

# BARBOUR

## Circus

*Written by Fiona Katherine Barbour*

The hay was wet. The smell surrounded the small group of performers like a mist encasing a clutter of cold statues. Somewhere, someone played a hollow and distant piano.

“You know the rules,” the Ringmaster spoke softly, “we put it to a vote.”

The Tamer, her hair just as wild and beautiful as the creatures she cracked beneath her whip, placed a worried hand to her mouth. “He has no one to go to if we vote him out.”

“None of us have anyone to go to,” the Contortionist growled, flexing his long unnatural digits. His knuckles cracked as he did so, somehow adding to the sad melody that wafted through the air.

“Plus,” added the Clown, exchanging looks with the Ringmaster, “he will not be *let out*. Isaac killed someone. His punishment, by the old laws, is death.” His once-humorous makeup was caked and caused rough shadows to be thrown across his face.

“Stoned, to be precise,” the Magician stated flatly. He was settled upon a brightly painted stool, one long graceful leg flung over the other, his fingertips steeped. His eyes were downcast.

The Lux Lucis, the traveling Circus of Lights, had been traveling for an uncountable number of years. Its family – its core – were the men and women who worked day in and day out, bleeding and laughing and performing, beneath the candy-colored tents. The Lucis was its own ecosystem, a miniature world unto itself. A world of ex-cons, runaways, beauties, the wise and reckless alike. People without faith or futures from all corners of the land. There was something miserably beautiful about watching those who were hopeless bind together, like tying a knot with muddy string. It created a bond that could not break easily.

The feathers, glitter and gauze, the velvet red of the Ringmaster’s tailcoat and the rhinestones that glittered across the trapeze artists’ costumes, like iridescent freckles, hid horrible pasts and broken hearts but when beneath the lights and under the crushing gaze of three hundred people they were perfect, whole and untainted by life. To uphold some semblance of civilized life most traveling circuses did not abide by the laws of the land; they made their own. This code had been passed through generations of performers, owners and workers and was fairly well known throughout the performing world. Respect and honor were considered vital – woe to he who broke these honored laws because the consequences normally much outweighed the rule itself.

Murder, as one could imagine, was unacceptable.

# BARBOUR

The Trapeze Girl coughed out a sob, turning to bury her head into the Contortionist's shoulder. She, of all people, was the one who had to bear witness, first hand, to Victoria's cruel murder. She could remember the face of her fellow gymnast as her swing snapped, her body tumbling to earth. And the heart-wrenching *crack* of her neck that following. Victoria Nysic, one of the most gifted trapeze girls, had fallen to her death, landing in a twisted heap of bones. All had seen. The packed audience had remained still and quiet until a wail had emitted from the second gymnast's mouth, her frame still hung high above the spectators. Only then did the audience break into screams and running bodies, hurrying from the tent and shielding their children from the horror of the poor girl still lying on the tent floor twitching. The now-head Trapeze Girl rubbed her face into the cool skin of the Contortionist's neck, wishing the images and memory away.

"It is true," the Ringmaster said to the quietly crying tumbler, a hand alighting upon her shoulder, "that Isaac hung the swings that night for the performance?"

She nodded her head miserably.

A draft came through, whipping the flags of the tent's opening. It rustled the hay and sent a shiver through everyone's spine. The distant piano paused momentarily.

"You saw the swing ropes," murmured the Clown, "they were partly severed. The cut was clean. It was made by a knife."

"I am aware of this," the Ringmaster instantly replied. There was a coldness in the voice that silenced everyone, even their thoughts. "There aren't any witnesses, spectators or performance who could confidently say Isaac had tampered with the swings. If I am to send a man to his death than at least let me be one hundred percent sure he deserves it."

He couldn't of. He's the kindest man I know! The kindest man traveling with the Lucis!" the Tamer spat forcefully, her own eyes misting with emotion, "he feeds the cats with me every morning and not once has he struck my babies in anger or frustration, even in self-defense! There isn't a mean streak in him. He could barely strike a fly let alone kill a woman."

The Ringmaster nodded in response to the Tamer, agreeing, "He was helpful, unquestioning and kind. Quiet, yes but...he worked harder than most of the men."

"His passion for Victoria was unrequited," the Magician added, playing Devil's Advocate, "I've never seen a man love a woman as deeply as he did."

The silence that followed was the group's unanimous agreement with the Magician's statement. Isaac had loved Victoria since the day he joined their traveling family. Victoria, a talented albeit overly confident young woman, had rebuffed Isaac and his advances multiple times, each refusal nastier than the last. At breakfast, as the entire circus ate, she would humiliate him, throwing insults across the lines of rickety old tables. She would laugh as he hoisted new tents, making him stiffen and sometimes fumble with the great wooden pillars he held. Subsequently his falling would make her laugh harder. She was as malicious as she was beautiful.

"It's not like he didn't have motive," the Contortionist said darkly, a hand absently wrapped around the Trapeze Girl who still shivered with sadness and shock. "She was a horrid bitch."

