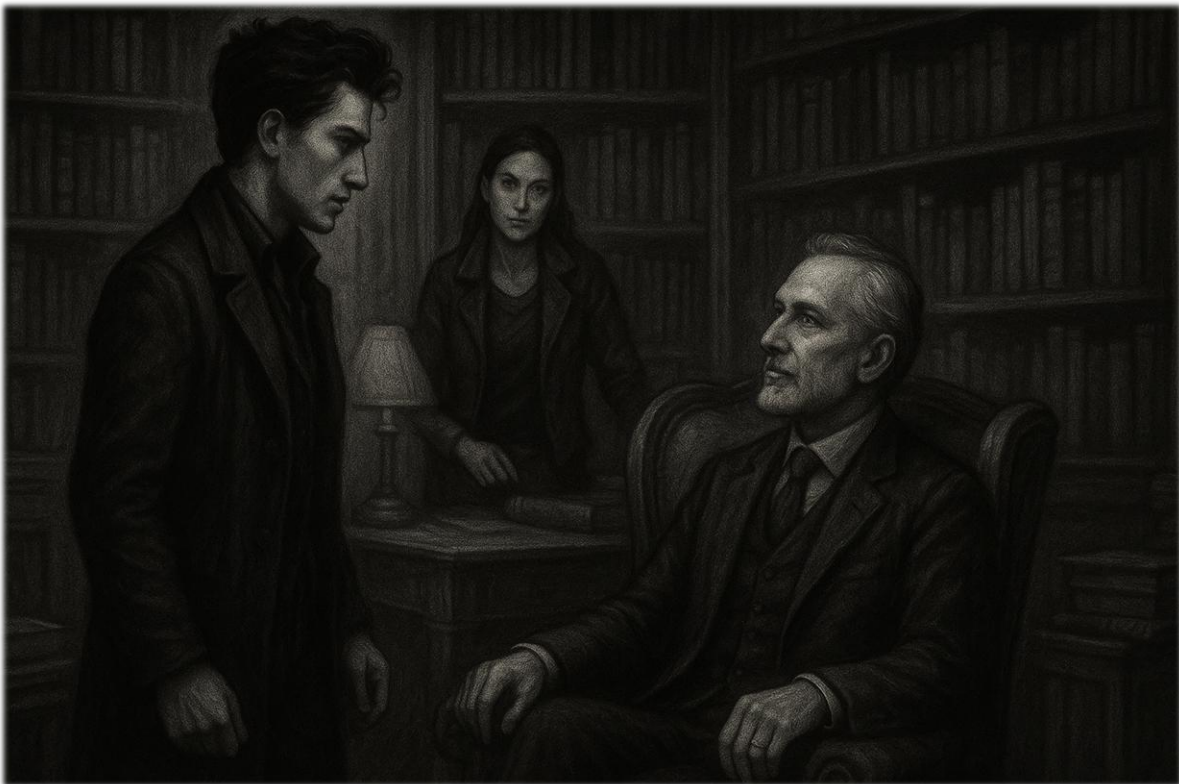
I cracked a dry smile. “Yeah, my dad can be a real ass sometimes, but I can also be real convincing.”

Vivian looked down at the ring on her hand.

“Alright, Declan.” She sighed. “But if anything unnatural happens to me, it’s on you.”

“Hey, curiosity killed the cat. Not me.”

## Chapter 6: Initiating the Normie





The fog was still draped across the countryside like a heavy curtain by the time Vivian and I turned off the main road onto the long gravel path leading to Pierce Manor. The air was thick with the smell of moss and old rain, and the crunch of tires on stone was the only sound breaking the stillness.

The manor (a place I used to call home) came into view like a forgotten relic, rising from the fog with its towering spires and dark slate rooftops. It wasn't built to be welcoming—it was built to endure. Stone, steel, shadow. I caught Vivian's eyes as she stared at it, lips tight. She hadn't been here since... well, since way back.

The great doors opened before I could even knock. **Hennings**, my father's ever-faithful steward, stood perfectly still in his usual immaculate suit.

"Master Declan," he said with a nod, then turned to Vivian. "Miss Roth. A rare sight indeed."

"Still not a hair out of place, Hennings," Vivian said returning a smile.

"Come in" he replied. "Your father is expecting you. In the library."

Of course he was. We followed the familiar path through echoing halls, past the portraits of ancestors with eyes that always seemed to follow.

Dad was standing by the hearth when we entered the library. The fire behind him threw

tall shadows across the shelves of ancient tomes and scrolls. He turned as we entered, his eyes narrowing slightly when he saw Vivian.

"I assumed you were coming to update me on your progress in locating a certain something. I didn't realize you were going to be bringing company" he said.

"A certain something?" I replied "You mean the Ring? Well father, you'll be happy to know that I have technically recovered the ring."

Vivian raised her hand, displaying the dark silver band gleaming on her finger. Dad's expression faltered, his lips parting slightly. I could see the calculations already beginning behind his eyes.

