

A Circus of Brass and Bone

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Abra SW



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Chapter 1

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Everyone Dies

On the day the ringmaster died, so did civilization.

Knowing nothing of what was to come, we complained of boredom as the ship steamed from Bombay to Boston. There was little to do except rehearse, drink, and gamble over cards. Everything tasted of salt, and bathing in seawater anointed us all with the perfume of dead fish. A plague of short temper spread through the troupe. I had no friends among them, so I took pleasure at seeing them snarl at each other like fighting dogs.

A three-day bout of seasickness soured the ringmaster's disposition further. Though Mr. Loyale's health seemed to recover, his temper didn't. When Miss Miller declared her intention to begin her dress rehearsal without him, her expression was promising.

Promising that if Mr. Loyale berated her for not waiting, he'd better hope a gelding knife wasn't to hand.

Promising a fine show for us.

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Lacey Miller, the Fabulous Lady Equestrienne Who Defies the Fiery Rings of Death!
On the Ship, Aether's Bounty, the Atlantic Ocean

"If anyone sees Mr. Loyale," Lacey Miller said to the group playing poker by the rail, "please inform him that I'm rehearsing." She walked away, her polished riding boots clicking across the deck.

The ringmaster had said they'd meet at sixth bell. She'd warmed her horses up before she went through the ship asking about the absent ringmaster. She wouldn't let them suffer, waiting with their saddles on, simply because he wasn't going to show.

Mr. Loyale didn't appreciate her skills; it would surprise nobody that he disrespected her by showing up late. Why, when she wished to buy a new pair of matched Arabian yearlings to train, he'd as good as said that her style of equestrian show had lost its novelty and the future of the circus lay elsewhere. A hot ball of anger flared up inside her. A lady never loses her temper, she heard her mother say, in memory. Lacey kept her back straight and her walk smooth. The heavy skirts of her riding habit swirled around her ankles. She raised her chin slightly, balancing the weight of the heavy chignon she'd swept her blonde hair up in. She brushed her fingers across her riding hat, checking that it tipped forward to precisely the right angle and that the hatpin still anchored it securely. Always check your appearance before a show.

Behind her, she heard the flutter of cards being shuffled back into the pack. A low whistle alerted other performers that something was going on. The whistle repeated along the length of the

ship. The monkeys out for their daily promenade chattered excitedly when their handler changed their routine, heading after her. The shuffle of feet on the deck told her that others followed. Let them. She didn't mind an audience, she told herself, though her stomach knotted.

She'd been raised to be a proper lady, but that didn't mean she would back down to a bully.

Lacey climbed down into the hold, where the poor animals huddled in their cages. The monkeys were among the lucky ones: small and nimble enough to be taken out, tame enough to be trusted on deck. And when the aerialists allowed the monkeys to play among their ropes, the creatures made a delightful spectacle.

The lion snarled half-heartedly at Lacey as she passed, more a complaint about his circumstances than anything personal, and then rested his chin back on his paws.

The camels felt well enough to be mean about it, smelly, ill-tempered beasts that they were. One worked his jaw preparatory to spitting; Lacey darted past. By a muffled curse behind her, she guessed the camel had found another target among those who'd followed her down. She smothered a grin.

The new aether-powered elephant they'd acquired in India loomed in the darkness of the hold. Brass capped the ends of the monstrous elephant bones and linked to shining ball-and-socket joints. In place of muscle and tendon, it had rod and piston. Metal pipes drilled into bone and conducted the aether to glass storage tubes. The elephant golem fueled itself. Lacey had to admire the efficiency, though the use of bone aether to golem dead creatures caused her to shudder.

Bad enough that the living might be strapped into golem harnesses and forced to labor with strength granted from the consumption of their vital energies. That even death was no escape ...

Lacey hastened past the elephant golem to her horses, stabled together near the edge of the makeshift ring. She expected the tardy ringmaster to be waiting for her there, but she kept her eyes on her horses, caressing their heads and feeding them a couple of sugar cubes, strengthening herself for what was to come.

She heard discontented whispers from the people who had followed her down into the hold. Time for the show.

Lacey paced forward to the darkened ring. Brass piping connected aether lamps spaced around the perimeter of the ring. Lacey bent and flipped a toggle to release fire aether into the pipe, and then struck a match to light the source lamp. The aether conducted the fire from the source, dividing its heat and lumina among the outer lamps. Around the ring, they flared to pale light.

