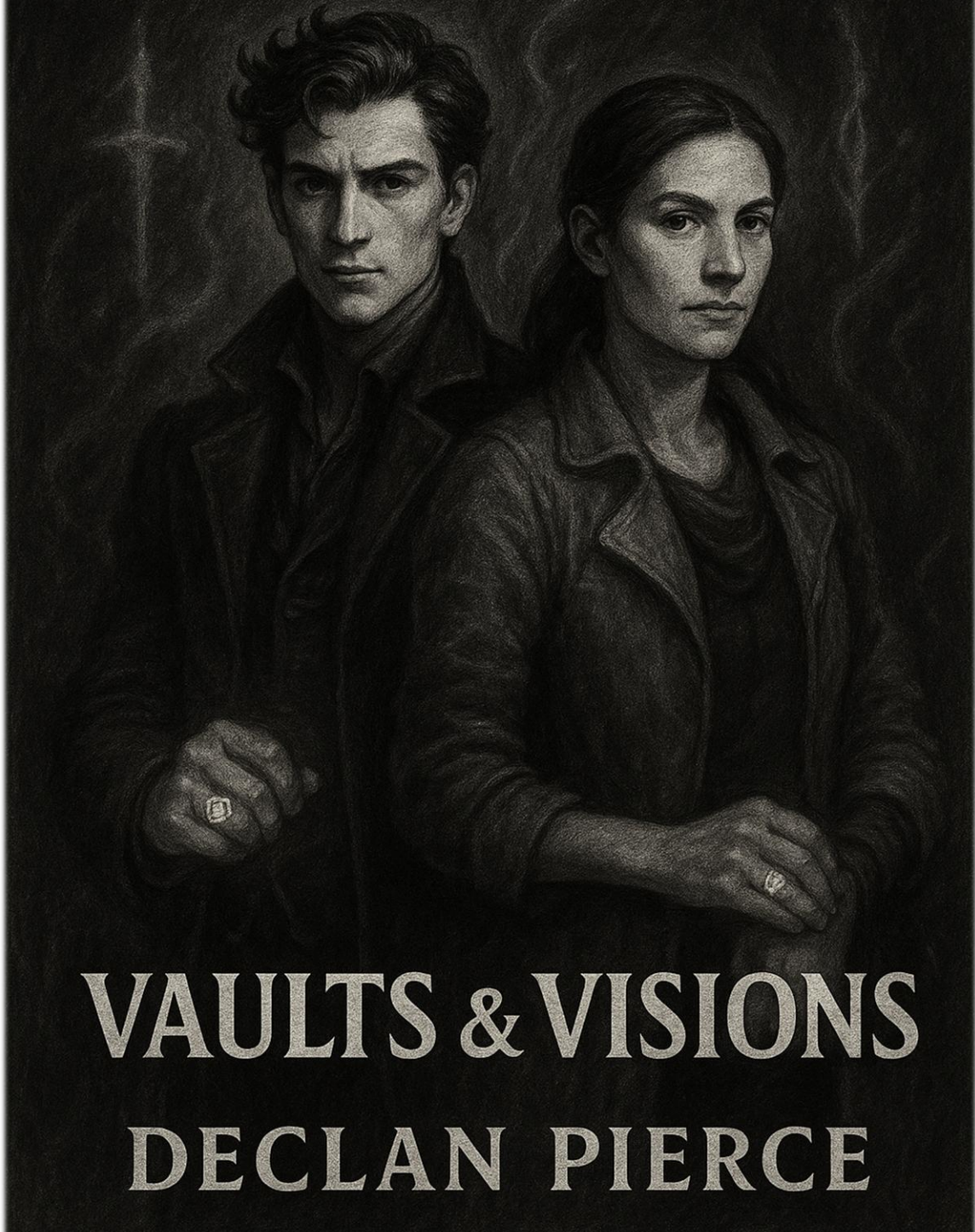


# THE CHRONICLES OF DECLAN PIERCE



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## Chapter 1: Signals and Suspicions



Lately, my apartment had become less of a haven and more of a waiting room between moments of strangeness.

The sun was dipping behind the city skyline, casting long shadows across the wooden floorboards of my flat. The shadows curled around the furniture like lazy cats, but I could still feel them, attentive – ready. I'd learned to live in that in-between state. Always half-listening. Always half-hiding.

The faintest vibration pulsed from the ring on my hand. A soft, rhythmic warmth – like the echo of a heartbeat. As I sat there allowing the pulse to radiate, I realized that the Ring of Asha had basically been glued to my finger ever since Vivian stepped back into my life. And that's what the pulsing sensation of the ring meant.

Vivian.

We'd spent the last several days experimenting, trying to figure out the subtle mysteries of these two ancient artifacts one strange day at a time. As far as we could tell, the Rings of Asha responded to focused intention. When either of us thought about the other with enough focus, the other's ring would begin to pulse – subtle but undeniable.

At first, it was disorienting. Now, it was... oddly comforting. A tether in a world that always felt two steps away from falling apart.

And then there were the visions. Vivian would send glimpses – short bursts of what she was seeing in that exact moment. Other times she would send me glimpses of photos she had taken of strange characters possibly connected to what were now calling *The Grand Collusion* (which hinted at the secret dealings between the Mist and Kretchin). It would usually start with a vision followed by a text message asking me if I was familiar with the person in the photo.

There was also the matter of Vivian's ability to use the ring to see through walls. I'd been trying – unsuccessfully – to master the trick myself. I was determined, however, to unlock this hidden ability.

It occurred to me that Vivian and I did share one major characteristic in common – a talent for uncovering things meant to stay hidden.

Ha, she would hate that description.

It's funny how I once found this habit of hers too intrusive, yet now, it had become one of her most endearing qualities.

A tap against the window broke my thought. Just the wind, maybe. Or the shadows teasing. I grabbed my coat and headed out to meet Simon at the Marlowe. I had finally accepted his invitation to go check out the new bar in town with live music – *The Hollow Note*.

Simon greeted me outside that night like a man who had just survived a duel and wanted everyone to know it.

He pulled off his bowtie with a dramatic flourish, sweeping into a half-bow as I approached.

"You've arrived just in time to miss my standing ovation."

"I'll lose sleep over it." I responded in jest.

Simon had always been larger than life. The Marlowe's velvet-draped stage suited him perfectly – its red curtains and golden sconces were the ideal backdrop for someone who believed in making everyday illusions feel like sacred rituals.

"Come on," he said, linking his arm through mine in mock gallantry. "You owe me a drink."

“I never agreed to that.”

“Ah, but you *never disagreed* either.”

The Hollow Note was perfectly nestled between an old guitar shop and local tailor – exactly the kind of place Simon would know about.

Its name was scrawled across a cracked neon sign shaped like a musical note with a slash through it, casting flickering purple light onto the sidewalk. The faint buzz of conversation and guitar licks radiated out into the street like a beacon of entertainment.

A little too high spirited for my taste, but I’d manage.

Inside, the space was vibrant and alive. It had high ceilings and red brick walls contrasted with dark wooden support beams and tables scattered around a modest stage. A local blues rock band was playing a lively number that had several spectators up on their feet in front of the stage.

The crowd was a complex hodgepodge of artists, students, performers and local townspeople like Simon who liked to be seen as much as they liked to see new things.

Simon led us to a booth further away from the crowd. Before I could sit, he raised a hand to someone across the room.

A woman approached – tall, poised, with dark auburn hair pulled into a high ponytail and a striking flame tattoo placed perfectly on her wrist. She moved with the confidence of someone who'd tamed fire and lived to tell the tale.

"Nina Flare," Simon said, standing to gesture between us. "Meet Declan Pierce. Declan, Nina."

She offered her hand. Her grip was surprisingly firm. "Pleasure."

"Nina's been performing at the Marlowe for a few months now," Simon explained. "She part of the new *The Crimson Pyre*. They're pretty good. A lot of fire illusions, fire eating, choreography and various pyrotechnic theatrics."

"Sounds safe," I said.

She smirked. "Safe as can be. Although we do come out with a missing eyebrow or two from time to time."

We ordered drinks, and soon a server brought Simon something bubbly with lemon and Nina, something fiery with cinnamon. For me, bourbon, neat. Simon toasted to "mystery and melody," and Nina rolled her eyes fondly.

The conversation wandered between stage gossip and upcoming acts until Simon steered it elsewhere.

"Have you been following that vault robbery that happened in the city the other day?" he asked.



I shrugged. “Caught a headline. Something about a bank getting hit without so much as tripping a single alarm, right?”

Nina nodded, her expression tightening. “That vault was full of private safe deposit boxes held by a lot of high-profile and wealthy people. A lot of really rich people lost a lot of really valuable stuff – and I was one of them. Though I’m a far cry from what you would call rich.”

I blinked. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “My grandfather’s gold pendant was in there, among a few other valuables that have been passed down through my family. Nothing immensely valuable – but I move around a lot and they’re not the kind of things I want to just keep lying around wherever I go, you know.”

Simon leaned in slightly. “Authorities are stumped. No signs of forced entry. All they have is security camera footage that caught a getaway van pulling away. They apparently found it a day or so later – abandoned. No leads. No trace. It’s crazy”

Nina’s voice dropped. “Feels like whoever did it knew exactly what they were doing.

Insurance companies are probably losing their minds right about now. I don’t care about the insurance money though. I just want my pendant back.”