"Declan, why is she wearing the ring?" he said, disbelief flickering through his voice.

"Well, you may wanna sit down for this, but basically we found *WAY* more than just a missing ring."

I knew he wasn't actually going to sit down, but he let me continue.

"Vivian is an investigative reporter for Media 6 now. A few months back she was following a lead on what appeared to be some type of underground market for stolen goods. One night on a trail, she witnessed a woman being hunted by another man. The woman

accidentally discovered Vivian hiding and handed her the Ring Asha telling her to protect it with her life. A few moments later, Vivian watched that same woman incinerated by fire magic.”

I could tell I got my father’s attention with that. “Fire magic?” he replied trying to keep his tone under control.

“Yes,” I said. “But that’s just the beginning. We don’t truly know how, but Vivian’s discovered how to use the ring.”

“What?” dad said, his face now starting to show visible signs of agitation “Impossible. Even if she could somehow see with the ring, there’s been no one on the other end to connect with.”

“That’s just it, dad. She’s not using the ring in the way you think.”

Vivian cut in abruptly. “Mr. Pierce, I can use the ring to see through walls.” she said, matter of factly.

Dad turned to her, his eyes hard. “You’ll forgive me if I ask for proof of this claim.”

Vivian met his gaze calmly. “You want proof? Sure. This library is full of wall space. Pick a spot. Ask me what’s behind it.”

Dad didn’t hesitate. He gestured toward the far side of the room. “Very well. See that

bookshelf over there closest to the grandfather clock? What's behind it?"

Vivian turned to look at the distant bookshelf and then walked off confidently in that direction. Standing before it, she removed a few books and then raised her ring-hand, placing her palm flat against the back panel of the bookshelf. She concentrated only for a few moments and then spoke.

"There appears to be a secret study room behind here. Narrow. Wood paneling. I see a globe, three shelves filled with red-bound books. There's a long wooden desk with a brass lamp on the right. A stool, not a chair."

Father's expression froze, as did mine. All my life I never even knew there was a secret room behind that bookshelf. Slowly, my father turned and made his way over to the grandfather clock that stood near the shelf. He reached behind and opened a small flap in the clock. There was a faint clicking sound followed by a low groan. Abruptly the bookcase creaked open, revealing the hidden room exactly as Vivian had described.

Silence hung in the air.

"She discovered this ability while trying to investigate the woman's death," I said. "In the process, she's gathered a ton of hard evidence. I've seen the photos, dad. Mist members clearly working together with members of the Embers AND...." I hesitated.

“And what?” father replied.

“And Fae creatures from The Nether dad! We’ve seen them, fought them, face to face.”

Father returned to his seat, face unreadable. “Are you honestly telling me you’ve had a scuffle with beings from The Nether?” His voice stiffened. He stared back at me and no doubt saw the truth in my eyes.

“If that’s true,” he continued, “there would have to be some sort of Waypoint. But none exists.”

“Funny you should mention that dad.” I said, flinging my hands into the air.

Vivian cut in again. “Yeah, we kind of found one of those too. I was calling it The Vanishing Point, but you guys seem to prefer the term Waypoint – but, whatever.”

I proceeded to tell my father everything in detail. About the entrance in the underground train depot. About the goblin man and the hellhound, he commanded.

After mentioning the goblin man and hellhound, my father stood up and walked towards one of the numerous bookshelves in the library, retrieving a thick volume from it. He flipped through the pages, stopping at a sketch of a wiry, pale gray-skinned creature with pointy nose and ears.

He turned the pages towards us and point at them “Did he look like this?”

“Yes.” I said shockingly.

He flipped a few more pages and soon revealed a sketch of a three-eyed houndlike beast.

“And this?”

“Two for two, dad.”

“Your goblin gatekeeper is called a *Kretchin* and his beast – a *Drekkhound*” he said. “The former are schemers. Greedy underground traders and wealth hoarders with a lust for all things gold and shiny. The latter... loyal Kretchin serving Drekkhounds, a Kretchin’s best friend”

“We barely made it out,” I said. “But the Kretchin fled, vanishing right through a concrete wall. At this point I began telling my father everything about the Kretchin’s glasses and the Veil, and more importantly, the Waypoint the veil was hiding.

There was so much information my father could barely keep up. Magic glasses, hidden Waypoint, crossing into the Nether, and ultimately being discovered by a whole band of Drekkhound commanding Kretchins.

That’s when dad interrupted “Wait, there were more of them?”

“Several more,” I replied not losing a beat. “After our fight, the gatekeeper must have run to gather reinforcements. When they suddenly showed up, we weren’t going to stick around for introductions.”

Dad sat back down, temple resting against his fingers.

“This changes everything, and I mean everything” he said earnestly. “The Mist... not only have they created or possibly found a Waypoint (I don’t know which is more disturbing). Not only are they recruiting members of other Orders, but they’re clearly working with Netherborn as well. Kretchins, and who knows what else. But to what end? Lords only know what they’re up to. My gut tells me, they’re working on something that could entirely disrupt the balance of the magical world.”

