

THE MIRROR MAN



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By age twelve, Theodora Bones was already an avid collector of curiosities. She pinned moths into shadow boxes, pressed flowers in books, filled jars with old coins—and saved anything small enough for her parents to tolerate.

Theo nearly bounced the ribbons right out of her blonde curls when Mother and Father announced the annual trip to her grandfather's house. Dr. Theodore Bones had been a professor and an archaeologist—and his house was always brimming with the most extraordinary things.

Cluttered, as Theo's parents often scoffed.

A steaming train rolled Theo's parents, her aunt and uncle, and her twin cousins out of the city and toward the countryside. As her cousins fought over a toy, Theo pressed her face against the chilly window to watch the dense autumn forests burn brightly in all shades of yellow, copper, and red. A horse and carriage completed their trip until the children hopped out to race along the steep driveway. Gold leaves fell like medallions all around as their shoes clicked on the wet cobblestones.

At the top of the hill loomed a castle of a house so gray it melted into the overcast sky. Bay windows bulged outwards, and scrollwork hung like delicate lace from the eaves. As she stepped inside, Theo inhaled deeply through her nose to enjoy the leather, tobacco, and must of old books

clinging in the air. She and her cousins dashed to the fireplace to warm their rosy cheeks and fingertips.

When Grandfather greeted the family, as usual, he presented each of the children with a gift. To Theo's cousins, Charles and Victoria, he gave coins. The twins squealed and clambered up the wooden staircase after their parents. For Theo, though, Grandfather did not have a coin, but an ornate silver case the size of her palm.

Theo traced her finger over the carved rose cameo embedded at the center. It was the loveliest shade of red she had ever seen. Was it called crimson or scarlet or garnet? Theo only knew that it was marvelous.

"What is it, Grandfather?"

He grinned, creasing the wrinkles around his eyes, and clicked the round piece at the front of the case. When it popped open, Theo stared at her reflection inside.

"It was your grandmother's makeup compact," Grandfather said. "It's yours now."

The pan had a ring of white residue along the edge. Theo knew the compact was far more precious than the coins Grandfather had given to her cousins.

She closed the compact and hugged it to her chest. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Theo. I know you'll take care of it." Grandfather patted her head. "Now, run along and have fun."

Theo tucked the rose compact into her pocket and took off to play.

While the adults talked, drank, and smoked, Theo and the twins explored the massive house. From the previous year, the children had already known about the hidden door, which led to Grandfather's study. In and out they went, nearly thirty times until they grew bored.

Outside, the children frolicked in the unruly garden, once tended to by their grandmother. They plucked tiny petals from mums and rolled pumpkins down the hill. As a crow flew overhead, Theo raised her eyes to the attic window, which gleamed in the autumn sunset. In years past, she had been too afraid, but, this time, the uppermost floor beckoned her.

"Who wants to explore the attic?" she asked and pointed.

Charles and Victoria backed away, shaking their heads, which sent their red hair wild in the breeze. Theo sighed and went along with the evening.

That night though, Theo couldn't sleep with the curiosity of the attic

fluttering about her mind like a moth drawn to light. She rolled out of bed, lit a candle, and left her cousins sound asleep in their beds.

Theo tiptoed her way down the hall and up the stairs, which creaked under her silk slippers. At the top, she placed her hand on the doorknob and peeked through the brass keyhole. Moonlight spilled through the ocular window and bathed the most fascinating of curiosities in shades of silver and bone. Theo twisted the handle and entered the attic where she was at once surrounded by old maps in dusty frames, leather trunks, marble busts, bronze statues, paintings, scrolls, and so much more.

As Theo gaped at the antiquities, the hem of her nightgown brushed the wood floor, leaving a trail of her wonder in the dust. Near the ocular window, a large white moth caught her gaze. It fluttered past the window and down toward an antique mirror, which twinkled ever so slightly. Theo approached the mirror and brushed away the cobwebs covering its ornate frame of iron rosettes and ivy. She extended the candle and wiped her sleeve across the dust when a man's face appeared.

Theo jumped back and dropped her candle, extinguishing the light.

"It's all right, miss," the mirror man whispered. "I won't hurt you. Here, lift your candle."

Holding a scream in the back of her throat, Theo raised the candle with a shaky hand. The man pointed his finger and ignited the flame.

Theo's curiosity won out over the fear hammering in her chest as she studied him. He had hair of the blackest ink, skin paler than the moon, and a thin face of sharp angles. His clothes were old yet fancy: a top hat, a velvet coat, and a white, ruffled cravat.

"What are you?" Theo asked as she tilted the heavy mirror forward to ensure it was not a trick.

