

THE SPECTACULARS

The Wild Song Contest



JODIE GARNISH

Harper can't wait for her second year of Spectacular training, where a song can send you on a rollercoaster, a dance can lift you into the air, and you can send notes to your friends via a mechanical dragon.

This year, her school at the Wondria is hosting the Spectacular Song Contest, where theatres from across the Hidden Peaks will compete to win the Wild Song, a powerful piece of music that can cause chaos.

When the Song Contest is sabotaged, it's down to Harper and her friends to find the culprit and make sure the show can go on, before the wild magic destroys everything...

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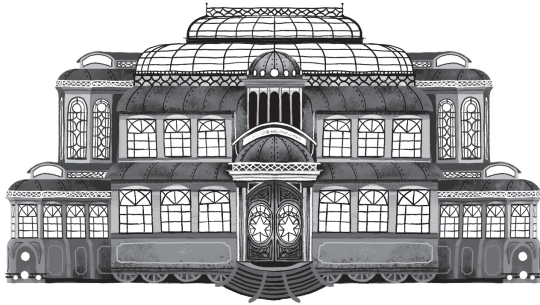
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CHAPTER ONE

Airborne

Harper Woolfe looked down at the object in her hand and sighed.

“This isn’t how hats work.”

Her best friend, Trick, rolled his eyes in a way that very clearly said he had no concern at all for how things were *supposed* to work.

“Your point being...?”

“Hats”, Harper pressed, “are for keeping your head warm. Or shielding you from the sun. Or for old ladies trying to outdo each other at weddings.”

“And yet,” Trick retorted, “here we are.”

Here was outside the Wondria – the enormous travelling-theatre-slash-school where they lived, which was currently perched somewhat precariously on the edge of a rocky ledge.

During the warmer months, the theatre (which converted into a tram at night to travel) had gradually climbed higher into the mountains, visiting small towns and villages that were cut off by the snow in winter. The late summer sun pierced through the clouds, glinting off the grand golden doors and domed roof. This afternoon, a crowd of Spectaculars – the magical performers who dazzled audiences every night at the Wondria – and Spectacular apprentices were gathered in a crowd, murmuring excitedly, all of them clutching on to hats of various shapes and sizes.

“Does everyone have a hat? Get your hats here! One per person!”

Fletcher’s voice carried across the clearing. Fletcher was Trick’s uncle and the Showrunner of the Wondria, and he had clearly raided the Costume Department. He was walking around like a bizarre sort of salesman: armfuls of hats – bonnets, bowlers, shiny black top hats and giant, floppy sunhats – swinging off his wrists and elbows. Spectaculars who were still empty-handed flocked to him, grabbing at the selection. Fletcher himself was sporting a deep purple trilby, decorated with several large cabbages and what *might* have been a live mouse.

It was the very last week of the long summer holidays. In the absence of daily training, the apprentices had been assigned various jobs to do around the Wondria: helping to mend broken props, polishing spotlights, running errands for the performers during the shows. Harper had spent a solid

week as personal assistant to Lady Roberta Helix – the Wondria’s illustrious prima donna – and her reflection, whom she duetted with onstage. Harper fetched drinks for both Lady Roberta and her reflection, and sorted through the ridiculous mounds of fan mail and gifts she received after each show. (This occasionally had its perks: if Lady Roberta felt like her dressing room was getting “a bit busy”, she’d let Harper take some things home with her, meaning that Harper often returned to the apprentice quarters bearing elaborate flower displays, fruit baskets and, once, a highly realistic bust of Lady Roberta’s head made out of red velvet cake.)

The apprentices had also enjoyed chaperoned trips into the towns and cities they’d passed through: they’d attended a fashion show in the baroque city of Perssion, heard a lecture on Witch history in the floating assembly hall of the River Colossus, and had their auras read by a Fae-woman who’d set up a tent outside Brightwood University. This last trip had been highly amusing: the Fae-woman had informed Harper that she had a bright future ahead of her, before turning to Trick and informing him in a very serious voice that his aura was deathly allergic to sugar, and he needed to stop eating it at once. Harper had almost cracked a rib laughing at his face, and Trick had fumed all the way home.