Simon gave me a look that I couldn’t quite read. “Maybe, Declan here can get to the bottom of it.”

He patted me on the shoulder as he continued “He’s quite the investigator. And I’m not just saying that – I’ve seen his work.”



I smirked faintly, shooting Simon a sideways glance. "I'm not an investigator."

Simon raised an eyebrow. "You could've fooled me."

I took a slow sip from my glass, buying a moment to think. The truth was, although I never thought of myself as an investigator, I certainly have spent my fair share of time digging up secrets.

"I do know someone who is," I said at last, setting my glass down with a soft clink. "She's works for Media 6 and has a hell of a nose for things like this – ha, and probably more strings of red yarn than a conspiracy theorist at a corkboard convention."

Nina chuckled lightly, though the tension in her expression didn't fade. "Sounds like just the kind of person I need."

I leaned back in the booth, eyes drifting toward the band on stage. The lead guitarist hit a note that wailed like a siren in the night. Fitting.

"I can't promise anything," I added, glancing back to them. "But I'll talk to her and see what more I can find out."

Nina's eyes lit up with a flicker of hope. "That'd be great, Thanks Declan."

Simon tapped his glass against mine in a quiet toast. "Knew I could count on you."

As the music swelled around us and the lights dimmed ever so slightly, I leaned into the comfort of the booth and tried to enjoy the rest of the night.

But my mind was already drifting – from the bank heist to the sudden pulse of magic I'd felt earlier from the Ring of Asha. A whisper of a connection. A nudge in the dark.

Something told me this wasn't just a case of missing jewelry. And I had a feeling I was about to find out just how deep it really went.

## Chapter 2: Two Minds Entwined



It was nearly midnight, and I should've been sleeping.

Instead, I was perched on the edge of my sofa, half a cup of cold coffee sitting forgotten beside me, my eyes locked on the paused footage playing on my computer screen.

The headline on the video clip read:

*“Authorities Still Investigating Braddock Bank Vault Robbery – Getaway Van Found.”*

The video showed the same grainy footage being recycled across every news outlet. Black-and-white security cam feed of a battered old black van speeding through an empty intersection at night. The license plate was unreadable, and the driver was just a blur behind the wheel. But it wasn't the front of the van that caught my attention.

I hit the space bar to pause the clip, then leaned in closer. There it was – a distinct dent in the left rear bumper. Deep, like it had collided with something hard. It pulled the bumper ever so distinctly out of alignment with the taillight.

I couldn't shake how familiar it seemed to me. I rubbed my jaw, trying to place where I'd seen it before.

And then it hit me.

A photo. One of Vivian's. She had shown it to me a few days ago. A wide-angle shot of an old industrial warehouse at the edge of the bay – taken at night, from a rooftop, if I recalled correctly. In the foreground, there was a van. Beat-up. Black. Boxy. The same distinct dent on the rear bumper.

I sat back, letting the pieces slide into place.

Couldn't be a coincidence.

My mind started to think of Vivian, trying to clearly recall what she had shown me.

*I wonder if Vivian knows this is the same van, I thought.*

Then, a flicker of something... not sound, not sight—more like sensation and thought woven into one.

And then... A voice.

*"What van?"*

I blinked. I hadn't spoken out loud.

I focused, though my heart was skipping in surprise. Viv?

A pause, then the thought again, clearer this time. *"What van are you talking about?"*

I leaned forward. "Are we...? How are you—?"

*"I don't know!"* she cut in, her tone as stunned and delighted as mine. *"I was just thinking about you, and then... boom. It's like I could hear your thoughts."*

"It's the rings," I thought. "This is new."

*"Awesome,"* she replied, her thoughts now buzzing with energy. *"I was getting ready for bed when my ring started to pulse. I figured it was you. I focused for only a few moments... and then, I heard you ask about the van. What Van?"*

It was like discovering a secret hallway in a house I'd lived in my whole life. We had stumbled onto a new layer of what the Rings of Asha could do. They were beginning to feel... limitless.

"I need to show you something," I thought. "Look through my eyes."

There was a faint warmth around my ring, then a tingling sensation behind my eyes.

"Okay," came Vivian's voice in my mind. *"I can see your apartment."*

"No, look over here." I said as I turned back to my computer screen. The image of the van – paused on the dented rear—still staring back at me.

"You recognize that?" I asked.

There was a beat of silence. Then: *"That's it. That's the same one. I have a photo of that exact van parked outside a warehouse in the bay area. It was late at night and it was making some kind of delivery. I wasn't able to see what."*

"Warehouse district by the bay..." I mused. "Wonder what they were dropping off?"

*"Still don't know. But this is huge. If that van is connected to the vault robbery, that means that not only are the Mist involved in the robbery, they're also likely moving the stolen goods through that location."*

I nodded slowly, heart now beating with a different kind of urgency. "You want to check it out?" I asked aloud, not expecting a yes—but still hoping.

*"I would if I could," she replied. "But I've got a different assignment for Media 6 tomorrow. All-day interviews. I won't be able to make it."*

"I could go take a look, I offered. Scope it out. Just to see if there's any movement. Maybe we can catch a lead."

*"Good idea," she said. "You might want to take the glasses."*

"Exactly what I was thinking."

*"They're in my apartment," she said. "Top drawer, end table next to the couch."*

"You're not gonna be there?" I asked.

*"Probably not. I gotta be out before sunrise tomorrow."*

I smiled to myself, shutting screen down on my laptop. "Don't worry. I'll let myself in."

*"Of course you will," she thought dryly.*

Our mental connection dimmed and died out, leaving behind a quiet hum. The sensation had become more like a tethered vibration allowing me to feel her on the other end at all times – like a string tied between our minds, pulled taut across space.

I stood and stretched, my thoughts racing with possibilities.

The rings were more powerful than either of us had imagined. And I was about to step one foot further into a mystery I already knew went far deeper than I could see.

Tomorrow, I'd pay the warehouse district a visit.

### Chapter 3: Lines in the Light



The magic glasses weren't hard to find. Vivian had tucked them inside a worn leather pouch beside a stack of case files on her living room table, right where she said they'd be. I slipped them into my inner coat pocket and took one last glance at her corkboard of scribbled notes and pinned photos. I didn't linger long – if I did, I'd be here all day, combing through her chaotic brilliance.



The sky over the city was gray and diffused, casting a dull silver hue over the skyline as I made my way toward the bay area where the warehouse district was located. Warehouses lined the waterfront like silent sentinels, most of them drab and industrial, their only purpose was to ship goods in and out of the bay.

The goods I was looking for were of a different sort.

Vivian had been keeping tabs on this place for weeks. Between the photographs she'd managed to snap and some sketchy delivery records she'd tracked down, this area had become a hotbed of suspicion. And now, I had a reason to be here – maybe more than one.

I kept my approach casual, hands in pockets, collar pulled up. If someone had eyes on this area, I didn't want to look like a tourist with a death wish.

The glasses pressed lightly against my chest through the fabric. When I reached a bench facing a nearby building, I sat, removed them discreetly, and slipped them on.

Through the glasses the world seemed to shift slightly.

I couldn't quite tell what the difference was right away but the dreary palette of gray and concrete didn't seem so dreary anymore. After scanning the area for a few moments, I noticed some color disturbances off in the distance. It appeared to be an arcane cloud of some sort, shimmering ever so faintly, floating above the pavement like a ghostly fog. Perhaps it was a faint trace of magical activity unknowingly left behind.

Whatever it was, it was worth getting a closer look.

I continued on following the fog and the further along I went, the more signs started to appear. Tiny sigils etched into doors. Spell markers scrawled into cracks on the wall. And then—

A more distinct arcane trail appeared.

Its glow was slightly more vibrant but more compact, creating a much more defined pathway. It led away from the main access road and down a narrow alley between two loading docks. I followed.

Several minutes and two turns later, I stood in front of a warehouse that looked no different from any of the others – except for the fact that the entire perimeter was emanating with a magical presence. The glasses showed hues of color practically protruding from all corners of the place.

I took the glasses off and back on again to compare the difference of the building to the other warehouses in the area.

There was no doubt about it. This warehouse was hiding something magical inside.

The glasses showed an arced series of glyphs set into the concrete a foot from the building's base.

But's that's not all they exposed.

I surprisingly encountered a security tripwire quite similar to the shadow thread tripwires I have set in every corner of my flat. This one, however, was totally invisible in broad daylight. I barely saw the wire even with the glasses.

Thankfully I was moving slowly and cautiously enough to notice it. If I had crossed it, anyone with a link to the enchantment would've known I was there.

I was definitely somewhere I shouldn't have been. It was time to forget about being inconspicuous and just try to stay out of sight.

There was no way I could breach the place without triggering something – or someone. There were several people visibly walking around at the warehouse. Some were working while others had more of the appearance of security guards.

Mist agents, likely.

The Mist had a reputation for being paranoid, and they weren't exactly known for their leniency either. I wasn't ready for a confrontation.

I made my way to the far side of the building, sneaking behind old crates and storage bins as I went. I was cautious to stay far enough away from sight so that the guards wouldn't catch on to my presence.

I got a pretty good look at the entire facility and ended up in a secluded corner outside at the far end of the warehouse.

It was confirmed. There was no way in. At least, not in broad daylight.

Still, I had to see what was inside.

Then, the idea occurred to me.

I had tried several times to use the ring of Asha to see through walls the way Vivian could with no success thus far.