"The better question might be to ask, 'What were you?'"

"Fine." Theo side-eyed the man. "What were you?"

"I was once real and alive, like you."

"Then how are you in there?" she asked, knocking on the glass.

"When I died, my soul was trapped in the mirror."

"How?"

"You sure are a curious child, aren't you?" The mirror man chuckled. "But I would rather not talk about my death right now."

Theo's shoulders dropped in disappointment.

“But,” the mirror man began, “it has been a long, long time since I’ve had anyone to talk to. Can you tell me a little about yourself?”

Theo sat cross-legged in front of the mirror and held her head high. “I am Theodora Bones, but I like to go by Theo. I’m twelve-and-a-half. I like reading and collecting things. Someday, I’m going to be an archeologist like my grandfather.”

“Is that so, Theo?” The mirror man removed his top hat and smiled. “You do seem rather fearless; I suppose you will become whatever you wish.”

“Fearless?” Theo asked, scrunching her nose.

“Well, you are speaking to a haunted mirror in a spooky attic in the middle of the night, are you not?”

Theo covered her mouth as she giggled. “My cousins were too afraid to come up here during the day.”

The mirror man’s gray eyes scanned the room behind her. “I can see why.”

“What’s your name?”

“Wolfgang.”

“Nice to meet you, Wolfgang.” Theo pretended to shake his hand. “Can I call you Mr. Wolf?”

“Sure.”

“Doesn’t it get boring up here, Mr. Wolf?”

He nodded with tears glistening in his eyes.

Theo stared at him until she perked up with an idea. “Do you like books?”

“I remember enjoying books very much.”

“Then, I’ll be right back!”

Theo tiptoed down the stairs, through the secret door, and into her grandfather’s study. She ran her fingers along the bookshelves filled with history texts, atlases, and encyclopedias until she found her grandfather’s small collection of children’s books. Theo plucked out *Through the Looking Glass* and *What Alice Found There*, thinking it would be perfect for the mirror man.

That night, and every night of the family’s visit, Theo snuck into the attic and read books to him. She learned from Mr. Wolf how her grandfather had acquired the antique mirror from an out-of-work circus and that the mirror man had been part of an illusionist’s act. Mr. Wolf still wouldn’t

offer details about his death, which made Theo all the more curious. They enjoyed each other's company, laughed often, and had similar tastes in books—the more fantastical, the better.

On the final night, Theo choked back tears as she read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Oh, don't cry," Mr. Wolf said. "I'm going to miss you too, Theo Bones."

"I'm going to miss you more. Even if Grandfather would part with your mirror, there's no way my parents would let me keep it. They think this is all junk." She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Is there any way we can still be friends?"

"There is."

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"I didn't want to impose," Mr. Wolf said. "Do you happen to have a mirror in your pocket?"

Theo rested her hand on the object through the fabric of her nightgown. "How did you know?"

"Magic." Mr. Wolf grinned. "Hold the mirror out to face me."

Theo retrieved the rose compact and clicked it open. She scooted forward and turned the mirror toward Mr. Wolf.

He placed his palm against the glass and closed his eyes. A soft cloud of twinkling lights emerged from the antique mirror and connected with the rose compact. Theo grinned at the magic display, which was her very own galaxy floating before her eyes. Moths fluttered from the window and joined in a dance with the lights. A sharp, burning scent filled the air, which reminded Theo of fireworks.

After the sparkles vanished, so did Mr. Wolf. The moths also flew away, leaving Theo all alone.

"Where did you go?" Theo asked, looking around.

"Right here, in your palm."

Theo turned the compact mirror to face her, and there he was: a miniature friend.

"Now, I can visit you whenever you wish."

Mr. Wolf hopped back and forth between the two mirrors, making Theo laugh.

"Do you have more mirrors somewhere?" she asked. "More places to visit?"

“Not anymore. I used to have many mirrors in the circus as part of the illusionist’s show, but this was the only mirror left unbroken,” he said with a serious tone. “Take care of your compact. For if it breaks, I’ll have to return to this mirror once again.”

“Oh, I’ll be very careful, indeed!”

That she was. Theo cherished her grandmother’s rose compact more than any other possession. When she wasn’t reading to Mr. Wolf, she wrapped the mirror in a piece of wool to protect it.

At home, Theo showed Mr. Wolf her collections. He especially enjoyed the delicate moths pinned into wooden shadow boxes that lined the walls of her bedroom.

“That’s how I found you,” Theo said. “A white moth in my grandfather’s attic led me to you.”

“Moths are attracted to magic,” he said. “They see things others cannot.”

Theo smiled, but soon fell quiet and fidgeted with the pearly buttons on her sleeves.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Wolf asked.