“Right then – gather round, everyone!”

Apparently satisfied that all those gathered had received a suitable hat, Fletcher strode to a point in the centre of the rocky clearing where a giant red X had been somewhat

ostentatiously painted on the ground.

“Welcome to the Muse of Air Ceremony!” Fletcher announced to a round of applause and cheering. Harper clapped along, feeling both excited and nervous about what was to come. She’d attended a handful of Muse Ceremonies by this point, and they all seemed to be a mixture of enchanting and downright hideous. She hadn’t forgotten the Muse of Stars Ceremony last year, when they’d set a stream of beautiful glowing lights bobbing across a lake, then been unceremoniously dumped in the freezing water.

Muses were like Spectacular patron saints: they were Spectaculars who’d earned great power, a power that had originated with the first Muses and then been passed down for generations, which they used to keep the world in balance. Harper had sort of met the Muse of Stars at the end of her first year at the Wondria, when he’d helped them defeat the evil composer, Tornio Nocturne. She’d only been able to make out a vague human-ish form in the midst of the swirling blue-and-black whirlwind that had appeared above the theatre, but she knew that it had been the Muse.

“The Muse of Air is an old family friend...” A voice drifted towards Harper, and she turned to see Lady Roberta Helix whispering with her group of adoring friends. “He often comes round for summer barbecues. Very fond of shrimp, as I recollect.”

Harper snorted. She remembered Lady Roberta making an equally outlandish claim about having once been on a date

with the Muse of Stars.

“I thought they didn’t dare venture down to Earth much any more?” one of her friends asked tentatively. “Ever since we crossed into the Hidden Peaks, I thought they started spending most of their time in Paradigm.”

Harper considered this. Paradigm was the name of the hidden city where the Muses resided, away from the rest of the world. Trick had said that they spent a lot of their time there, but she hadn’t known that things had been different before the crossing.

“Well, of course we don’t see him quite as much now,” Lady Roberta quickly backtracked. “Honestly, all this hiding-away-in-Paradigm nonsense... It’s terribly rude of them.”

As Lady Roberta and her friends peeled away, Harper turned to Trick.

“So, did people use to see the Muses more before you crossed into the Hidden Peaks? Like – just wandering around the Earth, performing magic, or... I dunno, buying milk?”

“I don’t think they were ever caught buying milk,” Trick said with a snort. “Fletcher says that apparently, when he was young, they used to throw a week-long carnival in Paradigm, which everyone was invited to. But after the crossing they closed the city to outsiders, and the Muses stopped coming down to Earth as much.”

“Now, I know this ceremony is something of a favourite amongst you all.” Fletcher’s voice brought Harper’s attention back to where he stood on that curious red X. “But please

queue in an orderly fashion and wait your turn. Anyone seen using excessive force of elbows, knees or other pointed objects to try to skip the line will receive a stern frown and have fifteen minutes deducted from their hat time.”

“That means you, McCubbins!” someone in the crowd yelled.

Satisfied that his warning had been taken seriously, Fletcher stepped forwards and positioned himself on the X. He lifted his hat and held it in one hand just above his head. For a moment, he simply stood, frozen like one of the living statues they sometimes saw in the bigger cities. Then Harper’s mouth dropped open in astonishment as Fletcher’s feet slowly began to rise off the ground.

“No way!” Harper breathed.

Fletcher continued to rise steadily into the air like a hot-air balloon, still clutching on to the rim of his trilby hat (the mouse peered over the side, squeaked in fright and promptly dived behind one of the cabbages). Once he was about twenty feet into the air, he waved merrily down to them all before turning a neat loop-the-loop.

“Are you *joking*?” Harper looked at Trick. “What – how?”