Pressing the palm of my ring-hand to the cool metal wall, I let out a breath and closed my eyes.

“Alright, Ring,” I muttered. “Don’t fail me now.”

I concentrated. This time I tried to block out the thought of what I was touching and just tried to bring my consciousness forward to whatever was *beyond*.

I struggled for a few moments and then thought back to how Vivian had described it to me. She once described it as looking through the ring.

Maybe that was it. Maybe I needed to concentrate less on looking through the wall and more on looking through the ring.

I took another deep breath and brought my attention back into focus. I brought my attention to the ring and concentrated on letting my consciousness get pulled through it and beyond.

Soon a vibration trickled out from the ring and resonated in my entire hand.

And then—

The world on the other side of the wall snapped into view.

I could see *through* it.

My breath caught. The sensation was alien, like looking through a window that shouldn't exist.

Inside, two figures moved with purpose. Mist operatives – cloaked in sleek black coats, sigils barely visible on their sleeves – were moving heavy crates from the center of the floor toward a reinforced corridor at the back. No labels or markings that I could see.

But one of the boxes had fallen open. From where I stood, I could just make out the glint of metal.

Gold.

At least a dozen bars of it.

These didn't come from any safe deposit box.

*What in the hell are they doing with gold stockpiles?*

I didn't recognize either of the operatives, even with the Ring's vision. I also couldn't make out a word anyone was saying. But it was obvious whatever they were doing was precise, practiced, and very, very secret.

I released the vision with a breath and took a step back.

This was bigger than just one vault robbery. This was highly organized criminal operation, likely the perpetrators of numerous heists.

Still, how exactly did all of this relate to the Nether Realm? This question made it all the more important that I find out *exactly* what was going on.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the cover of night, and my shadow powers – while versatile – weren't quite meant to operate in broad daylight on exposed ground like this. Though I have ways of getting around this daylight issue, I didn't want to risk it given all the traffic and magical security measures I had already encountered. I could likely be discovered before I got five feet past the door. I wasn't about to blow the whole investigation by being reckless.

No. I'd seen enough for today.

That night, I'd return. And this time, I wouldn't be watching from the outside.

## Chapter 4: Shadow Entry



The moment night fell, the city became mine once again.

No need for a car this time. I moved like an eagle through the tapestry of darkness. Earlier that evening, I had reached out to Vivian through the ring, and as always now, she'd answered immediately.

I told her about my discovery of the gold bars at the warehouse, bragging admittedly about how I was finally able to use the ring to see through walls.



We both questioned if there were any other robberies lately that might be connected.

Vivian wanted to do a little more investigation into the matter. So, the idea for now was for Vivian to stay behind at her apartment and do some digging on the internet while I went back to take a much more intimate look at the warehouse.

I had just arrived at the warehouse district in the bay area when I got a pulse from Vivian.

I stopped by a nearby building just at the edge of the warehouse district and focused on the ring.

Her voice, clear as if she sat beside me, came through. *"Hey Declan, I found at least four others major robberies in the last two months spread across the greater metropolitan area. Not in the news though. Buried in incident logs. We got a private vault, an art collection, and some jewelry and precious metals from a couple of high-profile estate homes."*

"Precious metals huh? Maybe that's where those gold bars I saw came from." I said as I took a quick look around. No one was out this late. I could see the faint glow of lights from the warehouses from where I stood.

"Any patterns?" I asked

*"All items insured. Some of the stolen pieces aren't exactly priceless... but they are rare. Looks like a bunch of rare family heirlooms and artifacts. Can't see anything specific yet."*

"Rare artifacts, huh" I replied.

*"Yeah, that caught my attention too."* Vivian said, voice tinged with approval. *"It looks like the Mist aren't just looting. They're curating specific items."*

"I'll see what they're curating tonight."

She paused. *"Be careful, Declan."*

I gave a small smile she couldn't see. "Always."

The warehouse district was even colder at night. The bay mist crept low along the ground, curling like smoke around my boots. I stood on a rooftop across from the warehouse I'd visited earlier, crouched like a shadow carved from moonlight.

With the glasses resting over my eyes, the magical traps lit up like constellations. Complex illusion runes, Mist-triggered motion wards, and trip-sigils inked beneath layers of paint.

Paranoia in glyph form.

They're definitely cautious. I'd give them that. But they weren't prepared for someone like me – especially with these magic glasses.

I slipped from the rooftop, landing with a whisper on the pavement below. My hand brushed the ring, and the world stretched.

Shadow Warp.

My form unraveled like vapor, darting through cracks in the stone and folds in the darkness until I emerged at the edge of the warehouse wall, tucked between a stack of rusted shipping pallets and a broken fence.

The glasses showed the lock on the side door was enchanted—Mist-made and full of spite. Normally I would have scanned the perimeter until I found an entrance big enough for me to exploit in shadow form. However, this particular enchanted lock – I was actually familiar with.

Only those bound to the enchantment are supposed to be able to see the lock; but my magic glasses helped me see exactly where it was. This is not your typical lock mind you. It's basically just an invisible pressure point on the wall near the door. I hear that it even changes locations on the wall after a period of time. At any rate, if you can see it, you simply press you finger on the right spot on the wall and bam, unlocked. The mark for this door was just arm's length away.

I pressed my finger on the spot on the wall and the lock clicked open. The door opened with ease. Opening it any other way would have set off Lords know what kind of alarms or traps.

I was inside now, but I would have to continue with extreme caution.

The warehouse was dim on the inside, lit only by the glimmer of residual magic and the faint light from the alley lights that penetrated the windows hovering up high near the ceiling. I kept the glasses on, which thankfully also seemed to function just fine even hidden in the shadows.

I needed all the extra help I could get in a trap ridden place like this. It's not all that easy to see from the shadows. It takes a little while to get used to. It's like being able to see everything all at once but, at the same time, really difficult to focus on just one thing. On top of that, it's like looking through a dark haze.

I glided slowly over and around several crates and storage shelves until I saw a particular stack of columns along the far wall that were covered up with sheets.

After checking first for signs of magical traps I carefully removed the sheeting.

There were dozens of crates, all marked with subtle sigils I didn't recognize at first – until I leaned in close and noticed the angular curves and spiral strokes.

Mist runes.

Some crates shared the same runes and were stacked accordingly. This wasn't some mindless collection of loot. This was a highly categorized and systematic operation.

One crate had already been pried open. I peeked inside.

A few more gold bars. Stamped and stacked, glinting softly in the dim light.

Next to them: velvet pouches of polished gemstones – sapphire, onyx, moonstone. Some shimmered with faint enchantments. Others hummed low and steady like they were holding something... deeper.

I pulled out my phone and began taking pictures of everything. Vivian would appreciate that. More photos to add to her pool of evidence.

I continued on – taking pictures as I went. Another crate held ornate silver objects—an antique goblet etched with draconic script, a small mirror backed in obsidian, and a twisted copper circlet I didn't recognize. All tagged in a language only used by the Mist.

I felt my jaw tighten.

This wasn't just about wealth. These were items of history. Artifacts of clear significance.

They were building something. A cache. A vault. Is this what they were giving to the Kretchin? And if so, what was the Mist getting in return?

My eyes scanned the rest of the room. No movement. Just the echo of my own breath and the whispering tension of the ring on my finger.

There was another collection of crates at the far end separated from the others that all bore different sigil markings. I found a crowbar lying nearby and used it to pry open one of the crates.

Inside, nestled between layers of protective cloth, was a large amulet. Not gold. Not silver. Perhaps bronze. It was a little weighty and had a faint bronze-like hue. It had intricately carved inscriptions and a large gemstone at its center that glistened even in the dim light emanating from the warehouse windows above.

Upon closer inspection I realized that the inscriptions were Fae.

This was an artifact from the Nether.

Not only that, but the amulet pulsed in my hand. It felt warm. It felt alive. It was very similar to how my nightstick feels when I hold on to it.

Like it was charged with energy.

I looked back into the crate and discovered a handful of similar looking amulets- each carefully wrapped in cloth, each with its own gemstone.

*Could this be what the Mist wanted from the Nether? But what were they exactly?*

I slipped the one in my hand into my coat pocket.

Just then I heard voices echoing faintly in the distance. Not in the room – but nearby.

Time to go.

I carefully placed the lid back on the crate and draped the sheets back over everything.

I Shadow-Warped back through the perimeter, tracing my entry path in reverse, carefully bypassing each trap.

The cool night air filled me with relief as I emerged from the shadows behind the fence once more. I looked down at the amulet, now warm against my chest.

I didn't know what it was yet, but something told me it was going to be important.

I didn't know much about ancient artifacts, but Garrick sure did. Hopefully he would be able to shed some light on what these artifacts were - or at least point me in the direction of where I could find out.

I vanished back into the dark.

This was enough for one night.

## Chapter 5: A Calm Before the Storm



It was late when I finally got back to Vivian's. She had coffee already waiting for me when I walked into her apartment, the sharp aroma cutting through the fog of my sleepless night. She sat cross-legged on her couch, wrapped in a thick cardigan, hair pulled back into a



quick knot, allowing only a few strands to rebelliously escape. The corkboard in the corner had grown even more cluttered, now boasting a fresh batch of notes, news clippings, and strings connecting names I barely recognized.

I took the bronze amulet out of my pocket and placed it onto the table between us.