Theo sighed. “I...don’t want to return to school tomorrow.”

“Why is that?”

“They tease me for being a know-it-all,” she whispered. “Angela Schumacher even ripped out a page in my archaeology journal.”

“Life may be difficult right now,” Mr. Wolf said. “But never stop being yourself. Who are you?”

“Theodora Bones,” she said with a shrug.

“No, I mean, who are you really? Answer this time from your heart,” he said, placing his hand on his chest. “Who are you?”

Theo sat up a little taller. “I am Theo Bones. I enjoy reading and collecting things. One day, I will be an archaeologist like my grandfather.”

“There you are, fearless girl.” Mr. Wolf tipped his hat to her. “You can take me with you if it will make you feel safer.”

And that, she did. Theo always kept the rose compact tucked safely in her pocket. One day at recess, Theo sat in her usual nook by the stairs to read a book. She wanted to share a fact about ancient Italy with Mr. Wolf, so she opened the compact. Angela and another kid from class, Roger, waltzed over, boots grinding into the gravel, and cornered Theo.

“Talking to your reflection because you have no friends, Theo-dora?” Angela asked.

Roger snatched the mirror from Theo’s hands and held it high in the air. Theo’s eyes grew the size of two moons as rage flared hot in her cheeks.

“Give that back! It was my grandmother’s!”

“What? This piece of junk?” he asked and tossed it to Angela.

“Stop!” Theo stood and scrambled to her.

Angela tossed it back to Roger. “Keep away!”

The two bullies laughed and threw the compact back and forth over Theo’s head.

“I’m going to tell Ms. Davies!”

“Tell her what? That you broke your junky mirror?” Angela teased, raising the compact. “I’ll drop it.”

“Please don’t!” Theo cried.

“Give us your assignments, and I’ll give it back.”

Theo’s stomach soured at the thought of cheating, but she would do anything for the mirror. “Fine. They’re in my pack.”

The boy rifled through Theo’s bag and stole her mathematics homework and English essay, which she had worked on for three hours.

“Thank you, Theo-dora Bones!” Angela chucked the mirror into the rocks, and the sound of broken glass pierced the air.

“No!” Theo shrieked with a rattled breath.

The kids ran away, laughing. Theo crashed to her knees, ripping her navy dress, and lifted the broken compact. The shattered pieces of the mirror gleamed in the afternoon light, and Mr. Wolf was gone. There was no twinkling magic left in the shards. Gritting her teeth against the intense pain of agony in her throat, Theo grabbed the largest piece of glass and charged after the two bullies.

Theo received a one-week suspension for her act of violence. Angela and Roger only received slaps on the wrist.

Mother and Father were beyond upset; they were *disappointed*. No matter how hard Theo tried to explain what the bullies did to her, they didn’t understand why she cared so much about the mirror. Once the dust of anger settled, Mother entered Theo’s room.

“We can repair it,” Mother said. “In fact, I’m sure I have an old compact we can use to replace the mirror.”

Fresh tears stung Theo's eyes; the new mirror wouldn't have Mr. Wolf in it.

Clutching the repaired rose compact, Theo cried herself to sleep that night and many nights after.

It was a rough school year and lonely summer with no friends and no Mr. Wolf, but Theo kept her mind occupied with books. She wrote pages upon pages of interesting facts to share with him at the family's annual visit to her grandfather's house in the fall. Theo read about places all over the world and even wrote lists of questions about archaeology for her grandfather.

When the leaves began turning, Theo counted down the days. Every time her fingers felt the rose compact in her pocket, Theo's heart raced with giddiness to see her best friend.

Three-and-a-half weeks before the annual trip, Mother and Father sat Theo down. Their hollowed faces, trembling lips, and glistening eyes frightened her. Theo cried herself to sleep again that night, clutching the mirror—Grandfather's last gift to her.

The family left on a train the very next day to attend the wake and funeral. Theo's only flicker of joy was the prospect of seeing Mr. Wolf since the family would be staying at her grandfather's house. Heavy rains had knocked the leaves from the trees, allowing the claw-like branches to twist skyward. Theo's hopes were extinguished at the sight of a horse-drawn wagon carrying heaps of antiques down the cobblestone driveway.

She pressed her face against the window of the carriage. "Where are they taking his collections?"

"Your grandfather donated his antiques to the university."

"It's a blessing we don't have to deal with that junk," Mother said.

The word "junk" rang in Theo's ears as she touched the compact in her pocket. None of it was ever junk to her. When they entered the mostly cleared-out home, the only items remaining were boring pieces of furniture and empty bookshelves. It at least still smelled of leather, tobacco, and musty books.

