

Eleanor Mae

Ringmaster

The clown stood on the patch of earth between our shack and the land beyond it. He wore a garish costume of white and scarlet silk, turning sodden in the drizzle, and shoes of a ludicrous size already stained with mud. His makeup was thick, garish—egg-yolk splotches over the eyes, a wide red slash for a mouth. I couldn't take my eyes off his hair, an implausible candy-floss cloud.

“Iskrey?” He mispronounced my name with total confidence. “Iskrey, right? That's got to be you. They said you were the prettiest one.” He moved toward me, sticking out a dainty, white-gloved hand. “Call me Ivan.”

His eyes were very dark amid all that greasepaint. I smiled politely. “Hello, Ivan.”

He didn't let go of my palm. His gloved thumb flickered over the top of my wrist—fast, compulsive. When he finally spoke again, I jumped.

“I'm with Liala. The circus, you know? He said it as if I wouldn't have noticed the collection of tents on the horizon. “We pitched up a few days ago, and I'm so *bored*.”

“This place is the worst, Iskrey. I hate to tell you, but it's the worst place I've ever seen.” His thumb still stroked my wrist, insistent. “A real dump.”

How did he want me to respond? In the end, I nodded, but he was already talking again.

“Such a dump. So I'll tell you what I did, Iskrey. I went to that little place that sells the potato cakes, the one by the church, and I asked for the prettiest girl in Kadnisov.” He smiled. “And they sent me to you.” His thumb stopped stroking. “So we're going out.”

I didn't know why I was still talking to this stranger, this damp gargoyle, getting my dress wet. Then it came to me—the smell of his clothes. Burning sugar, frying meat, sweet circus hay. My mouth was watering.

“Get your coat.” He jerked his head to the house. “Come on.”

“My father.” The only time I ever said *my father* with real relief. “My father won’t—”

Ivan let go and shoved his hand into the pocket of his billowing trousers. When his closed fist came back out, it was stuffed tight with bills. More money than I’d ever seen.

“He will.” Ivan threw the cash to the ground, half-smiling as rainwater melted into the paper. “He will.”

Ivan didn’t ask me about myself. He talked all about himself in the corner of that coffee house—not the best in Kadnisov, not even the second best, one just downmarket enough to let me know my place.

“I’m the best clown. The best.” A small drop of coffee trembled at the corner of his mouth. “All the other clowns get their stuff from me. I tell you, Iskrey, without me it would all crumble.” He took another gulp of coffee. “The whole damn show.”

“That’s what they say, isn’t it?” I picked at my cake. I’d taken a bite before, then seen his critical glance and put it back on my plate. “The clowns are the ones who really run the circus.”

“Bullshit.” There was no anger in Ivan’s voice, just an odd, sulky petulance. “The ringmaster runs the circus. He’s the one who gets all the respect.” He threw a lump of sugar into his coffee, his spoon thumping against the china as he stirred. “Even if he’s the worst damn ringmaster in the business, do you see people laughing at him? No. But that’s all I get.”

“Well, yes. Of course.” I try to smile, but there was no answering humor in Ivan’s face.

“Isn’t that your job? You entertain people. Make them laugh.”

Ivan scowled. With a delicate finger, he pulled my plate of cake across the table. “You don’t know my job.” He took a wedge of crumbs in his fingers, pushing them into his mouth. “You don’t know a single thing about it. I could be a ringmaster with my eyes closed. With my damn hands tied behind my back.” He picked up my cake, taking a careless bite. “I’d have everything running like clockwork.”

My voice took on my mother’s anxious, placatory tone, the kind she used with my father. “Yes. Of course, you would.” I kept thinking of the money, all those greasy green notes. “Of course.”

“Damn right.” Ivan nodded. “I would.”

A minute of silence passed. I tried not to look at his pockets, focusing instead on his squat, little fingers as they tapped.

“Finish your coffee.” Ivan drew out another wad of notes, shoving the rest of my cake in his mouth. “I’ll show you the circus. At night it looks less like garbage.”

Why did I follow him? The money, of course, and the scent that still hung on his clothes. Cooking onions, cheap liquor, caramel. The reek of animal dung flowing underneath it in a raw, farmyard trickle. The smell of greed.

RINGMASTER

Maybe it was magic. Not the good kind, the old, crude stuff. The magic of old men in graveyards. The binding of souls, elements.