“A gift from the Muse of Air.” Trick grinned. “Once a year only! Come on, let’s get in the queue.”

They joined the jostling line, and Harper watched in increasing excitement as each Spectacular and apprentice before them stepped onto the cross on the ground, tilted their hat to the wind, and was lifted up in a *whoosh* of air. Soon the

sky was filled with figures, spinning and whirling and high-fiving each other as they bobbed about like boats on the sea.

When Harper's turn came, she all but ran to the X. She looked nervously down at the hat in her hand. She'd selected a floppy crimson affair, trimmed with a silver ribbon. It was jaunty, but it hardly seemed sturdy enough to get her off the ground.

"Just lift it straight up!" Trick called encouragingly.

Harper took a breath, then raised the red hat above her head. For a split second she felt a bit silly, but then she felt a gust of wind billow into her hat and fill it like a helium balloon. The hat tugged upwards, and Harper only just managed to cling on to it as the ground fell away from her feet.

Harper gulped as she looked down, the figures below her seeming to get very small, very quickly. She gave an experimental kick of her legs, an astonished laugh bubbling up inside her as they swung through the air. She let out a whoop, her hat lifting her higher, joining the other Spectaculars in the air. *I'm flying*, she thought, slightly hysterically. *I'm actually flying!*

"Good form, Miss Woolfe!" Fletcher nodded to her as he sailed past. He stayed perfectly upright as he bobbed through the air. It looked like he was paddleboarding on a placid lake, Harper thought. She tried to balance herself in a similar way, but it was hard with absolutely nothing to balance *against*.

"Keep your knees straight!" Trick called, floating up beside her. He was grinning manically, clutching on to a

woolly hat with an absurdly large bobble on the top.

Harper tried this method and was relieved to find that it did indeed work. Now that she was upright, she managed to observe the scene around her. She saw her Theatrics tutor, Chancellor Lahiri, soaring elegantly as she held on to the ribbons of a laced-edged bonnet. On the other end of the elegance spectrum was her friend Anvi Patel, who had not one, but *four* hats grasped in her hands, and was zooming about haphazardly, shrieking with delight.

“Fancy a game of air dodgems?” Trick called, suddenly diving towards her and knocking into her hat with his ridiculous bobble.

“Don’t you dare!” Harper just managed to swerve out of the way. “I know where your sweets stash is, and I’m not afraid to sabotage it.”

As it turned out, there were plenty of other games to play in the sky. Fletcher led an airborne conga around the highest dome of the Wondria, while several apprentices began a game of chicken, zooming at each other from opposite ends of the clearing and seeing who would yank their hat to the side at the last minute. (This game was brought to a swift end after Trick and their other good friend, Rosie Wrenright, both too stubborn to change course, conked heads with an impressive *thunk*.)

“Yeah! Go on, Harper!” a voice called up from the ground, making Harper grin. She banked to one side, turning around in mid-air to look down to where her mother stood, beaming

proudly.

Having her mum here for the last couple of weeks was definitely one of the best things that had happened to Harper this summer. After leaving her mother behind in the Smoke, the smog-infused city that she'd been born in (and that the Spectaculars had fled six years earlier), Harper hadn't seen her mum for almost an entire year – minus a brief conversation in a dream. However, after a lot of negotiation, persistent wheedling from Harper and a personalized letter from Fletcher, Flora had agreed to shut the shop for a couple of weeks and come to the Hidden Peaks for a visit. They'd arranged a pick-up point in a discreet location just outside of the Smoke, and Harper and Fletcher had flown to meet her in a canoe. She'd understandably been wary of the gateway where the accident had happened that had killed Harper's dad, but Harper had held her hand tightly all the way through – and seeing her mother's face when she saw the wide-open skies, the peaks of the mountains and the dancing, coloured lights in the sky, Harper knew it had been worth it for her.