The wake was awful. Grandfather looked nothing like himself to Theo, with his skin taught and pale. The heavy scent of lilies made her nauseous.

That night, when the house was still, and her cousins sound asleep, Theo tiptoed to the attic. Her skin tingled with hope that the university people had left it untouched. She sighed in defeat as she peeked through

the brass keyhole. When she entered the empty attic, Theo plopped on the floor near the ocular window where Mr. Wolf should have been.

She repeated, "I am Theo Bones. I enjoy reading and collecting things. One day, I will be an archaeologist like my grandfather," over and over again until dawn.



The years went on. Theo worked hard in her studies and received a scholarship to an all-women's university. There Theo met like-minded people in her courses who encouraged her curious mind. She had grown to become a lovely young woman and even broke a few hearts because she wasn't ready to settle down for marriage. When other young ladies dropped out of college to wed, Theo studied that much harder.

In private, she would open her grandmother's compact and repeat, "I am Theo Bones. I enjoy reading and collecting things. One day, I will be an archaeologist like my grandfather."

Theo's memories of the man in the mirror had all but faded. She often wondered whether he was real at all or simply the fantasy of a lonely, awkward child. Nevertheless, she always kept the rose compact tucked in her pocket for good luck.

When Theo and some fellow classmates took a trip to her grandfather's old university for a seminar on Italian art, curiosity struck. As soon as the lecture ended, Theo asked the art history professor where her grandfather's donations may have gone.

Instead of getting lunch with her friends, Theo walked to a tiny museum only a few blocks from campus, hidden between two larger buildings. It was covered in ivy and looked like the perfect home for her grandfather's things. As soon as she opened the door, Theo grinned because she recognized many of the marble busts and paintings on display.

"Excuse me," she said to the curator. "I'm Theo, um, Theodora Bones. Do you still have the rest of my grandfather's collections? Possibly in storage?"

"No, I'm sorry. What you see here is what we kept. The rest would have been auctioned off to other museums or dealers."

"Do you remember seeing an ornate black mirror? I'm trying to track it down."

“That was many years ago, miss,” the curator said, looking down for a moment before his head popped up. “But wait!”

The sly old man dashed into the back office and rifled through a filing cabinet.

“Here,” he said, returning to Theo with a piece of paper. “This is a record from the auction.”

“So, it will say who bought the mirror?”

“Well, not exactly.”

Theo’s eyes scanned the document. There were no itemized lists of the antiques, only “batches.” Twelve of them, to be exact. Her posture deflated with defeat.

“I suggest you write to each of the buyers. Also, any leftover items were donated to charity shops. If that’s the case, then I’m afraid the mirror could be long gone.”

With a hollow ache in her chest, Theo thanked the curator and placed the document in her pocket next to the rose compact.

By graduation, Theo had tracked down and written to six of the buyers, none of whom could recall an ornate mirror as part of their batch. Theo also scoured every museum and charity shop she passed. In her obsession, she had grown quite the collection of antique mirrors, none of which were Mr. Wolf’s.

Theo happily placed her massive collection into storage when a former professor hired her as an assistant on an archeological study in Italy. They were to dig, catalog, and preserve items in a newly discovered Etruscan tomb discovered near Vetulonia. Theo’s dream to become an archaeologist was coming true, but the man in the mirror still burned at her curiosity, like a flame she couldn’t extinguish. Some nights, even his gray eyes haunted her dreams.

In Italy, Theo proved herself as capable as any man on site. She even developed a system of pipes to keep water away from the tomb as they dug. This not only impressed her professor, but a fellow archaeologist named Giuseppe, who was a student at a nearby university in Italy.

Giuseppe was a handsome man with black hair, tanned skin, and a lopsided smile who called Theo “Teddy.” He would work as close to her as possible and always shared his tools.

After one long day of digging, the workers sat around a fire and drank wine from Giuseppe’s family vineyard. Theo scooted closer to Giuseppe

as he read from a small book. She tried to translate some of the Latin and recognized the first sentence.

“Odi et amo. Is that Catullus?” she asked.

He nodded, gazed into Theo’s eyes, and began reciting it.

*“I hate and I love. Wherefore would I do this, perhaps you ask?
I do not know. But I feel that it happens and I am tortured.”*

“Tortured?” she asked with a smirk.

“Yes. By you, Teddy.”

Theo’s heart went wild, and her skin burned from much more than the fire. She threaded her fingers with Giuseppe’s and led him to her tent.

They fell hard for one another and spent nearly every night together at the camp. He helped her practice Italian and some Latin, while she helped him with English. During a small weather-related delay on the dig, Giuseppe even introduced Theo to his large family in Tuscany.