He looked up, firelight dancing in his eyes.

“If the Order of Mist is making a power move of this caliber, **Sylas** is undoubtably pulling the strings. I’ll work from the top-down and deal with him personally”

**Sylas Mireveil** was the head of the Order of Mist and as devious and power hungry as they come.

My father continued “You two will work from the bottom-up. We need to find out exactly what is coming in and out of the Waypoint and why. Use the rings or whatever you have to.”

I nodded. "Right. So, you're okay with Vivian using the ring?"

Arthur's gaze settled on me. "I'm not okay with any of this, but her use of the ring is admittedly an advantage. Between the two of you, even more so."

"But know this," he said, stiffening his tone. "She's still a normie. I do not take her involvement in magical affairs lightly. She's your responsibility now, Declan."

I turned to Vivian. She looked back at me with a determined set to her jaw.

We were in it now. Fully entrenched in the rabbit hole – with a feeling that we were still a long way off from the bottom.

I'll admit that having the rings on our side was a comforting feeling, but something told me we were going to need a little more help than that.

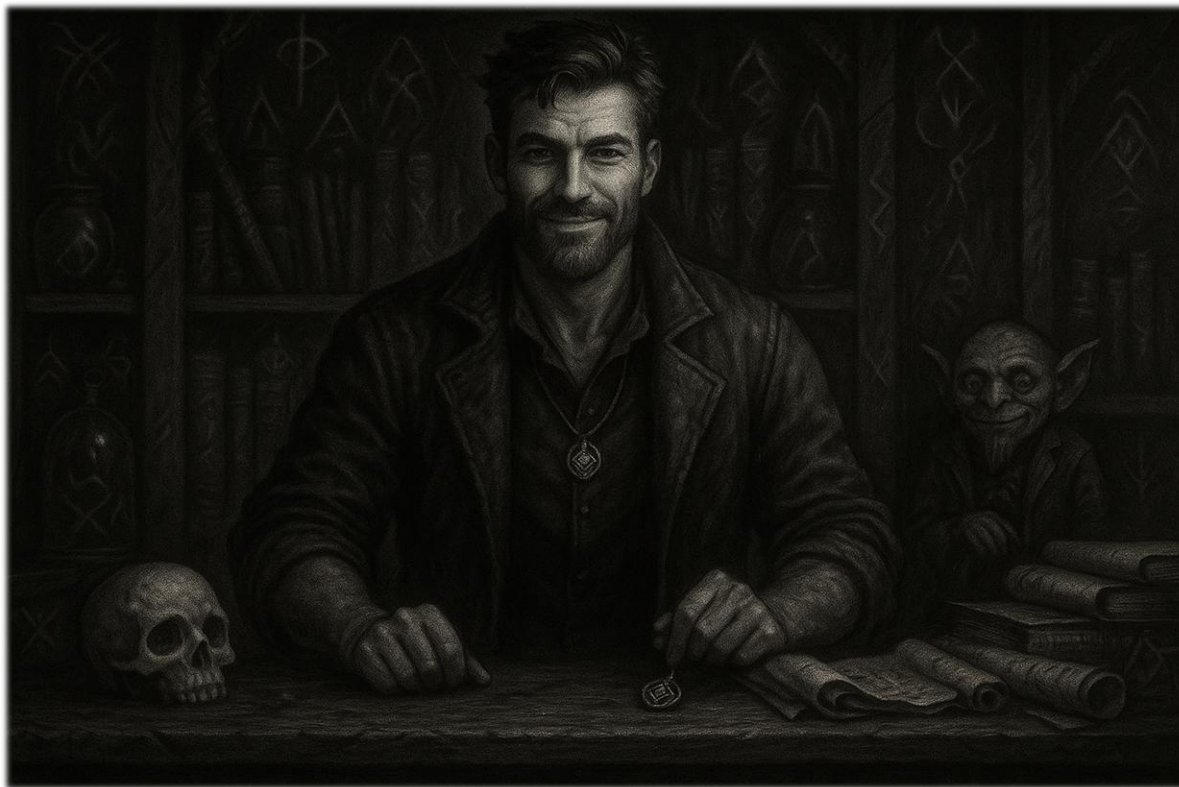
The thought came to me as we adjourned from the library. I excused myself momentarily, grabbed my phone and began scrolling to find an old friend of mine.

Yes, I had just the right person in mind.

He was probably the only person I knew in the magical world that was trustworthy – and that was despite his occupation.



## Chapter 7: Arcane Inquiry



We left Pierce Manor just after lunch, the road winding back toward the city like a silver ribbon threading through a forest of secrets. Vivian was quiet for most of the drive, processing the weight of what had just transpired with my father. I let the silence hang, giving her space. We were both exhausted, but the mission wasn't going to wait.

Our destination was tucked into the old part of the city, far from the gloss and neon of modern life. Cobblestone alleys and wrought-iron lamps marked the way to the quiet antique shop nestled between an old apothecary and a tailor's storefront that looked like it hadn't updated its window display since the last century. The sign above the door read:

*Vane's Antiquities & Curios.*

"Looks quaint," Vivian said, eyeing the dusty windows.