Flora had arrived just in time for Harper's twelfth birthday, which had been the best that Harper could remember. There were presents from all her friends, a giant cake baked by Helja, and a special birthday song played by Yosef and the Bedazzling Blues Brothers, which had a verse for every year of Harper's life. (They'd clearly heard some stories from her mum, and Harper sort of wished that the one about how she'd once thrown up on a clown during an All

Spooks' Eve party hadn't made it in, but it was still a nice gesture.) She'd spent the day with friends and gone to sleep with a huge smile on her face, a giant badge with 12 painted on it still pinned to her chest.

Over the two weeks since, Harper had given her mum several detailed tours of the Wondria, from the heated pools in the basement level where they warmed up for their lessons, to the grand Music Parlour where all the musical instruments were kept, to the apprentice quarters where Harper and her friends lived. They had long catch-ups over hot chocolate and late-night stargazing sessions, with Harper pointing out which constellations housed the bear-stars, the tiger-stars and the wolf-stars.

It was Harper herself who had revealed to the world that the stars were animals: not out of a desire for fame or notoriety, but to dispel the awful rumours of the Four Curses – four terrifying creatures from an old rhyme – that had almost led to the closure of the Wondria just a few months before. As people had accepted the truth, the mass hysteria had calmed, and people had begun to see things in a new light. It was a great relief to Harper – marred only by the fact that Tornio Nocturne, the famous and beloved composer responsible for pulling the stars from the sky in the first place, was potentially still at large.

As the afternoon drew on, many Spectaculars gently steered their hats towards the ground and streamed back into the Wondria to get ready for the evening's performance.

Harper and Trick stayed in the air until Fletcher appeared below them, waving a pair of starlight lanterns to indicate that they should come down. They landed on the ground just as the first few audience members began to appear. Harper ran over to her mum, who was now sitting with Yosef and Roper, sharing a pitcher of pink lemonade.

“Did you see me do that triple spin in the air?” Harper asked breathlessly.

“I did!” Flora sounded impressed. “You’re a natural, clearly. Perhaps we should look into getting you a pair of wings.”

“You were wonderful,” Yosef agreed. “Your dad would have been proud. I shall compose a ballad in honour of your skills: ‘The Amazing Adventures of the Flying Woolfe’.”

“You might well be too busy this year,” Roper said meaningfully to her fiancé, and they grinned at each other.

“Why might you be busy?” Harper asked. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly tell you,” Yosef said. “Top secret. If I told you, I’m afraid I’d have to immediately impale myself upon the nearest sword.”

“Oh, come on...” Harper coaxed. Yosef made a zipping motion across his lips, before proceeding to mime locking a padlock at his mouth, stamping on the key, then gathering up the pieces and burying them in a hole in the ground.

“Fine,” Harper sighed.

“Are you going to see the show tonight?” Flora asked

Harper. "It's the last performance of *Death Comes to Paradise Island*."

"Trick definitely wants to watch it again." Harper nodded. "We'll be there!"

Many of the acts at the Wondria had adapted their performances for the summer season. Plays set aboard cruise ships and on tropical islands had become popular, and entire symphonies were composed to the first bite of fish and chips on a summer's evening. The Utterly Un-Royal Theatre Troupe, who Fletcher had booked for the summer season, were currently presenting a dramatic musical about a summer holiday gone wrong, which ended with two rival jet-skiers engaging in a deadly duel before realizing that *they'd been brothers all along*. Harper had rolled her eyes at this point, but Trick had absolutely eaten it up.

Harper gave her mum a quick hug before running to catch up with Trick.

"Are you sure you want to go to the show tonight?" Harper asked. "You know we have homework due for when we're back in training next week?"

Trick's hand flew to his heart. "I am *appalled*. Are you seriously suggesting that I, Trick Torres, treat my Spectacular education with anything less than one hundred and ten per cent commitment and graft?"

"Right," Harper snorted. "Which means that you've done..."

"...absolutely none of it, yeah." Trick grinned easily and yawned.