The homemade wines, breads, and olive oils nearly seduced Theo as much as Giuseppe had, but the mystery of Mr. Wolf never stopped pricking her mind. The obsession with a faint childhood memory seeped into every corner of her being. Theo simply had to return home. When Giuseppe asked for her hand in marriage, Theo only agreed if they could live in America.

Giuseppe dearly wanted to return home with his Teddy, but he needed to finish the coursework to complete his degree. He was going to be the first member of his large family to graduate.

“We shall begin the rest of our lives in six months,” he assured her.

Once home again, Theo was hired as the curator of a museum and lived in the flat above it, waiting for Giuseppe. She decorated the flat with the many vintage mirrors in her collection and worked hard at the museum. In between work and visiting her family, Theo obsessively tracked down and contacted the remaining buyers from the list, still hoping to find Mr. Wolf.

After a series of no’s, Theo almost surrendered to the mystery, but one hopeful letter was all she needed—and one hopeful letter is what she received. An antique dealer in a nearby town had the mirror. The very next day, Theo dressed in her finest lace blouse, plum velvet skirt with a matching jacket, and moth cameo. She piled her curly blonde hair up into

a loose bun, pulling out a few messy tendrils. She tucked the rose compact into her pocket, like always, and boarded a train to find Mr. Wolf. Her leg bounced the entire ride there.

From a dim and dusty cellar, the antique dealer carried out a heavy item draped with a sheet. When he lifted the protective covering, Theo dropped to her knees and trailed her fingers over the iron rosettes and ivy adorning the frame. Overcome with joy, she rested her forehead against the glass and wept.

“This mirror really means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

Theo nodded.

“Then it’s yours.”

“How much?” she asked, reaching into her pocketbook; she had been saving her money for this very moment.

The dealer shook his head. “It’s free.”

That night, Theo sat on the floor of her flat with a glass of wine and stared at her reflection. Was it all a childish fantasy? Theo pulled some ruffled pillows down from her sofa and reclined next to the mirror, waiting. She dozed off for a moment, but a soft noise awoke her. The mirror twinkled ever so slightly, enough to catch Theo’s eyes. She threw herself toward it and gripped the ornate edges.

“Mr. Wolf?” she asked, then laughed at her own ridiculousness.

She was about to retire to bed when a man’s smiling face appeared in the antique mirror. His grin faded, though, as he studied her. Theo didn’t remember Mr. Wolf being so handsome. His dark hair was wavy, and his grey eyes nearly cut through the glass. Theo was short of breath as she kneeled before the man in the mirror.

Under furrowed brows, his eyes scanned her face and made their way down her loose blonde curls. Theo flushed, feeling rather exposed, wearing only her nightgown.

“Mr. Wolf?” she dared to ask again.

The man’s eyes widened as he gasped. “Theo? Is that you?” he asked in a deep, honey-sweet voice.

“Y-Yes,” Theo’s voice trembled as a flood of emotions rushed through her body. “I can’t believe you’re real! I’ve been tracking this mirror down for years.”

“You have?” he said with a perfect smile, which made Theo’s heart flutter. “I thought you had forgotten about me.”

“I never stopped thinking about you.”

“Nor I, you.” He removed his top hat, and a piece of wavy, dark hair fell over one eye. “I always wondered why you stopped talking to me.”

“Some vile children from school broke my compact. Then, when my grandfather passed away, all of his collections were donated and distributed. My mother fixed the mirror.” Theo relaxed a little and held out the rose compact. “And I carried it everywhere, hoping to someday find you again, Mr. Wolf.”

“Please, call me Wolfgang,” he said. “Would you like me to magic myself into your compact?”

Theo nodded and held the mirror out for him as her hands shook. A soft cloud of burning shimmer extended from Wolfgang’s mirror toward the compact. And there he was—Theo’s tiny friend in the palm of her hand.

At that, Wolfgang’s eyes glistened.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“And I, *you*, Theo.” Wolfgang disappeared and then reappeared into his original mirror. “Life has certainly been lonely without you. But you’re, um, much... *taller* now.”

Theo giggled. “I am still Theo Bones. I still enjoy reading and collecting things. But now, I am an archaeologist like my grandfather.”

Wolfgang’s grin widened even further. “I knew you would be, fearless girl.”

They chatted until late in the night. Theo told Wolfgang all about her adventures at university and abroad...and even about Giuseppe.

Every night, Theo read books to him like old times. Except, it wasn’t like old times—now Theo’s heart fluttered at the sound of Wolfgang’s deep laugh, and heat tingled her skin every time he complimented her.