"Don't let it fool you," I replied. "He deals in more than just teapots and Victorian knickknacks."

I pushed open the heavy wooden door, and a familiar chime rang out. The scent of old paper, leather bindings, and something vaguely metallic filled the air. And there, standing proud behind a counter stacked with half-disassembled clocks and tarnished candlesticks, was ***Garrick Vane***.

He looked up, raising a thick brow under a mop of light brown, slightly disheveled hair.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, voice filling the room instantly. "If it isn't Declan Pierce."

"Hello, Garrick."

He stood tall and broad, his arms thick with muscle that stretched the sleeves of his rolled-up shirt. His eyes flicked toward Vivian, curious but polite.

"This her?" he asked, pointing vaguely toward Vivian. "The new ring bearer?"

“He knows about the ring?” Vivian shot a quick concerning glance my way.

Garrick chuckled and extended a hand. “Name’s Garrick Vane. Professional relic wrangler and part-time Enchantsmith. Yeah, Declan already called and clued me in on your little ring situation. Heck, I’m the one who hunted down the first one for the Pierce’s years ago.”

“Vivian Roth,” she replied, shaking his hand. “Full-time reporter and accidental beholder of ancient arcane artifacts.”

“Well then,” Garrick said, motioning us toward the back of the shop. “Come on in. Sounds like a story worthy of a drink.”

We followed him through a creaky wooden walkway into a workshop that looked more like a blacksmith’s den than a quaint antique boutique. Worktables cluttered with half-assembled devices, magical sigils carved into steel plates, and faintly glowing stones littered the space.

“This is where the real business happens,” Garrick said, pulling out a stool for Vivian. “So, what brings you to my little corner of the world?”

“We were hoping for a little help, though we’re not exactly sure what kind of help we need. We’re sort of chasing shadows here,” I said.

“Thought you were the expert in shadows?” he said chuckling.

“Yeah, well, these ones are more elusive than I’m used to. Plus.... They bite back.”

He pulled a decanter and three small glasses from a shelf - one of the few items in his workshop that wasn’t covered in dust. He offered us each a brandy and we politely accepted.

Vivian began recounting how she came into possession of the ring. A gruesome story that had Garrick on the edge of his seat.

We then proceeded to take turns explaining everything as before with my father – what we’d seen, the Kretchin gatekeeper, the Drekkhound, the hidden Waypoint.

Garrick was much better company compared to my father. He listened, eyes poised intently on the two of us while gently swirling the brandy in his hand.

When we finished, he leaned back and let out a low whistle.

“Waypoints,” he spouted. “Would never have thought of one as being anything more than a rumor.”

“Well, they exist. Trust me” I said. “The Mist are clearly using it to make deals with Netherborn. We just don’t know what or why. I thought maybe, giving your occupation, you might have heard a whisper or two that might give us more of a clue as to what we’re dealing with.

“Nah, sorry pal. Business has been pretty slow lately. Still, no doubt this is Mist work,” he said with a grunt. “Manipulating sons of bitches – though admittedly some of my best customers. They’ve got a finger in every damn pie, but no one ever sees it until it’s too late, if at all.”

“You said business has been slow lately,” I said. “Think there’s a connection?”

Garrick shrugged. “Could be. Come to think of it, my usual clients from the Order of Embers have gone quiet lately as well. I’ve been thinking it’s all been just political tension, but now, after everything you just described... I don’t like it.” He trailed off, furrowing his brow.

“Look, Garrick. We could truly use your help” I said. “We need some muscle, as well as someone with your experience in, let’s say, magical transactions of the secretive kind.”

Garrick raised an eyebrow. “And you came to me?”

He crossed his arms, considering. “You want muscle. I can do muscle. But I’m still afraid the trouble you’ve stirred up sounds a bit meaner and more capable than even the three of us can stand against.

“We’re not asking you to charge into battle,” I said. “We’re just trying to gather a little information right now. Between the three of us, I think we can handle that discretely. The

muscle is just in case.”

Garrick barked a laugh. “Alright. Fine. I’ll poke around and see what I can find out. But only because I’m curious – and maybe a little bored.”

I reached out to shake his hand. “Thanks Garrick.”

He took it. “Just make sure I don’t regret it.”

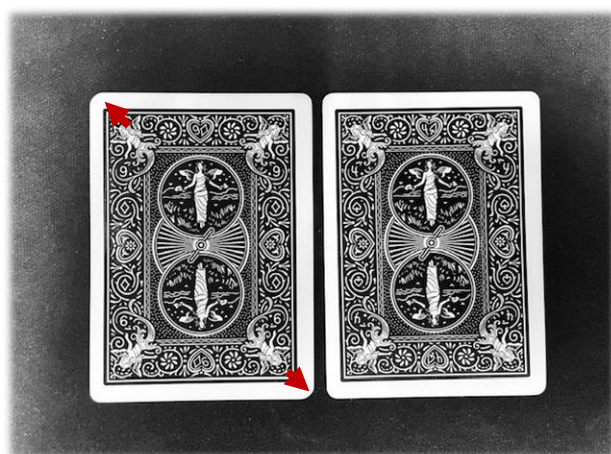
As we left the shop, I felt the weight of the world shift slightly. With Garrick on our side, we had more than just wit and shadows – we had might.