"Check this out," I said. "It's Fae, and I'm certain it has some magical properties. I'm just not sure what"

Vivian's brows shot up as she leaned forward, turning the piece over delicately in her hands. *"It's warm!"* she said looking wide-eyed back at me. *"Did you take this from the warehouse?"*

"Yep. And there were many more where that came from. They have everything meticulously marked in crates and then covered by thick sheets." I leaned against the back of the chair across from her, arms folded. "I found the loot too, which were all in separate containers – gold, gems, jewelry and other various assorted heirlooms. Obviously, a stockpile from their string of robberies. But these amulets.... these are from the Nether."

Vivian ran a thumb along the amulet's etched feathers, her eyes narrowing.

Its metallic sheen glistened much more brightly in the light of Vivian's apartment. I could tell now that it was not made of bronze though. It was a metal I had never seen before. Its color was a little more amber than bronze.

*"This looks ancient."* Vivian said.

“It probably is” I replied. “But the Mist don’t care about historical significance. They have some magical quality, and the Mist are stockpiling them. But to what end? I was thinking Garrick might be able to enlighten us on the matter.”

She nodded slowly, still studying the artifact. *“Sounds like a good start. But there’s still the matter of the stash from the robberies. If this stash becomes public knowledge – if we leaked the right details to the right places – it could trigger a full-scale investigation. Police might not know what they’re really looking at, but they’d have to return it all. And it might scare the Mist into retreating.”*

I sat forward, rubbing my temples. “Well, I did take quite a few pictures for you to sift through. If we do send them to the police, we’ll need to be extremely careful because the Mist will retaliate. I’m sure those Kretchin have already informed them that a shadow man has been snooping around. They just don’t know who.”

Vivian’s lips quirked with that familiar fire. *“Well, I’m a bit of an expert in leaking anonymous information. I can curate a few photos and provide the warehouse location which should be more than enough to ignite a full-scale investigation. It should be enough to bring some stability back to the non-magical side of the world, while at the same time, forcing the Mist into remission.”*

My eyes flicked to the corkboard. “Sounds like plan. Be sure to wipe all your metadata.”

She smirked. *“Please. Amateur.”*

I gave a low chuckle, as I stood up and stretched.

"I'll head over to the Marlowe tomorrow and give Nina an update. No details of course. I'll just let her know that the police are on to a lead and her pendant may be recovered before long."

Vivian nodded, her expression dimming into something more thoughtful. *"Be careful, Declan."*

*Always.*

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The following day, the Marlowe was alive with its usual low thrum of theatrical chaos — costumes rustling backstage, muted laughter echoing off brick walls, the scent of smoke and greasepaint hanging in the air like an old friend. I moved through the halls, nodding to familiar faces, ducking under lighting rigs, sidestepping props.

But something was... off.

The marquee had Nina's act listed – *"The Crimson Pyre – 8:00 p.m."* – and yet her stage was empty. Her segment should've started fifteen minutes ago.

I found one of the crew members, a wiry lighting tech named Jules.

"Nina around?"

Jules blinked. "She didn't check in. Never showed. Stage manager's been scrambling for a last-minute filler."

It was highly irregular for any performer to ever miss a performance – even when sick.

My pulse picked up, just a tick faster.

I pivoted and made my way toward the dressing rooms, where Simon's door was usually cracked open, music playing, the occasional card flourish flipping between his fingers.

But his door was closed.

Locked.

I knocked. No answer.

"Simon?"

Nothing.

The same chill I'd felt weeks ago began to crawl up my spine – the same one that prickled the back of my neck when Victor Lorne's secrets had spilled into the light.

I tried the handle again, harder. Still locked.

Simon Winters never missed a show.

And Nina Flare didn't strike me as the type to vanish on performance night without a call.

I stepped back from the door and out into the hallway. I caught one of the stage hands passing by carrying some props.

"Hey, isn't Simon's act on right after the Crimson Pyre tonight?" I asked

“Yeah, he’s on in 45 minutes. But he hasn’t come in yet” he replied as he continued down the hallway.”

Simon was never late and always arrived at least an hour before his shows.

Two mysterious no-shows in one day?

The chill in my spine radiated out to goose bumps that raised the hair on my arms.

I instinctively reached for my ring, rubbing it with my thumb. It had recently become a source of comfort for me.

This was anything but a comforting situation.

I needed to check and see if Simon was alright.

## Chapter 6: A Chilling Warning



The street was quiet – too quiet for a Friday night. Simon’s apartment sat on the edge of Old Row, above a vintage menswear shop. Across the street sat a forgotten jazz club that only came to life once a week. Tonight, everything around it was dead still.

I approached the front door with the growing sense that something was wrong. The kind of wrong that settled in your chest before it ever touched your skin. I knocked once.

No answer.

I knocked again, this time louder. “Simon?”

Nothing.

I waited. The silence stretched on, dragging like a wet cloth.

Then – *creeeeeeak* – the door drifted open on its own.

A sliver of darkness greeted me, faintly illuminated by the apartment's ambient city glow.

No breeze. No draft.

Just an invitation.

My hand slid into my coat pocket and wrapped around the glasses. I slipped them on.

The moment I crossed the threshold, the air shifted. Colder. Heavier.

I scanned the living room. Everything was still: Simon's overturned Fedora on the coffee table, a deck of cards half-spread like a frozen flourish, and his velvet blazer slung across the back of a chair.

Simon had been here recently.

But he wasn't here now.

Then, they appeared.

Two figures stepped forward from the far corners of the room – at first just silhouettes, then fully-formed men cloaked in black, faces twisted into devilish masks: pale skin, curling horns, eyes glowing with an unnatural silver hue.



Mist men - clearly dressed to intimidate.

Their image flickered like smoke trying to hold form.

I didn't speak. I just stared. Waiting.

"You've been busy, Mr. Pierce," said the first one. His voice was low and smooth, like syrup hiding shards of glass.

"We've been waiting for you," said the second, stepping forward. He was slightly taller, broader. The grin that twisted across his sharp features never reached his eyes. "We figured you'd show up, eventually."

I took another step into the room and tilted my head to the left, my eyes narrowing behind the Lens of Truth.

As I stepped closer, their illusion suddenly shattered.

Their feet didn't touch the floor. Their bodies carried no weight. And the shadows in the corners of the room didn't respond to their presence.

They weren't really there.

Projections.

They were speaking from somewhere nearby – within the city, likely within the same block—but I couldn't trace the exact source. Mist operatives were good at hiding their magical footprints.

“What do you want?” I asked, voice level.

“Not much,” the first said. “Only what you stole.”

One of the men made a gesture with his hand and then a haze started to bloom between them. It molded itself into a miniature stable cloud floating right in the middle of the room. Within it, an image coalesced. It was Simon and Nina, bound to chairs in what looked like a dim stone cellar. Their heads slumped forward, unconscious. Heavy chains wrapped around their wrists.

Nina’s necklace still hung around her neck.

Simon’s hands twitched slightly.

He was alive. *But for how long?*

“We can be generous,” the second agent said, brushing imaginary dust off his lapel. “We’re not unreasonable.”

“You return what you took from the warehouse,” said the first. “And we’ll return your friends. No further trouble. Simple.”

“And if I don’t?”

The taller one stepped closer, his voice turning to ice. “Well then I guess you can kiss your friends goodbye, and we’ll be forced to take a more direct approach to take back what you took.”

My fists curled.

“Be at this location in twenty-four hours with the amulet and you can have your friends back” the agent said tossing me a folded-up wad of paper.”

“And one more thing...” he said just as I caught the paper.

The leader leaned forward, his silver eyes burning through the illusion.

“Stay out of places you don’t belong.”

Their images then suddenly collapsed, swirling into a dissipating cloud of smoke and ash. Within seconds, the apartment was empty again. The air was still. Too still.

I pulled off the glasses, staring into the silence left behind.

Shit!

I didn’t move for several moments. I just stood there feeling my rage simmer just beneath the surface of my skin.

It would have been one thing if they had threatened me directly, but taking Simon and Nina like that...

Big mistake.

## Chapter 7: The Turning Point



The Mist had crossed a line.

But even with my anger pulsing through every inch of me, my thoughts shifted immediately from Simon and Nina to someone else.

**Vivian.**

I brought the ring to my temple, summoning her through the mental tether.

“Vivian—are you alright?” My voice echoed inside our shared link, sharp with urgency.

It didn't take more than a few seconds before her presence filled the void.

*"Yeah. I'm okay. Why? What happened?"*

I exhaled sharply, relief washing over me like a crashing tide. "Good. I... something very bad just happened. I had to see if you were alright. I need to tell you everything."

*"Talk to me."*

I paced back and forth in Simon's flat, threading through memory as I relayed it all – how I came there to check on Simon, how the door creaked open on its own, and how the Mist agents appeared as projected illusions.

Vivian hadn't said a word yet, but I could tell she was just waiting for me to reveal the bad part.

I took one more deep breath before telling her about Simon and Nina being kidnapped and the ultimatum given to use to exchange the amulet I took for their safe return.

Vivian gasped *"Oh shit, Declan! What are we gonna do?"*

I unfurled the folded-up piece of paper that was still in my hand. It was a map with an X clearly marking the location they wanted to make the exchange.

"I don't know yet" I replied. "I have no idea how they knew it was me. I was so busy trying to avoid security enchantments at the warehouse perhaps I overlooked more typical forms of security. Hidden cameras maybe?"