Wolfgang grew quiet and vanished for long periods of time in the weeks leading up to Giuseppe’s planned arrival. Theo wasn’t sure how she would explain a magical talking mirror to her fiancé but was too excited to worry. One evening after work, Theo opened a letter from Giuseppe’s family. She stared at it for a long moment while her hands trembled, and the blood drained from her cheeks. Then she dropped it, melted to the floor in front of the mirror, and buried her face into a pillow.

“Theo?” Wolfgang asked. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s...Giuseppe,” she said between rattled sobs. “He’s...dead.”

Wolfgang peered at the letter on the floor. Giuseppe had died in a tunnel collapse on the archaeological site, trying to rescue other workers.

“Oh, Theo, I’m so terribly sorry,” he said. “Would you like me to leave you alone or stay?”

“Stay,” she said with a snuffle. “Just talk to me.”

Theo cried as Wolfgang recited poems and stories from her childhood. Lulled by his comforting voice, she fell asleep on the floor next to the mirror. The next day, Theo shipped the engagement ring back to Italy to help Giuseppe’s family pay for the funeral services and hoped a trip to her parents’ house would help calm her emotions.

Before Theo left, she thumbed the rose cameo on the compact.

“Wolfgang?” Theo asked the ornate black mirror, and he appeared. She gestured to her collection of mirrors lining the dark gray walls of her flat. “Can you magic yourself into all of my mirrors?”

“If that’s what you wish.”

“Please?” She tucked the compact into her pocket. “I’m afraid to lose you again.”

Wolfgang closed his eyes and pressed his palm against the glass. The galaxy-like magic display swirled around Theo and filled the entire living room, along with the acrid scent of magic. Moths fluttered and crawled outside the window, drawn to the lights. When the twinkling cloud vanished, Wolfgang appeared in every mirror at once.

“There.” He tipped his hat to her. “Just open your compact if you need me during your trip. I’ll always be here for you.”

And that, he was. Through the winter, as grief settled into Theo’s bones like a deep chill, Wolfgang let her cry, talk, or sit quietly as much as she wanted. Next to the cozy fireplace, they would read together as snow fell upon the street below.

One night, as Theo reclined next to the mirror with a book, Wolfgang asked, “What was Giuseppe like?”

Theo stared silently into the embers of the fire as tears brimmed against her eyelids.

“I’m sorry,” Wolfgang said. “You don’t need to answer—”

“No, no, I want to talk about him. He was adventurous and funny,” she said with a nostalgic smile as she wiped her eyes. “And a bit like you.”

Wolfgang quirked a brow at that. “How so?”

“We enjoyed working and studying together. He encouraged me in my successes and never treated me differently because I was a woman.”

“It sounds like he was a good man.”

“He was,” Theo said and sniffled. “I just feel so...guilty that I left him there alone. I was too eager to return home. We were supposed to spend our life together, and I couldn’t even wait a few months for him.”

“Don’t feel guilty; there’s no way you could have predicted the accident,” Wolfgang said. “I’m sure simply knowing you made his life worth living.”

Theo dabbed her eyes with a blanket. “Do you really think so? Our romance was such a short-lived whirlwind, what if it wasn’t real?”

“Time is...relative.” Wolfgang placed his hand against the glass. “He was a lucky man to have known you—even if it was for a short amount of time. I’ve spent ages inside this mirror, and all of those lonely years went by in the blink of an eye. But the few short months I spent in your rose compact felt like a lifetime.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re special, Theo. Dare I say, you have a bit of...*magic*.” His smile wrapped Theo like a warm blanket. “You gave Giuseppe a lifetime in a short amount of time.”

“Thank you.” Theo rested her hand against the glass on top of Wolfgang’s and could’ve sworn she felt him.

Theo’s heartache ebbed and flowed over the months, but work, family, and, especially, Wolfgang gave her focus and comfort. Every day she looked forward to spending the evening with him. Every word they read together mended her heart a bit more. Every conversation warmed the hollow spaces in her soul.

One fine spring day, Theo prepared for her cousin Victoria’s wedding. She wore a corset and slipped into a light blue gown with a tight bodice and lace trim. As she stepped into the living room of her flat, Wolfgang stared at her from the nearest mirror.

“You are exquisite,” he said.

Though Theo blushed at his compliment, she did a little twirl. “Do you like it?”

“I certainly do.” Wolfgang studied her a little more. “The blue matches your eyes.”

“Care to join me?” she asked with a sly smile, holding up the rose compact. “I need a date.”

Speechless, Wolfgang nodded.

Although the wedding was lovely, everything reminded Theo of her unfulfilled plans with Giuseppe. When relatives began asking if Theo was going to get married, she couldn't bear it. Heartsick and depressed, Theo snuck into a dark hallway to whisper with Wolfgang for most of the night.