Although I was desperately hoping we wouldn’t come to need it.

## New uses for an age-old gimmick

What's this age-old gimmick you ask? I'm talking about the humble "*Trim*" – at least that's what I call it. A "*trim card*" is a *face down* card that has been ever so slightly trimmed or rounded down in its upper-left and lower-right corners. You can use scissors or a nail file to shape it down so that the corners are as smooth and round as the others. See Fig 1.

Fig 1.



Notice how even laying side by side it is difficult to tell the difference from the trim card on the left and a normal card on the right. I personally use a card corner cutting device which can be easily purchased for cheap online. I then use a nail file to sand

the corners down smoothly. It works best for me to get the rounding of the corners just right. The rounding of the corners should be so subtle that a trim card can be freely handed out without fear of your participant discovering anything out of the ordinary with it. The typical described use for a trim card in beginner level magic books, is as a virtually invisible gimmick for forcing a card.

For this use, the force card is generally placed on top of about half the deck with the *trim card* then immediately above it, then followed by the rest of the deck – all *face down*. With the face down deck in left-hand, Mechanics Grip, you can use the left thumb to riffle down

the upper left corner of the deck. Upon reaching the trim card, the deck will stop at the natural break caused by the slightly trimmed down edge. See Fig 2.

Fig 2.



When this stop occurs, there will be a slight split in the deck and the force card will be on top of the lower portioned packet.

In practice, the magician riffles down the upper left corner of the pack, asking a participant to call stop. There is a slight

timing element, but done quickly, you can almost instantly stop at the *trim card-break* whenever your participant calls stop to force whatever card you would like on them. The *trim card* is one of those old gimmicks that tends to eventually get discarded as young magicians begin to more deeply develop their techniques for forcing cards that do not require gimmicks. I, however, humbly intend to remedy this situation by offering you a few card miracles that display some new and interesting applications for this age-old gimmick. Personally, all my decks contain a trim card. Why not? It's a virtually invisible card gimmick that is always there to be made use of when I need it.



## Underhanded

The innovation behind this effect was to consider the possibility of using the trim card not as a card used to force another, but as the force card itself. If you can accomplish that, you could be blindfolded and have no idea where the card is in the deck, but still quickly discover its location simply by riffling down the corner edge of the deck until you hit the stopping point caused by the trim card.

For this effect you will need a full deck (of course with your trim card included in the mix). You will also need a small table and a willing participant. The table will provide the cover for the entire effect.

**Note:** Not all tables work well for this. Some are too large and make the handling of the effect overly cumbersome. You can try to work around this by only using the corner of the table. You will have to do your own experimentation to discern what is best for you. Preferably a table small enough to where a deck of cards can be easily passed back and forth underneath it without any problems.

The trick is titled *Underhanded* – meaning, everything is done under some type of cover (provided by the table) where the magician sees nothing at all times. The magician is, however, not only able to identify the card but locate it in the deck without looking. Let's begin.

The perfect force for this situation is the *Under the Table Force* – except this time you will be forcing your trim card on your participant. My trim card is always the 9 of Diamonds so

let's use that for explanation purposes. Hand your participant the deck of cards and offer them to freely shuffle the deck until they are satisfied it is in no particular order. When they are done, have them hand the deck back to you *face down* and square it up. Upon doing so, you should easily be able to tell the location of the trim card in the deck just by glancing quickly at the corner edges. Your trim card will cast the faintest shadow that you will be able to see. Knowing its location ahead of time will help you in a few seconds when you begin to blindly riffle down the cards to find it under the table.

State that you want your spectator to select a card, but you do not want to see anything, so you will do so under the table. If they desire, they can check under the table to be sure that there is nothing hidden before you begin. When they are satisfied, bring the deck *face down* under the table with both hands. As soon as the deck is out of site, riffle down and cut the deck at the trim point. Quickly complete the cut thereby bringing the trim card to the bottom of the deck. Holding the deck in an overhand grip from above with the right hand, use your left hand to then quickly flip the bottom card *face up* and then allow the deck to drop into Mechanics Grip in your left hand. This whole procedure should be executed in little more than a second. Quickly bring your right hand back above the table. You will use it to demonstrate what you want your participant to do.

Gesture with your right hand for your participant to reach under the table (with their right hand) and lift up on a portion of cards, thereby cutting the deck into 2 portions. As they do, the moment they lift up a packet of cards, use your left hand to flip the remaining packet of cards in your left hand *face up*. The 9 of Diamonds trim card will now be on top of the packet in your hand *face down*. When this is done, tell them to hold their right hand where

it is and to use their left hand to reach in and grab the top card from the bottom portion packet. This apparently fair and secret selection will of course be the trim card 9 of Diamonds. As soon as they take their selection, flip the packet in your left-hand back *face down* and instruct your participant to take their secretly selected card in one hand and all the other remaining cards with their other hand.