They made it back to the apprentice quarters in time for a quick dinner. Anvi sprayed them all with potato salad while extolling the excitement of the afternoon, and Rosie glared at Trick, nursing an impressive bruise on her forehead. Feeling worn out from the afternoon's antics, they decided to skip the first act of the show, making their lazy way up to the Auditorium once the interval had been called.

"We don't have to watch the *whole* of the second act," Trick said as they crossed the lobby. "Just the death scene. They managed to stretch it out to six and a half minutes last night. I want to see if they can get it even longer."

They filched some bags of popcorn from the Gilded Bar, then made their way backstage and climbed to their normal place next to the spotlights. A pair of Lumineers were busying themselves around the lights, adjusting positions and tweaking brightness levels. Harper peered down at the audience, observing the increasingly ridiculous methods they were using to stay cool during the show. One couple had brought an inflatable paddling pool and positioned it underneath their chairs, dangling their bare feet in the cold water, whilst an older gentleman was sporting a waistcoat made entirely out of ice packs.

"...Is Fletcher going to announce it tonight?"

"Muses knows. Surely he's got to do it sooner rather than later..."

A pair of hushed voices floated up from just behind them. Harper glanced around at her friends, and all four of them

leaned back slightly. The two Lumineers, now propped up against the spotlights, had begun chatting softly.

“It’ll change the course of the whole year!”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Rosie nudged Trick. “What are they talking about?” she whispered.

Trick shrugged. “I dunno. Fletcher hasn’t mentioned anything to me.”

Harper glanced back to the Lumineers, but they were taking their positions again, clearly getting ready for the start of the second act. Harper barely noticed as the house lights went down, and the chatter of the Auditorium descended into an excited hush. What had the Lumineers been talking about? What announcement was Fletcher going to make?

They watched the second act of *Death Comes to Paradise Island*, which involved a lot of pontificating, plenty of men in silly trousers and approximately a gallon of fake blood. Once the final death had occurred and the actors playing the two rival-jet-skiers-turned-brothers had taken their bows, Harper nudged Trick and they slipped down the stairs and out into the lobby.

“It’s ridiculous,” Harper ranted as they walked. “They looked identical! They should have realized they were brothers as soon as they set eyes on each other.”

“They were not identical,” Trick argued. “One of them had a moustache.”

“And?”

“And the other one *did not have a moustache.*”

“I think you’re seriously overestimating the effect a moustache can have on a face,” Rosie said.

“Yeah,” Harper snorted as they reached the apprentice quarters. “If you grew a moustache tomorrow, I *think* I’d still be able to tell it was you.”

“Depends on how much of my face it covered,” Trick pointed out. “And when it comes to moustaches, I say go big or go home.”

“They were very good actors, though, weren’t they?” Anvi said brightly. “It was impressive how they managed to keep it together when that man’s blood bag exploded too early, and he started dripping blood into his shoes during a love duet.”

The apprentice quarters were abuzz with activity when they stepped inside. They made their way to a pile of beanbags and revisited the subject of the Lumineers’ mysterious conversation.

“Are you sure Fletcher hasn’t mentioned anything?” Anvi asked Trick.

“Why does everyone assume Fletcher tells me everything?” Trick complained. “He once bought a tin of McGregory’s biscuits and ate *all* of the mint creams before he told me he had them.”

They talked about what the announcement could be until their heads were stuffed with possibilities. When Anvi suggested, somewhat hysterically, that perhaps they were planning on launching the entire Wondria into space, they

decided it was probably time for bed.

Harper climbed up to her room and scrambled under the covers, grateful to note that Helja must have strung up a line of self-flapping paper fans in order to generate a cool breeze around the room. Harper's mechanical dragon, who she'd named Stan, sat on her bedside table, and she gave him a quick pat before lying down. She stared at the ceiling for a good while, wondering what on Earth Fletcher's mysterious announcement could be, before tiredness finally overtook her and she dropped off to sleep.