I was getting worked up just thinking about it. Stealth was a matter of pride for me but somehow, I was discovered. I took another deep breath to try and calm down.

“Doesn’t matter now” I said. “Anyways, they left me with directions for the exchange point. Wanna see?”

*“Show me”* she said eagerly.

I raised the paper to eye level and let her see through my vision.

There was a beat of silence between us, and then her voice returned.

*“I know that place. It's an old marina near the eastern pier not too far from the warehouse district. It used to house river ferries decades ago before they relocated most of the traffic. It's completely shut down now. Perfectly secluded location for a drop like this.”*

I rubbed a hand down my face and slumped into Simon’s old reading chair, the only thing that didn’t look like it belonged in a magician’s lair. I pulled the amulet out of my pocket and stared at it intently. It gleamed even in the dark.

“I had the amulet in my pocket the whole time, Viv. But I wasn’t about to just give it to them and then simply trust they would hold up their end of the bargain. This is a major play on their part. Whatever this amulet is, they’re willing to kill for it.”

Vivian didn’t answer right away. I could feel her thinking, putting pieces together.

*"We should wait to act on leaking the warehouse intel", she finally said. "If they're willing to do this for the return of a single amulet who knows what they'll do if we send the cops to bust up their whole operation. We have to be smart about this."*

I nodded to myself. "Agreed. But we still need to figure out what this amulet really is and why it's so valuable to them."

I rolled it around in my hands examining once again every angle of it. Its brilliant amber hue gleamed brightly even in the dark.

"I don't know, Viv. Something about this thing feels... I don't know... powerful. Like it's resonating with something inside. I get a similar feeling when holding my nightstick. The enchantment on my nightstick is essentially a charge. It only has so many uses before it runs out of juice. I wonder if this amulet works in a similar way?"

Vivian's mind-voice was quiet now, but I could tell she was still attentive.

"When my nightstick runs out of juice, I'll have to take it back to Garrick to repower the enchantment. While we're on the subject matter, he's probably our only hope in trying to figure out what this amulet is really used for."

"Garrick?" Vivian finally responded.

"Yep, he's our only play for now." I stood again and slipped the amulet back into my pocket.

“He’s the only one I trust to look into this without alerting the whole world. We’ll go to him first thing in the morning. Hopefully he can help us figure out what this thing really is – and why the Mist want it so badly.”

There was a pause, then the warmth of Vivian’s determination surged through the link.

*“Alright. First Garrick. Then we make a plan.”*

“Alright, Viv. I’ll see you in the morning. Get some sleep. It’s gonna be a long day tomorrow.”

*“I’ll be ready”* she said with conviction.

Vivian then ended the connection softly, her mental voice fading into the background of my thoughts.

I was left standing in the center of Simon’s empty flat all alone. The silence still hung heavy, but now it had a shape. A purpose.

Twenty minutes later, I was back in my own apartment, sitting at my desk, staring at the amulet resting under the lamplight.

The room was quiet.

My reflection peered at me from the dark window – a figure cloaked in shadow, eyes glowing faintly from the ambient pulse of the Ring of Asha.

Sleep would be hard to come by tonight. My mind was swirling in reflections.



This whole thing was about far more than stolen treasure.

These amulets were from the Nether. They had power. I was sure of it.

That's what this was about – power, control.

That's what the Mist wanted.

But what kind of power?

And to what extent?

The one thing the Order of Mist is most known for is their desire for the power to exert their will on others. It's a well-known character trait among their kind. I had always tried to stay somewhat aloof about this fact. Now, it was all too real. It demanded my attention.

They got it.

## **Me First**

The *Me First* deception is a stunt most often seen in ESP card routines. Later on, I will detail a unique card trick (using a marked deck) that puts this deception into play in an interesting way. Though some of you may already be familiar with the *Me First* deception, I felt it best to summarize it here first (for the uninitiated of my readers) before diving into the effect – which is rather involved.

The theme of this book is marked decks. You will of course need a marked deck for the *Me First* deception – ESP deck or otherwise. To understand how the deception works, grab your marked cards and pull out the Ace through 5 of Spades as well as the matching color Ace through 5 of Clubs. For this deception it is ideal for your participant to be sitting directly across the table from you, though you will be able to easily follow along without a participant for now. Your participant is handed the Ace, 2, 3, 4 and 5 of Clubs while you retain the matching five cards in spades.

**Note:** *If using ESP cards, obviously your participant will receive one card for each symbol, and you as well.*

Tell your participant that you want to test your psychic intuition with a simple matching game. Say that “the only rule is that I go first.” (hence the name *Me First*). You will always place your card out *face down* on the table before your participant places their card out *face down* in front of yours on their side of the table.

**Note:** *It is permissible to have your participant lay their cards face up instead, given that you are always the one playing your cards first. The effect will still be a surprising one. This will be a matter of personal preference. One could debate on how much this may or may not detract from performing the routine with all face down cards. I, of course, feel that having all the cards placed face down adds to the impossibility of the effect. There is a trade of though, and that is, at the end, the participant’s face down cards will have to be revealed as well, and care must be taken to make the revelation of the cards appear as fair as possible. The way I handle this is by flipping the participant’s overlapping row of cards over openly and at the same time, but more on this later.*

The game continues on in this fashion until all cards have been placed on the table. I recommend laying your cards down from right to left. It may feel a little weird to you, but it will feel more natural for your participant across the table from you. They will lay their cards out left to right which means that you both will be laying your cards down one at a time in the same direction. Also, this way, two rows will eventually form as the gameplay goes on – both moving in the same direction.

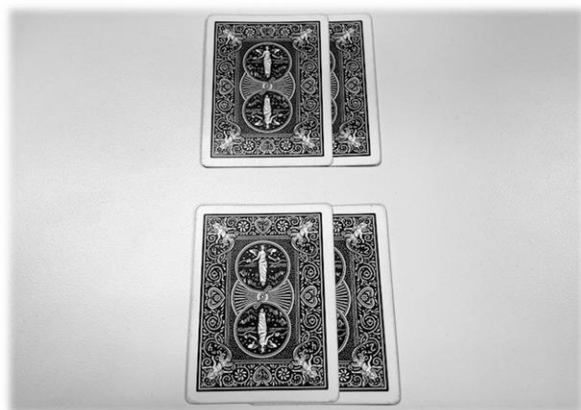
How this deception plays out actually depends entirely on your participant. Each of you has 5 different cards and therefore there are 5 different possible outcomes. They are as follows.

**Outcome 1** – Place your card out *face down* on to the table toward your right. Let's say you choose the 2S. Invite your participant to place any one of their cards *face down* right in front of yours. Given that the cards are marked, you should be able to easily identify your participant's card. Let's assume it is the matching 2C. In this case immediately flip over your card as well as your participant's showing that they are a match. "I'm off to a great start" you could say at this point. You have two options here: pick up the cards and start over again **OR** continue on with the game as detailed in the other outcomes below.

**Outcome 2** - Place your card out *face down* on to the table toward your right. Again, let's say you choose the 2S. Again, invite your participant to place any one of their cards *face down* right in front of yours. You will read the marking to determine what card they played. Let's say this time they put down the 4C. This is not a match to your 2S. Anytime your participant puts down a card that does not match the last card you placed down, the next card you play must be one that matches the last card they placed down. In this case they played the 4C, which means the next card you place down should be the 4S. When you place

it *face down*, you should *overlap* it slightly to the left of the 2S you already have down on the table.

Fig 1.



**Note:** Any time you start creating a row like this due to a miss-match you are in a “cycle”. The cycle will only end when your participant finally lays down the very first card you laid down. In this case it’s the 2 of Spades

Invite your participant to do the same on their row with any card they choose. Let’s say the next card they play is the 2C. See Fig 1 for view of a completed cycle of 2 cards each. This matches the 2S you played first and thus completes the cycle. At this point you can reveal a match, though I recommend you keep going as detailed in the rest of the outcomes. To reveal, pick your cards up, keeping them face down as one in the left hand (this will be facilitated if they are placed down in an overlapping manner). With your right hand you are going to apparently deal the top card off your packet *face up* onto the table, but you are really going to use your right hand as cover to instead drag the bottom card off with your right fingers, thumb on top. See Fig 2.

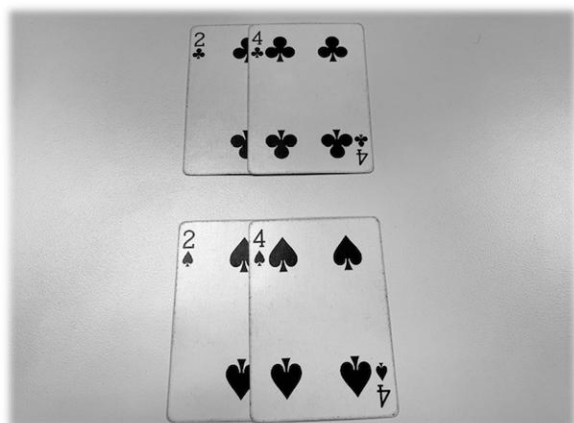
Fig 2.



Deal this card *face up* and then deal the next card *face up* to the right, overlapping this time on the right side. Next, reach over and flip over your participant's cards all together, leaving them overlapped as you do so. They will match

your cards and be running in the same direction – which adds to the illusion. The end result should look as it does in Fig 3.