Make sure you specify that they keep everything secret. They are to view their card from under the table and remember it. Then they are to reinsert it back into the deck wherever they would like and shuffle the cards until they are sure that they themselves do not know where it is in the deck. They are to do all of this under the table and away from your magician's eyes.

I leave the ending of this illusion to your own stylistic whims. Suffice it to say that all that is left to do is to take back the deck from underneath the table and riffle down the top-left corner edge until you hit the break caused by the trim card.

**Note:** Since the trim card is the force card in this effect, their selection will be the bottom card of the top portion packet when thumb reaches the stopping point. I personally like to squeeze more mentalism out of the effect. There's no rush. You already know what their card is. Why not first have your participant think intently on their card and then read their minds to reveal the 9 of Diamonds? Then, as a finale, locate the card from the thoroughly shuffled deck from underneath the table.

**Second Note:** Some of you may have reservations about letting your participant physically hold your trim card. The rounding of the edges of your trim card need only be ever so

subtle and still work. Still, I have used this little gimmick in this way for years and even my worst rush cut trim jobs have never been noticed by a participant. They're simply not looking for it.

## Deja Screw

Hold on to your trim cards my magical friends. We're just getting started. There's much more rabbit hole to discover. This effect uses your trim card as a key card as you attempt to create a Deja Vue experience for your participant – an experience in which you apparently botch the ending, only to prove seconds later that your participant truly does have Deja Vue.

You will need a full deck (with your trim card in the mix), a surface to deal cards onto and a willing participant. As usual, I start by having my participant shuffle the cards, but it is not necessary for this trick. In any event, the trim card needs to be *face down* on the bottom of the deck before you start the effect. You can either start from this position or you can quickly cut to this position after your participant shuffles by simply riffling down to the trim and cutting the cards at that point. State that you are going to attempt to create a Deja Vue experience for your participant. You will have him or her perform a series of moves with a deck of cards and then you will try to replicate the exact same outcome later.

Hold the deck *face down* in your left hand. With the fingers and thumb of your right hand, begin casually drawing off packets of 3 and dropping them into a loose pile on the table, as

you invite your participant to call stop whenever they would like. You should push the top cards over with your left thumb loosely but grab exactly 3 cards with the right thumb and fingers, dropping them on the table. This may take some practice to be precise while not appearing too deliberate. You want it to appear as though you are just randomly dropping small packets of cards on the table. Make no mention of it, but in your head, you will be counting each packet of 3 as 1 in your head as you drop them onto the pile on the table. Let's say you dropped 6 packets of 3 onto the table when your participant calls stop. 6 times 3 would mean the tabled packet has 18 cards in it, but this is not important. The only thing you need to remember is the number 6. Also, for explanation purposes, let's call this tabled packet – packet A.

When they call stop, place the leftover packet in your left-hand *face down* on the table slightly off to the side. We'll call this packet B. Have your participant square up packet A, keeping it *face down* and then cut off any number of cards from it. Have them look at and remember the bottom card of the packet of cards they cut off. Now have them place that packet *face down* on top of packet B. Next, have them shuffle the last small remainder of cards still in packet A and place them *face down* on top of packet B as well. Finally, have them give the whole deck several complete cuts, losing their card in the deck. You can then square the whole deck up.

As the deck stands, your trim card is now exactly 18 cards above the card they secretly viewed. But remember, you only need to remember the number of packets you initially dropped on the table. In this case it was 6.

State that you are now going to attempt to recreate the experience. As you say this, casually riffle down cutting the cards at the trim and complete the cut. Next, recall to your participant that they started by first randomly tossing out piles of cards onto the table. You will do exactly this, except this time, as you toss out packets of 3, you will count to 1 number higher than the original count. The original count was 6 packets of 3, so this time you will toss out 7 packets of 3. Again, this must still appear random. When you stop, you should nonchalantly add something to the effect of “eh, I tossed out about these many cards for you.” At this point the card they secretly viewed earlier will be 6<sup>th</sup> from the top of the pile you just tossed out onto the table. Pick up the cards, squaring them up *face down* in your left hand.

Now spread them in your hands as you say “I’m trying to create a Deja Vue moment here, but we can’t truly be sure if your card is in this spread or not.” Square them up again, but this time grab a pinky break beneath the top 4 cards as you do so. As you’re doing this, recall that the next thing your participant did was to cut the cards. As you say this, transfer your pinky break to an overhand thumb break with the right-hand and use your left-hand to undercut the cards on the bottom of the break to the top. Then immediately push over the top card with the left thumb drawing suspense to its identity by keeping it *face down* between the thumb and fingers of your right hand. Your participant will be waiting in anticipation to see if you have in fact arrived at the exact same card they secretly viewed earlier. Their card is actually still on top of the deck in your left hand.