"Have respect for the dead," the Ringmaster snapped, despite internally agreeing with the statement.

# BARBOUR

“Do we know anything about Isaac’s past? *We’ve* never seen him snap. He could have a hidden history of violence.” The Clown picked his head, crossing his arms as he relaxed back against the hay bale. It was the dead of night and the crickets were composing a symphony of darkness, their lonesome tunes whistling throughout the encampment of tents, carriages and train cars.

“I could say the same about you,” the Ringmaster echoed, eyes narrowing slightly. “We all have pasts. What we know is the life Isaac spent with us. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Then he is innocent.”

The Ringmaster glanced at the Magician, who had uttered the statement.

The Magician displayed his hands, palms up. “If we make the decision based upon his time with the Lucis then he is innocent.”

“But the evidence – “ the Contortionist started to speak.

“The *evidence*, my dear man, is merely hearsay and gossip. Victoria may have treated him with disrespect but we haven’t the slightest shred of factual evidence that indicates Isaac as *violent*.” The Magician cocked one dark eyebrow. The Contortionist stewed silently, glaring.

The Ringmaster heaved a weary sigh. There were bags beneath the master’s jewel-toned eyes. The great top hat was dragged from the dark head and clutched between worn hands. “I agree with you, old friend. But it is still up to the vote. We, as the elected leaders of the Lux Lucis, must vote.”

“Let the man speak for himself at least,” whispered the Tamer, “let him appeal to you, Ringmaster.” The Trapeze girl nodded her agreement.

“He will have his chance. But we must vote now. We pack up tomorrow and I need all of you present and fit.”

The congregation huddled even closer together. As in the ancient days, colored stones were used to determine the fate of Isaac’s life. The small jumbled group cast their votes; a white stone meant Isaac was innocent, red meant he deserved to die. The stones were tossed into the Ringmaster’s top hat. The air became even more turbulent with wind and sound, as if imitating the troubled nature of the event that was taking place. Once all had voted the Ringmaster gestured for the Magician to follow, giving a simple, determining nod to the rest of the group. They all dissipated, walking back to their respective tents and carriages. Silence once again enveloped the small settlement.

“Shall he live or die?” asked the Magician in a sing-song whisper, his accent heavily lacing the softly spoken words. The various charms and earrings that hung from his earlobes tinkled as he did so.

The Ringmaster glanced at the rocks assorted in the top hat and cracked a weak, weak smile. “He shall live.”

“As I suspected.”

“You gave quite the fright, old friend.”

The Magician waved a hand dismissively. “*Fight* is not the correct word. *Stance* maybe?” The Magician returned the smile. “He is waiting for the results. Perhaps you should go tell poor Isaac that he has another year with the Lucis.”

“I shall.” The Ringmaster squeezed the Magician’s shoulder amicably. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

The Magician gave a low and gracious bow, “*Madame*.” In a flurry of his great cloak he was gone.

# BARBOUR

The Ringmaster dumped the stones and replaced the top hat on her head. Her dark curls spilled over her shoulders, her green eyes suddenly alive, *mirthful* even. She picked her way through the hay and amongst the terrain, towards a small, private tent. Isaac was alone, seated on a stool that was much too small for his massive frame. He didn't seem frightened or on-edge. Quite to the contrary: his face was a mask of neutrality. His broad, muscled shoulders were relaxed and his calloused hands rested in his lap. His black eyes watched the Ringmaster enter. She knelt before him, down on one knee.

Silence passed between them.

Isaac was the first to speak. When he did it was quiet and tender. "You did not have to kill her."

A hurt expression passed over the Ringmaster's angular features. "She hurt you," she replied, almost whimpering. She outstretched her hand and touched Isaac's. His enormous palm encased her small fingers.

"Yes but you did not have to kill her."

The Ringmaster look devastated. Quite the opposite of what the Lux Lucis normally saw in their tail-coated leader. "I couldn't stand the way she treated you. She had to go. Don't you see how much I love you? *No one* treats you like that. Not while I'm in charge." Her hand moved from his to cup his cheek. She inched forward, desperate for his approval.

"You are not God," was Isaac's sad reply.

"Nor are you," the Ringmaster instantly snapped back, standing. "So how *dare* you judge me. What I did was for *love*. Does that not count for *anything*?" Her voice had risen several octaves, her eyes wild.

Isaac had tensed, his muscles rippling with the effort not to stand and leave. His kind face had become stoic. "This is not love."

"But don't you see?" the Ringmaster fell to her knees again, her hands grasping his, "*don't you see?* She's gone. She'll never hurt you again. We can be together in peace."

"You are mistaken. You've fought for a lost cause." Isaac gently moved her hands from his and stood slowly. As he walked toward the exit he spoke over his shoulder, "I resign from Lux Lucis. May God have mercy on you."

The Ringmaster's wails were all Isaac heard as he exited the tent, her screams and protests fading into the distant, hollow piano.