I looked at Ivan and was bound.

He led me through the twilight, treading on trampled flags and broken bottles that glittered like stars in the wet grass. The evening sky crackled with striped canopies. The circus slept, sprawled on the damp earth.

“This place has really gone to the dogs.” Ivan threw out his hand in a brute flourish, sweeping over the ragged group of tents. “You should see the Big Top. God, they manage it terribly. I’d double ticket sales. Just watch me.”

I couldn’t stop watching him. Watching each word fly out of his mouth, skittering into the dark, spiraling up into the inky sky.

“I mean, ask your average ticket-buyer who they’d want running this joint. They’re dumb, Iskrey, dumb like you wouldn’t believe. They’d all say the ringmaster, but they’re looking at the red jacket and the top hat. Even if the guy is a total idiot, they see the uniform and go wild. It’s all in the clothes.”

I looked at his damp, crumpled clown suit, the smears of greasepaint clinging to his fingers. Ivan was still talking.

“One day, Iskrey. That’s all I need. One day in that red jacket, and this place would be drowning in money. I’d get all the freaks out, all the gross acts that only the weirdos want to see. Bearded ladies, that stuff. All of ’em gone. I’d bring this outfit back to the good old days. Back when it was worth seeing.”

“You would.” I hadn’t meant to speak. I was marveling at the blunt force of his words, their strangely powerful childishness. No one could possibly bluster and shout their way into having everything they wanted. And yet, there he was. “You really would.”

Ivan moved closer. In the gathering dark, his makeup gleamed. “Well, what do you know.” His hand rubbed my side, as if inspecting the flanks of a horse. “The prettiest girl is a nice girl too. Doesn’t often work like that.”

His touch was both lustful and completely detached, his fingers cold. I tried to smile, then looked down when I couldn’t do it.

“We’re going to get rid of these rags.” Ivan smiled as he pulled at the fabric of my dress, rubbing the cheap, coarse cotton between his fingers. “You can have all the gowns in the world, Iskrey. Any kind you want. The good stuff.”

My mother had made this dress. She had sat in front of the guttering fire night after night, stitching the skirts. In Ivan’s hands, it didn’t seem worth the work.

“Come to my tent.” Ivan pointed at a huge, squat pyramid of mustard-yellow fabric that lay on the outskirts of the field. “It’s the nicest one here. Even better than the ringmaster’s, when it comes to size. I’d throw out all the crap in *that* place on the first day. Come and see.”

Ivan's tent shone like a church, vast and bright, laden with furs and richly patterned chests. The scent of his clothes was deeper there, stronger, full of the eerie sacredness of dreams.

The act itself was brief and completely neutral, like sweeping a floor. A little tiring, at most. Soon Ivan fell asleep, the thick, soft blankets kicked into a tangle.

I lay still. Night crept over me, the wind drawing deep, cold breaths. Dogs roamed the fields, howling.

I closed my eyes. In the crowded silence of a stormy night, I slept.

In the dream the air was dense, almost liquid. Ivan stood away, his back turned. The scarlet ringmaster's jacket fit oddly across his shoulders, buckling at the seams, but there it was, gold epaulettes and all. He already looked taller. He loomed.

I knew with complete certainty that the makeup was still on Ivan's face. White, yellow, and red. Garish, irremovable. His trousers were still baggy silk tents, his shoes still enormous. Still a clown, down to the bone.

The canvas of the tent rippled, bending to the wind. A roar rose and fell outside—a storm, a crowd, a mob. Opening night.

I couldn't imagine the crowd. All I could see was the darkness beyond the circus lights, a night that waited on the borders of the field. Endless, ravaging, full of wet earth and damp wood and hunger.

The tent was vast and bright but very thin. A single layer of brightly colored canvas kept that needy dark at bay—and oh, how scared I was of all that starving night. Of wanting and wanting, hands brimming with bitter air.

Ivan's words from the coffee house beat through me like a heart. *The ringmaster runs the circus.* In the heavy gold of the dream, I knew I had to stay in the tent. Stay in the light.

I would be the prettiest girl, the nicest girl. I would stay close to the clown in the ringmaster's jacket, bound by old, rough magic.

Magic that looked like fear in thick, white makeup. A carnival mask.