Fig 3.



**Note:** *Anytime you complete a cycle and want to continue placing cards down, you must start a new cycle, placing the next card down aside from the already completed cycle. This is important for the method, but you can also use it to add to the effect – making it seem as*

*though it is a separate group or singularly special card.*

**Outcome 3** – Continue as you did in outcomes 1 and 2. Let's say this time you played a 2S, 4S and then an AS. Your participant played the 4C, AC and finally the 2C. Your participant's finally play of the 2C completes the cycle which means it is ready to reveal. You can however play another card of yours off to the side and continue the gameplay keeping the next cards dealt separate. To reveal this three-card cycle, again pick your cards up, keeping

them *face down* as one. Again, use your right hand as cover as you pretend to deal the top card *face up* onto the table as you really deal off the bottom card. As soon as the bottom card is dealt with this simple sleight of hand, all the rest of the cards can be dealt fairly and openly onto the table. Remember to deal this time from left to right, overlapping each following card to right of the previous. Then, as before, reach over and flip over your participant's cards *face up* all together, leaving them overlapped as you do so. They will of course match and be running in the same direction.

**Outcome 4** – Continue as you did in outcomes 1, 2 and 3. Let's say this time you played the 2S, 4S, AS and finally the 5S. Your participant played the 4C, AC, 5C and finally the 2C to complete the cycle. This situation will leave only one card left in both you and your participant's hand. I recommend revealing these singular matches right away. If you wait to the end, the effect will be dampened because the result will already be known. They are definitely a match. To reveal this 4-card cycle, simply do as you did before in outcome 3. Pick up your cards. The first card is always secretly dealt from the bottom card *face up* while all subsequent cards are dealt *face up* normally from there. Flip over your participant's cards as before revealing they all match.

**Outcome 5** – This outcome is almost as much of a miracle as the real thing, but it does happen from time to time. It means that your participant never placed down a matching card and that now you have a 5-card complete cycle. All you need to do is reveal it in the same way as before. Pick up your cards *face down* as one. The first card is dealt *face up* secretly from the bottom. All the rest of the cards are dealt *face up* openly and fairly from

the top of the packet, dealing left to right in overlapping fashion. Flip over your participant's cards all together and at the same time. They'll be a perfect match.

## Parity Prediction

I now present to you the *Parity Prediction*, a unique creation of mine designed as a way of getting into the *Me First* deception through the context of a much larger and impossible effect. It is so named due to the use of a derivation of the *Parity Principle* combined with a prediction style effect. This routine actually blends both coincidence and prediction into one single effect. All you need is a marked deck of cards and a willing participant seated across from you at a table. As with most of my card routines, start by having your participant thoroughly shuffle the deck.

Have the deck returned to you and state that you are going to remove a couple of cards that will come into play later. Feign deep concentration for a moment and then begin spreading through the deck faces towards you. As you spread the cards, take note of the top 2 cards of the deck. The cards you will remove will need to be the matching colors and values of those top 2 cards. Let's say the top 2 cards are a 3 of Spades and the Queen of Clubs. This would mean you will be looking to remove the matching 3 of Clubs and Queen of Spades. Remove these cards and place them *face down* off to the side, keeping them a secret from your participant. State that you will get back to these later. Next, feign a concentrated change of mind. State that "on second thought, you get the feeling that 2 cards may not be enough."

Feign concentration again, spreading through the cards faces towards you. This time, you will take note of the top 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> card of the deck as you spread. Let's say they are the 7 of Hearts and the 9 of Diamonds. This means you will need to remove the matching 7 of Diamonds and 9 of Hearts. Remove these 2 cards and place them off to the side *face down* with the other 2, keeping your 4-card packet a secret from your participant.

State that this feels like enough to you now, but again, you'll come back to them later. With your 4-card packet off to the side, state that you are going to attempt to show how order can come out of the most chaotic of situations. Holding the deck *face down* in your left hand, casually cut the deck, but maintain a pinky break above the original top cards of the deck as you complete the cut in your hands. You will now spread the deck *face down* in your hand, cutting the spread at the pinky break. Your right hand will be holding half the deck with all random cards. The top 4 cards of the left hand's packet will be the 4 matching cards to the 4 cards you set aside moments ago. You will now lay out a *face down* 4X4 grid of cards on the table in an apparently fair and random manner as seen in Fig 4.



Fig 4.



You will take turns placing a card down from the bottom of the right-hand packet then from the top of the left-hand packet to create the grid. You must lay out this grid pattern in an apparent chaotic fashion while actually making sure that the top 4 cards of the left-

hand packet are deliberately placed in a diagonal pattern. Fig 5 shows an exposed view of how these top 4 cards should be arranged at the end of this procedure.

Fig 5.



**Note:** *The following is only for better understanding of the principle behind this effect. You will soon instruct your participant to conduct a folding up procedure of this grid. In its current state of all face down cards seen in Fig 4, when the whole grid is eventually*

*folded up into a single pile, the cards seen in Fig 6 will always be facing the other direction no matter how your participant chooses to fold up the grid. For this effect, we only want the top 4 cards that are now laying diagonally on the grid to end up facing the other way. To do this we are about to use some clever storytelling to reverse the 4 other cards seen in Fig 6 beforehand*

- so that they will be facing the same way as the rest of the cards when the grid is finally folded up.

Fig 6.



Once you have laid out the 4X4 grid, state that it is a representation of the world of order which is actually riddled with chaos. Say that “if I were to flip over 2 random cards like this.” As you say this, flip over the 2 cards shown in Fig 7. State that “There’s a small possibility of

there being a coincidental similarity between the two. In this example, both happen to be red cards.” Next state that “we could try to make a similar move on the other side of the grid and hope to see some type of congruent orderly pattern.” Flip over the other 2 cards shown in Fig 8 as you say this. State that “this time, they happened to be both different colors. Furthermore, now the grid is mixed with face up and face down cards. Some are spot cards. Some are court cards – and there is a mix of red and black cards.”

Fig 7.

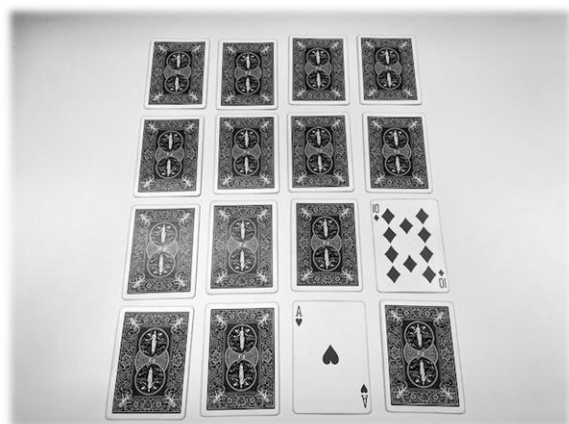
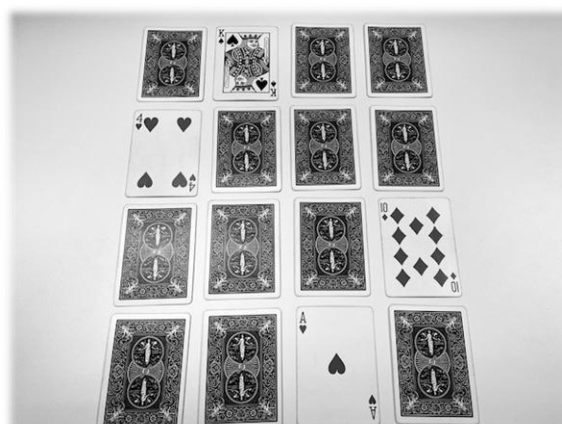


Fig 8.



**Note:** *Of course, these cards will always change every time you perform this effect. You will need to identify the results as they appear. The point is to stress to your participant that the more moves that are made in the once perfect grid, the more chaos you are inviting into the pattern. However, you need to spin it, you need to present the flipping over of the cards as looking for possible coincidences that inevitably create more chaos.*

Now ask your participant what they think will happen if you really start to insert some chaos into the mix. You are now going to start the gradual folding up process of the cards that I spoke of earlier. Your participant gets to make all the choices. Tell your participant to choose a side – top, bottom, left, or right – and that side will be folded inward onto the other cards. As you say this, keep your focus on the bottom left-corner card of the pattern. As you progress in folding the card grid up, the orientation of the cards will change. Tracking the face up or face down position of this one card will help you keep track of the orientation of the other 3 original top cards. Right now, it is the 9 of Diamonds and it is *face down*.

Let's say your participant chooses the bottom row. You will flip this row inwards and upwards onto the other cards as shown in Fig 9. Notice how the bottom left 9 of Diamonds is now *face up*. Mentally say to yourself "face up" to keep track.

Fig 9.