Theo and Wolfgang spent as much time together as possible over the next few months. She always carried the rose compact in her pocket and would often speak to him at work when the museum was quiet. Theo found herself caring about her looks more and more, even when simply wearing a nightgown for their evening readings. She enjoyed the way Wolfgang's gray eyes felt upon her skin.

She kept a permanent layer of pillows and books on the floor next to his antique mirror. Their choices in literature started as mostly educational but soon turned into things like romance novels, plays, and poetry.

One balmy, summer evening, Theo dared to recite a love poem by Catullus.

*“...Suns may set, and suns may rise again:
but when our brief light has set,
night is one long everlasting sleep.
Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,
another thousand, and another hundred,
and, when we've counted up the many thousands,
confuse them so as not to know them all,
so that no enemy may cast an evil eye,
by knowing that there were so many kisses.”*

After the poem, Theo propped herself on her elbow, and stared at Wolfgang. She studied how his wavy hair fell over his face, how his dark lashes framed his gray eyes, and how his lips turned up ever so slightly when he was thinking. Theo noticed Wolfgang was staring at her lips too and wondered if he ever thought of her as more than a friend. Was it possible? Although he knew her more intimately than anyone, there were still things she didn't know about him.

“Will you ever tell me how you died?” she whispered.

“I never told you when you were young, because I thought it might have been too scary. I suppose it is time, now.” He took a deep breath and nodded. “I was actually the ringmaster for the circus.”

“The ringmaster?” Theo asked, thinking he was just one of the acts.

“Yes, much like you and your grandfather, I enjoyed collecting things, except mine were marvelous acts.”

“That’s amazing, how did you get into circuses?” The flames of the fire and wonder danced in Theo’s blue eyes.

“My mother was an actress, and my father was a stuntman. I suppose you could say it was in my blood.”

“But how did you end up like this?” She trailed her finger along the iron ivy and rosettes.

Wolfgang cleared his throat. “I was engaged to the illusionist, Maria, who possessed real magic. It was something ancient, something you don’t see every day,” he said. “I thought we were in love, that is, until I found her in a compromising position with one of the animal tamers.”

“Oh, Wolfgang.” Theo pressed her palm against the glass. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said, staring off into the distance. “But that wasn’t the worst part. Fearing I would fire them, they set his tigers on me.”

Theo’s eyes widened in horror as her heart broke for Wolfgang.

“Death would have been too kind.” Tears glistened in his eyes. “Maria trapped my soul in the mirror. With the promise of releasing me someday, she used me to rise in the ranks of the circus and become ringmaster herself.”

“I would never use you like that.”

Wolfgang raised his hand to meet Theo’s. “I know.”

“Is there a way we can release you now?” she asked.

“Believe me, dying was my greatest desire for a very long time. I even tried to scare those who carried my mirror, like your grandfather, hoping they would break the glass and the spell alike. But without Maria’s magic, no one could ever see me, which is why I believe there is a bit of ancient magic in you. You see things others cannot.” He gazed into Theo’s eyes. “I wouldn’t want to move on now anyway.”

“Why not?”

“You, Theo Bones.” Wolfgang removed his top hat and twisted his

brows. “You’ve given me a lifetime in a short amount of time. I’ve been working on something for you. I’m no Catullus, but I hope it will do.”

Wolfgang cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. Theo had never seen him so nervous before.

“Can a broken heart mend its torn edges?

Can a lonely bird sing a new tune?

Time, it is said, can heal all wounds,

—and I desperately hope this is true.

*For, I will spend a thousand years, maybe a thousand more,
desperately in love with you.”*

Giddiness bloomed in Theo’s chest as she kept her hand steady against his. “And I love you.”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to the mirror. Wolfgang did the same, and Theo was certain she could feel the heat of his kiss. Wolfgang’s love seeped through the mirror and filled every void in Theo’s cracked soul. They lingered there, lips but the width of the glass apart, enjoying their unique kiss.

When they pulled away, both Theo and Wolfgang were all smiles and longing gazes.

“Oh, how I wish I could truly touch you,” Wolfgang said.

“What would you do if you could?” Theo bit her lip as a rush of desire flooded her body.

“I would give you a real kiss.”

At that, Theo placed two fingers upon her lips and kissed them slowly. “Then what?”

Wolfgang gulped before he said, “I would run my hands through your golden curls.”

Arching her back, Theo swept both hands through her hair. “Then what?”

“I would kiss your neck.”

Theo touched the bottom of her jaw and trailed her fingers down her neck until they landed at her cleavage. “Then what?”