The ring was empty. The crowd behind Lacey grumbled with dissatisfaction. Maybe they'd also been anticipating Mr. Loyale—expecting him to be waiting to admonish her for being late, when *she'd* been looking for *him*. After a moment of readjusting her expectations, Lacey squared her shoulders and went to the side of the hold. Ropes snaked down from the shadows above and looped around a heavy iron ring that served as an anchor, keeping aerial props and equipment high in the shadows above until needed. Mr. Loyale had booked passage on a steamship with a hold nearly as deep as the circus' main tent was high, to allow for practice inside.

Lacey unwound the jeff to lower the *Fiery Rings of Death!* They wouldn't be fiery until her actual performance. None of them were so foolish as to have uncontained fire in the hold of a ship.

The loop of rope slithered up and snapped taut against its new limit. Behind Lacey, the hoops plummeted down. Somebody screamed. Lacey whirled to look at the group of onlookers. One of the albino twins pressed his hand to his mouth as if to call back the scream, his pink eyes wide. The aerialists tensed, rising to their toes. The Indian *mabout* cast a quick glance around the hold and returned to staring at her—no, past her—along with the rest. The acrobats looked ready to flip backward. The snake charmer stood statue-still, the only motion the slow movement of Samson, the baby boa draped across her shoulders.

The fortune teller slowly raised one ring-heavy finger to point at the hoops. A prickling

sensation ran along Lacey's spine, and she pivoted to look.

A dark figure swayed between the shining hoops. Their ropes crisscrossed around his neck, suspending Mr. Loyale above the rink he'd ruled in life. A macabre boutonniere of blood flowered from his chest, and liquid of uncertain provenance oozed drop by drop from the tips of his boots.

"I suppose Mr. Loyale will not be joining me for my rehearsal after all," Lacey said faintly, stunned by the gruesome puppet dangling above the ring.

A scuffling noise came from the crowd as a short man of middling years with a plain face and a calm demeanor pushed through to the front. "The ringmaster said he wanted to discuss my act. He wanted to meet at the fourth bell." He hesitated. "It seemed urgent, but he never showed."

"Thank you, Ginger," Lacey told the man, whose nickname came not from his current unremarkable coif, but from the fiery orange wig he wore while clowning. Ginger nodded and faded back into the crowd. He seemed to only come alive in the ring, as if he folded up his personality and tucked it away along with the wig and face paint.

Lacey looked at the other performers. They stared back.

"We'll get Doc," a voice piped up from the back of the crowd.

Lacey squinted into the shadows. One of the conjoined sisters had spoken. She wasn't sure which one. The sisters seemed to be waiting for something. Lacey jerked her head in an awkward nod. The sisters left, running in lockstep, their arms wrapped around each other's waists.

A midget stepped forward and crossed his arms over his chest. "It ain't right to just leave him there." He frowned up at Lacey as if he expected *her* to do something about it.

"That's so," his wife said, a matching scowl on her small face.

Goaded, Lacey said, "He's hanging about a foot too high for me to untangle him!" She scanned the crowd. "Bradley, can you get him down?"

The enormous black strongman stepped into the ring and cocked his head. "Yes. Push up on his legs. Too much weight on the ropes."

Bradley Roberts' massive frame dwarfed Lacey when he stood beside her. She wrapped her arms around the corpse's knees and lifted. Foul liquid oozed over her arms. She breathed through her mouth to avoid the smells of death. It was no worse than mucking out stalls, she told herself. No worse, and just as necessary.

Bradley unwound the ropes from around Mr. Loyale's puffed-up neck. He caught the weight of the body as it fell. When he flexed his muscles, the black tattoos covering his skin writhed. Lacey released her hold and staggered backwards. Cradling the corpse as gently as if it were his own baby, Bradley stood.

The conjoined sisters trotted back into the hold, pulling Doc behind them. He took one look and shook his head. "Too dark. Bring him up."

Above decks, the blood seeping through Mr. Loyale's shirt showed clearly in the afternoon sunlight. Doc bent over the body. What began as a quick exam slowed once he'd removed the shirt and bared the corpse's torso to the light. He inspected Mr. Loyale's mouth, surveyed his arms, ankles, and calves, felt under his chin, and pressed his fingers into Mr. Loyale's armpits.

As word spread through the ship, it drew others to the little tableau. The ring of watchers grew two, three, four deep, and kept growing until all the members of the circus crowded onto the deck: freaks and geeks, aerialists and clowns, canvassmen and hostlers, blacksmiths and carpenters, costumers and cooks, musicians and games riggers, contortionists and fortune tellers, tumblers and gymnasts, museum keepers and ticket takers, food butchers and roustabouts.