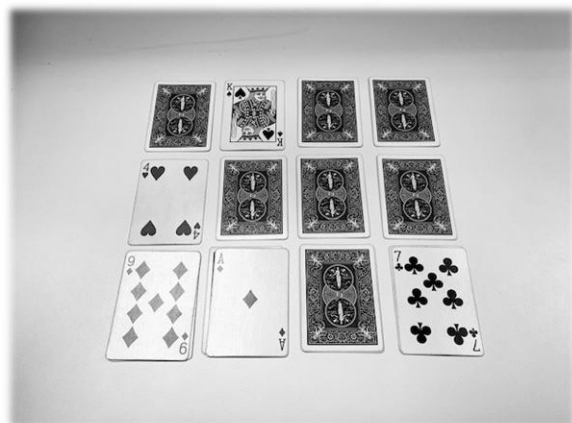
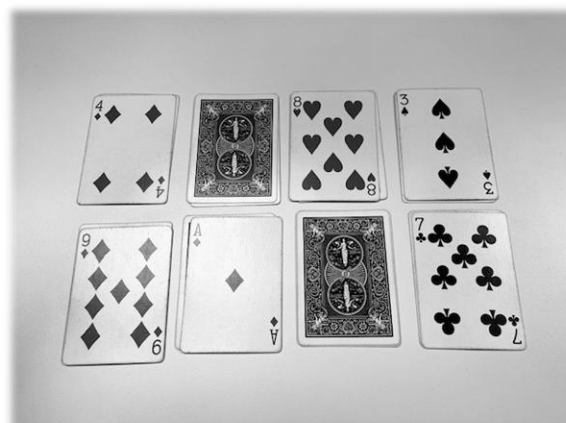


Fig 10.



Let's say that next they choose the top row. This row will get folded inwards and downwards on top of the other cards as seen in Fig 10. Remark to you participant that, in only two moves, they have inserted a lot more chaos into the mix and there is no way to tell which cards are face up or down or how many. However, note to yourself that your 9 of Diamonds is still *face up*.

Next let's say your participant chooses the right side of the grid. This side will then get folded inwards and to the left on top of the other cards as seen in Fig 11. Note that the 9 of Diamonds is still *face up*.

Fig 11.

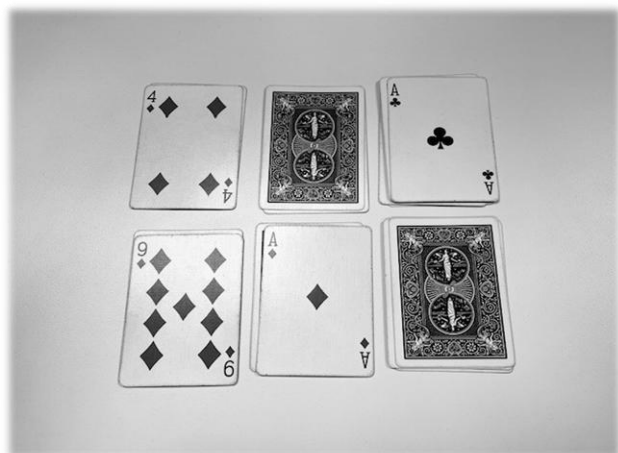


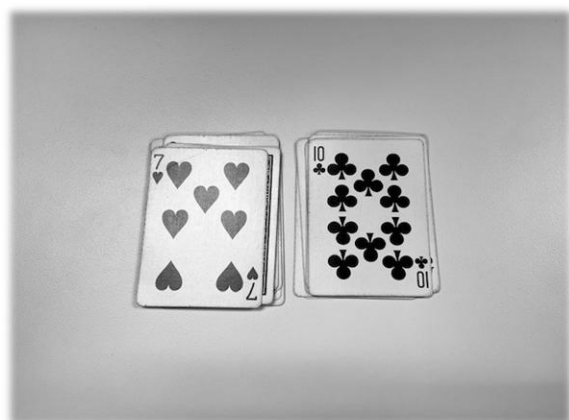
Fig 12.



For the next move, let's say that your participant chooses the left side. This side will then get folded inwards to the right as seen in Fig 12. Note that the 9 of Diamonds is now *face down*. Keep a mental note.

Next, let's say your participant chooses the bottom row. The row will then be folded upwards on top of the other cards as seen in Fig 13. The 9 of Diamonds will now be *face up* once again. Keep a mental note.

Fig 13.



Finally, let's say your participant chooses to fold the right-side packet over onto the left-side packet. This will leave one final packet in which you know the 9 of Diamonds is *face up*. This means that the other 3 original top cards are also *face up* in the final packet.

It does not matter which outer rows your participant chooses or when - If you follow this procedure perfectly, the 4 matching cards to the 4 cards you set aside earlier will **ALWAYS** be the only cards in the packet that are facing the other direction.

As it stands now, you know that the 9 of Diamonds is *face up* along with the other 3 original top cards of the deck – the cards that are matches to the 4 cards you still have set aside since the beginning. These are the cards you will want to use in the next sequence which will be the *Me First* deception. Recap to your participant that they have introduced a whole lot of chaos into this packet and that they made all the choices in doing so. Affirm that there is no way any one could have known the choices they would make and therefore no way to know what condition the packet is in. The first part of this statement is true while the second part couldn't be further from the truth – but they don't know that.

The next thing to do is reveal the results of the stack your participant created. You want the 4 matching cards to be *face down* when you spread the packet. In this case, you know that the 9 of Diamonds is *face up*. This means you will need to pick up the cards and flip them

over as you spread to show that only four cards are *face down*. If, however, your tracking card were *face down* at the end of the folding sequence, you would simply have to spread the cards on the table as they stand to show 4 face down cards.

Have your participant remove the 4 face down cards, keeping them a secret from you while you discard the rest of the face up cards. Now is a good time to introduce the hook by mentioning the coincidence in the fact that you also removed exactly 4 cards earlier before even starting the effect.

All that is left to do now is finalize the effect with the *Me First* deception as detailed above. This time you will only be working with 4 cards instead of 5. I'll leave it up to your stylistic whims on how you want to focus your presentation – pure mental clairvoyance, pure coincidence, or the natural world naturally creating order out of chaos.

## **A.T.F.N**

### **(All That For Nothing)**

This one is a pure mind-reading effect which presents various ways of ensuring the magician can't possibly discover the identity of a secretly selected card – at the end of which, the magician uses no tactics at all and simply divines the selected card by apparent thought to thought transmission alone. Following the theme of this book, this effect will require a marked deck. Additionally, you will need a trim card as was the focus of the

previous book. You can perform this effect for a single person, but I like playing with 2 participants for this one and will describe it as such.

Start with your trim card on top of a face down deck. State to your participants that there are many tactics a magician can use to discover the identity of a selected card and as such, there are many measures for countering these tactics. State that the first obvious counter measure would be to start by shuffling the deck. State that since there are two of you, you can both participate in the shuffling process.

I prefer to use a *Rosetta Shuffle*. To do this, cut the deck into two halves leaving them side by side on the table. Then, with your fingers, spin each of them into a thorough Rosetta circle as seen in Fig 14. You will have your participants mash the two halves together and square them up. Before you have them do this, make sure that the top trim card is slightly overlapping on top to ensure that it stays on top as you indicate to one of your participants to mash the two halves together. This is also seen in Fig 14.

Fig 14.



When this is done, have them leave the deck *face down* on the table. Now for the selection process. State that the magician usually controls this process. Continue by stating that a counter measure for this is to not let the magician handle the cards for this. Since



there are 2 participants you will allow both of them to take part in the selection process. One will be the dealer, and one will be the director. Let's say Participant A is the dealer and Participant B is the director. Participant A (the dealer) will pick up the deck holding it *face down* in their hands. State that the dealer will deal cards onto a pile on the table at Participant B's direction. State that if the director says 1 – they are to deal 1 card *face down*. Have them deal the top card *face down* to confirm they understand what to do. This places your trim card first on the table and will therefore be at the bottom of the packet they create. Next, state that if the director calls 3 – they are to drop 3 cards at a time on top of the packet. Have them perform this as well. State that the director can choose between 1, 2, 3 or 4 cards dealt at a time and can call stop whenever they would like, and the dealer will have to deal accordingly. Have them begin and continue this process until the Participant B calls stop.

When they do, state that a card has now been randomly arrived at. Continue by stating that another potential hazard is the assured secret viewing of the selected card. Say that as a counter measure it is wise to have the magician turn away. As you say this, physically turn your head away and even cover your eyes if necessary. Next, instruct Participant A to view the top card of the packet in their hand and remember it. State that since there are two of you, Participant A should pass the selected card to Participant B so that he or she can view it as well. Keep your head turned as they do this. Next have Participant B replace the selected card *face down* on top of the tabled packet and then cut and complete the cut of the tabled packet (all while your head is still turned away). This will secretly place your trim card directly above the selected card.

State that the next issue to deal with is to lose the card in the deck, which card magicians also have secret ways of dealing with. Say that to ensure that there is no way you can manipulate or even see the cards during this process, you will have your participants handle everything while you keep your head turned away. Turn your head away again and instruct Participant A to cut the packet in their hand into two packets and place them apart on the table. You should now have three small packets on the table. Instruct your 2 participants to reassemble the three packets in any order they would like. When this is done, have Participant A follow up by giving the deck a complete cut and then have Participant B do the same. Have them leave the deck *face down* on the table.

When this is done, turn back towards your participants and pick up the deck leaving it *face down* in your left hand. State that, in this condition, they must admit that it should be pretty hard for you to determine what their card is. As you say this, square the deck firmly with your right hand as you gaze at its condition being careful not to look at the face of the deck. What you are really doing is spotting the location of your trim card on the outer corner. You want your trim card to be roughly in the middle of the deck. If it is not, you will need to cut off the appropriate amount of cards to the table and then place the remainder of the packet on top to bring the trim card roughly to the middle. If you do this, you should say that “it doesn’t matter now how many times one cuts the deck – none of us should know exactly where the card is”. As you say this, you will casually cut and complete the cut of the cards on the table.