“I would ask you if you wanted to keep going.”

“And I would say yes.”

“Then...I-I w-would take off your...n-nightgown,” Wolfgang stuttered.

Theo reclined onto the pillows and slowly unlaced the top of her nightgown. “Then what?”

Wolfgang’s eyes grew wide as his breathing quickened. “I would kiss and touch you.”

Theo squeezed her breasts for Wolfgang, whose cheeks grew splotchy with scarlet blooms of lust.

“Then what?” she asked.

“I would take off the rest.”

Theo inched the gown from her hips and tossed it to the side. She spread her legs wide as Wolfgang watched.

“Then what?”

“I would ask if I could touch and kiss you there,” he said.

“And I would say yes.”

“Then I would do so gladly. I would touch you and kiss you until I brought you to bliss.”

Theo began touching herself, enjoying the burning desire in Wolfgang’s eyes. Her hips squirmed while Wolfgang guided her through the motions. Theo cried out when a burst of euphoria spread through her body. She had never been so satisfied, despite not being able to physically be with Wolfgang.

After that night, Theo let Wolfgang use his magic to enter the mirrors in both her bedroom and bathroom, not just for lovemaking, but to have Wolfgang nearer to her at all times.

“Is there any way I can come inside the mirror with you?” Theo asked one day.

“I might have enough magic, but there’s only one way for your soul to enter.”

“Oh.”

Life went on with Theo reading to Wolfgang and taking him with her to work, which included an occasional archaeological dig or curating trip. Together, they spent time in Paris, Rome, and Athens. Although she wanted Wolfgang’s hands and body more than anything, Theo never grew tired of their unique lovemaking. It grew more passionate, daring, and romantic the longer they were together.

For Theo, visiting her parents grew exhausting, as they pressed and

pressed for her to wed lest she became a spinster. They even introduced her to several gentlemen, all of whom she had to let down easily. She tried to explain to her parents that she was focused on her career.

After returning from a holiday visit filled with more badgering from Theo's parents, Wolfgang grew very quiet and vanished for long periods of time. When he finally appeared in his antique mirror, Theo stood before him with her hands on her hips.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Do you want a real man?" he whispered. "Don't let me hold you back...I don't want to ruin your life."

Theo knelt to his level and rested her palm on the glass. "You are real to me. You've also given me a lifetime in a short amount of time. We may be an unusual couple, but I am yours, and you are mine. Don't ever forget that."

One evening after a curating trip to Spain, Theo felt weak and settled down for bed early when she began coughing. Wolfgang suggested she drink tea with honey and soak in a warm bath. Theo's wheezing remained for days and she grew paler and paler. When she saw blood in her palm, Wolfgang told her it was time to call a doctor for a house visit.

The doctor stared curiously at the many mirrors lining Theo's flat before he examined her.

"My poor dear, I'm sorry to say you might have tuberculosis."

Theo shook her head and covered her mouth with a handkerchief to cough.

The doctor wrote an address on a slip of paper and handed it to her. "This is the closest sanitarium. They can keep you comfortable. Some patients have even lived from their experimental treatment in the mountain air. Do not visit anyone unless you're going to the sanitarium, so you don't risk infecting others."

As soon as the doctor left, Theo crashed to the ground near the antique mirror and wept, which soon turned into a violent cough.

"Shh, shh," Wolfgang hushed. "Focus on breathing and get some tea."

While Theo walked around her flat sipping on the tea, Wolfgang popped into every mirror she passed. She avoided his intense gaze and paced, deep in thought.

"You should go to the sanitarium," Wolfgang said as he flashed into every mirror at once, finally getting Theo's attention.

“And die amongst strangers?” Theo shook her head as she reclined onto the pillows next to his original mirror and brushed her fingers along the iron rosettes and ivy. “You can magic me into the mirror with you if I die, right?”

“Think about what that means.” He tilted his head. “A mostly timeless, eternal existence with me.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” she asked and let out a few coughs. “Do you not want me in there with you?”

“Theo Bones, archaeologist, who loves reading and collecting things, I want you more than a life of my own. I am yours, and you are mine. I love you.”

“Then there’s nothing to think about, is there, *Mr. Wolf?*”



Theo’s parents received a letter in shaky handwriting from their daughter explaining her illness and her refusal to visit the sanitarium. At once, they boarded a train to the city to change her mind. When they reached Theo’s flat atop the museum, they met a macabre sight.

Hundreds of antique mirrors lined the walls, an acrid scent lingered in the air, and a swarm of moths fluttered all around. There, on the floor, lay their daughter with blood on her lips and the rose compact clutched in her cold, pale hand.