As you slowly reveal the card in your right hand, the suspense will dissipate completely when it is shown to be a different card. You should pretend to be let down as well that it is

not their card. You should relax and drop your hands just a bit, catching your participants eyes as you ask them to wait and try to recall what usually happens in a Deja Vue moment. At this moment you will execute a quick top change; switching the botched card in your hand for their selected card that is on top of the deck. State that Deja Vue is often accompanied by a fog uncertainty. Ask your participant to think back and try to clearly recall the name of the card they secretly viewed earlier. When they call it out, you can turn the card over in your hand to reveal that it now matches theirs saying “no, you definitely got Deja Vue.”

## Oracle in Training

In considering the possibility of some of my less mastered readers out there being a bit apprehensive in executing a perfectly timed top change, (as is necessary in the previous effect) I offer this humble alternative which requires no top change while still following more or less the exact same methodology – though under a different presentation. I Still highly recommend trying out *Deja Screw* if only as means of practicing your top change. The move is executed at the exact moment your participant’s guard is down.

At any rate, *Oracle in Training* is a simple effect that works well as a follow up to most any other effect that involves the magician using the power of the mind to mysteriously identify and/or locate a card. It is particularly applicable in those instances where your participant asks “How’d you do that?” *Oracle in Training* can quickly be presented as an apparent exercise in training your participant to trust their *own* instincts to find their *own* card. You

will of course guide them through the process, controlling everything while making it appear as if your “Oracle in Training” is doing all the heavy lifting.

You begin this effect the same way you do *Deja Screw*. Have a deck of cards thoroughly shuffled and, at some point, and in whatever way is comfortable for you, bring your trim card to the bottom of a *face down* deck, holding it in Mechanics Grip in the left hand. As in the previous effect, begin by tossing out small *packets of 3 cards at a time* into a loose pile of *face down* cards onto the table, asking your participant to call stop whenever they would like. For explanation purposes, we will call this packet A. As before, you will count each packet of 3 as 1 in your head as you go. Let’s say your participant calls stop as you toss out the 7<sup>th</sup> packet onto the table. This time you will not focus on the number 7. Instead, you will multiply the number of packets you tossed out by 3 which, in this case, 7 times 3 brings you to 21. Remember this number.

Place the remainder of the deck still in your hand (let’s call this packet B) slightly off to the side of the packet A. Have your participant square up packet A and then cut off a portion of cards from it. Ask them to secretly view and remember the card at the bottom of the packet they cut off and then place it *face down* onto packet B. Next, have them pick up the remainder of packet A, give it a quick shuffle and then also place it on top of the packet B *face down*. Ask them next to cut the deck and complete the cut several times, thus losing their card in the deck. Unbeknownst to your participant, their secretly viewed card is now exactly 21 cards beneath your trim card.

**Note:** As you guide this multiple card-cut procedure, you can continuously square up the cards after they are cut. Doing so will allow you to easily see the corner edges of the deck.



The trim card will cast an ever so slight shadow which will be clear to you. You may prefer to have your participant stop cutting the cards when you can visibly tell that your trim card is near the middle. This could make the next step a little easier for you.

When they are finished, pick up the deck, keeping it *face down* in your left hand. State that your participant has cut the deck multiple times and should have no idea where in the deck their card is. State that cutting it one or two more times will not improve or worsen this situation. As you say this, casually thumb down the corners with your left thumb stopping at the trim break and cutting the cards at that point, completing the cut in your hands. State that, under these conditions, we can now start to train your intuition.

At this point, you need to recall the number you remembered from the beginning. In this case it was 21. You will now deal out 2 piles of *face down* cards (dealing to the left, then to the right, 1 in one pile and 1 in the next, so on and so on) onto the table, counting in your head as you go. You will keep dealing until you reach 21.

**Note:** If the number you're thinking of is even, then you will be able to deal 2 equal piles. In this example, the number is 21. In this case, you would deal an extra 22<sup>nd</sup> card into the next pile only to keep the two piles even.

At this point you should have two *face down* tabled piles – one of which the top card is the 21<sup>st</sup> card (and therefore your participant's secretly selected card). We'll call this packet A. The second tabled packet, we'll call packet B. You will also have the leftover deck in your hand which you will now place *face down* to the side and identify it openly to your participant as the *leftover pile*. Clarify to your participant that their training has now begun.

Their card could be in any one of the three tabled packets. Your participants job is to intuit which packet contains their secretly selected card.

If you are using a marked deck, you can simply look down at the top card of packet A and know exactly what their card is at this point. If not, you'll have to secretly glimpse the 21<sup>st</sup> card as you place it down or as you square up the piles.

Ask your participant to let their mind naturally picture what their card is without grasping onto the thought too tightly. Then ask them to point to the packet they believe contains their card. This procedure will happen several times throughout the trick. You will easily be able to track which packet their card is in at all times. The effect should feel like you are the master training the student. If your participant selects the correct packet, immediately congratulate them on guessing correctly (but do not show the packet with their card in it). Instead reveal the leftover packets.