Once you are sure your trim card is near the middle of the deck, state that another problem can be in the mere cutting of the cards. State that this isn’t quite as good for mixing the

cards as you're sure they would prefer. State that to mitigate this problem, you are suggesting that they now be thoroughly mixed once again. Holding the cards *face down* in your left hand, run your left thumb down the corner edge of the packet until you hit the break caused by the trim card. Split the deck at this point and place the two packets *face down* on the table side by side. The card on top of the packet from the bottom will be the selected card – you need simply look down and read the marking to know what it is.

Remember it.

Immediately begin spinning both packets into a Rosetta shape in order to prepare for another *Rosetta Shuffle*. Turn your head and have them both smush the cards together, mixing them however they see fit. Have the deck squared and left *face down* on the table.

When this is done, turn back, but do not reach for the deck. State that the proceedings thus far have been conducted in the fairest manner possible. Now is a good time to recap the fact that you have not once even glanced at the faces of the cards and that all the proceedings were handled by the participants themselves while your eyes were turned away.

The only thing left to do now is to reveal the card. State, that this, in and of itself, can pose another problem. By simply allowing the magician to pick up the cards and look through the faces, one is inviting the possibility of deception. State that “what you're really getting at here is that all those counter measures could possibly be undermined by simply allowing the magician to handle the cards to find the selection, and that someone with true psychic abilities wouldn't need the cards at all.” Continue by stating that what this really means is that the revealing of the secretly selected card is something that should occur solely between the minds of your participants and yourself. Ask Participant A to think of the

secretly selected card. Then ask Participant B to do the same. Confirm that you have unquestionably read their minds by calling out the name of the card.

## Far Beyond Coincidence

I call this next effect *Far Beyond Coincide* because I almost always use it as a follow up trick for a routine of two other effects, one of which I call *Beyond Coincidence*. There is a little finesse in the sleight of hand used in these effects, but they are all three detailed in the proper sequence in my book *The Shadow Palm Principle*. If you're already well-versed in the *One-Handed Top Palm*, my subtle deviation here should not pose much of a problem.

This is not a coincidence effect at all. It's essentially a transposition effect that requires a marked deck, a surface – and a willing participant, naturally.

As usual, start by having your participant thoroughly shuffle the cards and place the deck *face down* on the table. Next, have them cut the deck in half, and keep whichever half they want for themselves while sliding you the other. It is highly ideal to have your participant seated across the table from you and a little to the right. In any event, your packet should be in front of and to the left of your participant's packet as seen in Fig 15.

Fig 15.



Ask your participant to pick up a card from their stack, keeping it *face down* as they place it in the palm of their hand. Have them call out the number 1 as they do so. You will immediately begin a follow-the-leader process by likewise clearly picking up 1

single card from your stack and placing it *face down* in the palm of your left hand. You will also call out the number 1 as you do so. At no time are either of you to look at the faces of the cards during this process and you should emphasize this point.

Next, have your participant pick up another card and place it *face down* on top of the other and calling out the number 2. You will then do the same, making sure your participant clearly sees that you are exactly mimicking what they are doing, and no extra cards are being dealt. Tell your participant that you will keep doing this process until they feel like stopping. It is a slow and tedious process, and they will likely stop at the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> card. Let's say they call stop when picking up the 6<sup>th</sup> card from their tabled packet and adding it face down to the small packet in their hand. You will do the same as the process dictates, calling out the number 6 and then stop as well.

Next, fairly count the cards in your hands showing that you do in fact hold 6 cards which is the same amount your participant is holding. State that your participant stopped where they desired, leaving a random top card on the each of your still tabled packets. Instruct your participant to secretly glimpse and remember the top card of their still tabled packet,

leaving it where it is – you will do the same. The identity of your card makes no difference and there is no need to remember the card you personally glimpsed at. You should view your card as a means of instructing your participant on what to do. While they are looking at their card, you will have the misdirection you need to execute a *one-handed top palm* of the top card of the small packet in your hand.

**Note:** This is more difficult than it sounds, even if you are well-versed in the *one-handed top palm*. This is because a small packet of 6 cards does not provide enough rigidity for your pinky to create the palming action of the card. What you need is an *assist*. The derivation I offer here to deal with this problem is essentially a left-index finger assist from the bottom. The packet is already in your left hand. When your right hand comes over to execute the *one-handed top palm*, your right pinky will fall into place at the corner to execute the sleight. To facilitate the sleight, you need to align your left index finger perfectly beneath your right pinky finger. Now, applying equal pressure with both your left index finger from the bottom and the pressure of the right pinky finger on top will provide the stability you need to execute the *top palm*.

Once you have the card palmed in your right hand, offer the small stack in your left hand to your participant in exchange for the small packet in their hands. When you receive your participant's packet, bring your hands together smoothly to add your palmed card to the top of their packet as you place it on top of your tabled packet (along with the palmed card on top). Occupy your participant's attention while you do this by instructing them to place your small packet on top of their tabled packet. When this is done, state that all you have

done is replaced 6 cards for 6 other cards on top of each of your tabled packets. In reality you have given your participant only 5 cards because you secretly palmed off your 6<sup>th</sup> card.

State that now all you are going to do is remove the 6 cards from each packet to arrive back at each of your secretly viewed cards in the stacks. Tell your participant to make sure that you are counting fairly. Always start counting with your stack first. Slowly and fairly, pick up the top card from your stack calling out 1 as you place it into your left-hand *face down*. Next, pick up the top card of your participant's stack as you call out 1 again, also placing it *face down* on top in your left-hand. Continue counting in this fashion until you have counted off 6 cards from your stack and 6 cards from your participant's stack. Since you secretly only handed your participant 5 cards, the 6<sup>th</sup> card you take from their stack will actually be their secretly viewed card.

Square up the cards and catch your participant's eyes as you ask them to confirm that all you did was fairly pull off the original 6 cards from each packet that were pulled off earlier. This is when you will again execute the *assisted one-handed top palm* again as you nod your head begging for a confirming response from your participant. With your participant's selected card in right-hand palm position, reach over to your left, dropping the packet on the table. As your hand with the palmed card begins to retreat, it must pass directly over your tabled packet. Do not stop. Instead drop your whole hand on top and slide the entire packet over to the right and directly in front of your participant's packet and squaring it up fairly. This adds suspense by bringing both packets starkly into focus. It is a highly justifiable and non-suspicious way of adding your participant's card to the top of your

packet. It is also at this moment that you will want to read the marking of the top card of your participant's packet.

Recap that all you have done is remove the top 6 cards of the packets to arrive right back at each of your secretly viewed cards. Tell your participant that you will reveal your card first. Call out the name of the card that is on the top of your participant's packet. Have your participant then call out the name of their secretly selected card. Flip over the 2 top cards and reveal that they have magically switched positions.

## Stick and Stones

I wanted to cap this book off with something different – something fun. *Sticks and Stones* is an impromptu billet routine that makes use of the *ABC principle* in magic. What I'm calling the *ABC principle* is an old method in mentalism that involves creating a stack of billets that each have a unique word on the face of it. One word is written on each card or billet that starts with each letter of the alphabet. The cards are then stacked in alphabetical order. If you create the card words yourself, you will be amazed to discover how easy it is to remember each card in order in the stack. It will take perhaps 10 minutes of practice but then you will have a mentalism deck for life.

The card stack must of course be handled with care. They can be fairly cut anywhere but must stay in stack order. All shuffles must be false shuffles. A *Charlier Shuffle* works best with small packets. The card/billets can then be spread *face down* and a participant is



invited to draw a random card from the spread. The cards are cut at the point where the selected card was drawn from, bringing the portion of the deck that was on top of the chosen card to the bottom. All it takes is a quick glance at the bottom card and you will know the next card word in the alphabetical sequence. Your participant's card will either be the previous or next word in your alphabetical sequence – depending on whether you stacked your cards in order from A – Z or Z – A. It's a simple but very deceptive concept.

*Stick and Stones* is an impromptu variety of this effect that I once saw Simon perform on the fly whilst slightly inebriated at *Hollow Note* during a small get-together with a few other Marlowe performers. What he did was take out a small pack of blank billets and asked the performers to each think of some foul-mouth names that you might call someone you don't like – such as A-hole, B-word, D-head or D-bag. He handed out a pen to be passed around one at a time to each member and they openly wrote down their cuss word names on the billets. I didn't catch on until he was over halfway through collecting all the billets, but Simon was secretly stacking the cuss words in alphabetical order as he collected the billets. Each time someone wrote down a word, he would call it out loud for everyone to hear. This was probably to help his memory of the words, but it also provided a hilarious spectacle.

Once all the words were collected, he performed a simple *Charlier* false shuffle and then invited one of the performers to draw out a card and secretly read it. Simon cut the cards and glimpsed the bottom card of the deck. I tried the effect later myself that night and was surprised to see just how easy it is to remember a quickly made stack of 10 or so names. It is the strong nature of the names that gives them weight in your mind.

Now, knowing what card the participant took, Simon would tell them to say out loud “Simon, you F-ing (blank)”. The participant’s job was to then try and mentally transmit the secret (blank) cuss word to Simon. Simon would of course yell out the correct word and everyone would get a huge laugh out of it. This routine is certainly not for all occasions. But in the right setting, its highly entertaining. Hope you have as much fun with it as Simon.