"Did anyone see him recently?" Doc asked.

"He stopped by the card game and watched for a bit," a candy butcher said.

"When was that?"

"When I had a full house, aces high, and the damn albino beat me with four of a kind—twos!"

Who holds onto twos!?”

Lacey narrowed her eyes, giving him her best “boss stallion” look.

“I don’t know when! All the damn days are the same at sea!” He squinted. “It was a couple of hands before the elephant keeper came up from the engine room. That hand I won with two pair.”

The Indian *mabout* said, speaking carefully in his heavily accented English, “I am coming up after I hear the fourth bell.”

“Probably you saw Mr. Loyale right before he died,” Doc told the candy seller. “How did he look?”

“Kinda sleepy looking, I guess. Pale. Tired. I figured he was still recovering from the seasickness. He seemed in good enough spirits. Winked at me to wish me luck before he left.”

“Hmph,” Doc muttered. “Well, what killed him was being stabbed.” He spread his fingers over the wound on the corpse’s chest. “I’d have to cut him open to see what kind of knife did it. Since I don’t want to get arrested—” a wry smile twisted up the edges of his lips, “—again, it’ll have to wait for the coroner.”

“Who would do that?” said Bradley, the strongman. “He helped many of us when we needed it most.”

Nobody else spoke up to defend the dead man. They shuffled back a bit, looking at their neighbors to see what they’d say—and then, really *looking* at their neighbors as it sank in that the murderer was one of their own.

Doc looked up at Bradley. “He helped some of us, yes. And he fought with us, and tampered with our acts, and pushed us to do things we would rather not, and generally made himself unpleasant. He was, in short, the ringmaster. I don’t know what we’ll do without him. Or without the circus.”

Most circusfolk couldn’t make it as townies. A freak worth paying to see in a sideshow would fare poorly without the protective air of the exotic granted by the circus. A performer who’d trained for years to master his art would wither if forced to unskilled labor. Others had their own reasons to keep moving.

Lacey saw the moment the fear took them, as she would see a skittish horse tense before bolting. Instinctively she moved to intervene.

“Everyone dies sometime,” she said, “but it doesn’t mean the end!” She cast about. “The backers! We’ll telegraph them once we reach Boston. Surely they won’t want to waste their investment. They’ll hire another ringmaster, and the circus will go on!”

The crowd paused, still prepared to bolt but willing to listen.

“What about the coppers?” the skeleton man called, looking ready to fade back behind the chimney stack he leaned against.

“That must depend on what the investors demand,” she temporized.

Doubt lingered on a few faces, but they drifted apart instead of bolting.

“What will you do with Mister—with the body?” Lacey asked Doc, once the crowd dispersed. She felt an odd reluctance to leave him alone with the corpse—or, perhaps, to leave the corpse alone with him.

“We’re docking at Boston sometime tonight?”

She nodded.

“I’ll take him down to the engine room, then, and put him in the aether containment chamber. The influence of the flux bottle will stir his bone aether to greater vitality. It will keep his flesh from degrading, at least until we dock.”

“Is that safe?” she asked, astonished.

He smiled a crooked smile. “For a living man, certainly not. After a factory explosion, I once—. Ah, but that tale isn’t fit for ladylike ears. Suffice it to say that for a dead man, secondhand exposure

for a few hours should cause no troubles.”

“Once we arrive in Boston, we can telegraph the investors. They will know what we ought to do,” Lacey said. It was almost a prayer.

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The Mountains of East Tennessee

It began with an imperfection in a handblown glass tube. The join of the stopcock made the small air bubble nigh-invisible. The new assistant assigned to maintain the lab didn't notice a thing. Likely, he was regretting having agreed to take a position in the remote mountains of East Tennessee. The town nearby wasn't what anyone would call lively. Most of the young girls had moved to the cities for paying jobs in factories. The ones who remained weren't the brightest or the most beautiful, and they all had relatives with shotguns.

The imperfection hardly mattered, but it had gone unnoticed for a month, allowing the slow leak of fire aether to form an invisible bubble that floated and danced in the assistant's wake, now behind him, now ahead.

The assistant opened the exterior door to the aether enrichment chamber, and then hesitated. Beyond the interior door, the enriched aether was stored. He could not resist the urge to peek.

And even that would not have caused serious harm, except to any potential progeny of the assistant, if he had not squinted at the interior, decided it needed a closer look, and struck a match to light his lamp—too close to the invisible bubble of fire aether.

END OF EXCERPT