**Note:** Round 1 will have 2 leftover packets, both of which you can reveal to not contain their secretly selected card.

If your participant guesses incorrectly, you immediately say something to the effect of "Ah, sorry. You're probably just trying too hard. Try again but relax this time and just let it come to you."

Whether your participant guesses correct or wrong, you always either confirm or deny their packet selection, verifying that you certainly knew ahead of time. You confirm this each time by revealing the other packet or packets do not contain their card.

Let's assume, in round 1, your participant correctly guesses packet A as the packet containing their card. Say "excellent! You may be a natural at this." Flip over the other two packets and spread through the cards to prove that their selected card is not among them. Push these to the side and pick up packet A keeping it *face down* and deal out all the cards into 2 new piles on the table – again a pile A and pile B. The once top card of packet A will now be the bottom card of the new packet A. Ask your participant to concentrate again and again select the packet they believe contains their card. Let's say they choose packet B this time. Immediately say "Ah, no. You must have tried too hard this time." Flip over packet B and spread through the cards to prove their card is not in packet B.

Pick up the remaining packet A and repeat the same dealing process creating a new packet A and B on the table. Their selected card will be the last card dealt. Let's say it winds up on top of packet B. Again, ask your participant to concentrate (but not too hard) and select the packet they believe has their card in it. Let's say they correctly guess packet B. Say "Great! I told you to just let it come to you." Flip over the other packet to verify their selected card is not among them.

You will continue in this manner until you are left with only 3 cards. Using this method, you will know whether it is the top or bottom card. From here, there is no need to deal cards to the table. Just hold them in your hands asking your participant to guess which hand their card is in. In the same fashion, confirm or deny by revealing the cards or card in the other hand to not be or contain their secretly selected card. Ultimately you will arrive at the exact last card which will be their card. You will have guided them to this card, proving that you

knew the whole time where their card was. The success rate of your participant will of course vary - which helps solidify the idea of an Oracle being in training.

**Note:** If you wanted to, you could state out loud the identity of your participant's card before even starting the first round of guessing. You could have your participant concentrate on their card and then read their mind, telling them what it is beforehand. You may present this as solidifying your ability to correctly guide them through all the guessing rounds. This effect offers some wiggle room for presentational derivations.

## Divine Drawings

Here's one more incredibly simple application of the trim card that I hope will appeal to my more mentalism purist readers. This is a sleight-free billet routine in which the performer hands out several blank billets to a few participants, instructing them to each draw their own simple yet personal drawing on their billet. After completing this in secret, the billets are shuffled up and handed back to the performer who is able to correctly divine which pictures were drawn by which participants. The method is remarkably simple, both in theory and execution, yet goes completely unnoticed in plain sight.

You'll need a stack of blank billets and, you guessed it, some trim cards which act as identifiers only noticeable to you.

**Note:** As far as billets go, I recommend purchasing a deck of double-blank-face cards from *U.S. Playing Card Company* card stock. Nothing beats their card stock. They handle and store

just like real cards. They're more robust than most any other paper stock you can find, and, you'll never have the fear of the ink bleeding through when using a sharpie.

On top of your stack of card stock billets should be a card that has been trimmed on two diagonally opposing corners while the next card has only 1 corner trimmed down. For billet work like this, I tend to take extra care in ensuring that my filing down of the corners is as subtle as possible. They will be openly handled by your participant. In practice you'll notice that even the slightest rounding down of a card corner will be instantly visible to you while basically invisible to everyone else.

To start, deal out the cards one at a time to 3 different participants. Participant 1 will receive the top double trimmed billet, Participant 2 will receive the single trimmed billet and Participant 3 is special and will receive 2 non-gimmicked billets presented as a means of merely increasing the difficulty. Ask them all to draw simple pictures on each of their blank billets keeping it a secret not only from you, but from each other as well. When they are finished drawing, have the cards collected *face down* by one of the participants and secretly mixed to randomize the order of the drawings. When finished, ask for the cards back, taking them in your hand, squaring them up and turning the faces toward you so that you can see the drawing of the bottom card. You will easily be able to tell if the card has 1, 2 or no trimmed corners and therefore correctly tell which card belongs to which participant. This is a ridiculously simple method, I know, but it offers a perfect opportunity to help polish your patter and theatrical presentation without the need to focus heavily on technique. It also serves well as an opener – a warm up session to gauge the receptiveness of your participants before moving on to a more difficult billet reading routine.

**Note:** This method is of course scalable by simply inserting more gimmicked cards with 3 or 4 trimmed corners into the mix. This will allow you to divine more drawings for more participants. Alternatively, if only working with 3 participants, you could also deal 2 double-trimmed cards to participant 1 and 2 single trimmed cards to participant 2 – allowing each participant to draw 2 drawing each. The method is the same, but you can apparently add more difficulty to the effect by adding more cards to the mix.