

Birds of Paris Volume 1 – The Magic Pendulum

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Chapter 1 – 3

Excerpt pp. 49-53: The story of the shimmer birds

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Stardust and Feathers

Léa

Léa could hardly believe her eyes. Just a few feet away, a girl was standing talking to a pigeon. Not cooing at it, trying to coax it towards her. And not scolding it to shoo it away. No - she was having a proper conversation.

The pigeon perched on the girl's crooked arm, its head cocked to one side as if listening intently. Every now and then it cooed softly and the girl nodded as if she were responding to what it had just said before continuing the conversation.

Of all the things! Léa knew she shouldn't stare but she couldn't help it. The pigeon girl wore a denim jacket covered in bright badges and a pair of cargo trousers. Her hair was a striking blue-grey and she was carrying a skateboard tucked under her arm. She hadn't noticed Léa yet but that wasn't surprising. Léa was very good at melting into the background.

If you want to observe things in detail, you have to be invisible, her mother always said.

At last, Léa was able to check out her new neighbourhood for the first time. Two days earlier, she and her parents had moved into a top-floor flat right in the heart of Paris. From her bedroom window, she could see the towers of Notre Dame. It was the perfect place to start exploring. Now she was sitting on a bench in a small park beside the cathedral. The crown of a gigantic chestnut tree cast Léa in dappled shade and the grey light of the sun, filtered through the clouds, completed her disguise.

She was holding a list. Her mum had written down ten items for her to find. Léa had ticked off three so far. A grocer's shop, a green door and a person wearing a watch on their left wrist.

They had been playing the list game ever since Léa was six years old. Léa's mum compiled the lists and it was Léa's job to explore her surroundings until she had discovered every item on the list. Léa was 12 years old now and was such a good observer she was hard to beat.

But she had never seen anything like the pigeon girl before. Not only was she talking to a pigeon - there was something about her that made the back of Léa's neck tingle.

She looked pretty cool standing there, but Léa could tell that she was on her guard. She was *observing* her surroundings too. Léa fidgeted with the edge of her jacket as questions buzzed through her brain like busy bumblebees. How did she tame the pigeon? What were they talking about?

Léa tried to imagine going up to her and saying 'hello'. Not a great idea. It might be easy for someone else, but Léa wasn't very good at talking to other children. She was always either too quiet or too loud, unsure of what to say, or bombarding people with her busy bumble bee questions.

Suddenly she wanted the girl to notice her. Almost as if a hand on her back was gently pushing her towards her.

Go on. I dare you.

The girl was concentrating on something. After waiting for a few tourists to stroll by, she walked up to the fence that separated the cathedral from the public park. The pigeon landed on a post close by. As Léa glanced around, she realised she was the only other person there. *She is waiting for the all clear,* Léa thought. She watched, increasingly intrigued, as the girl approached a gate in the wrought-iron fence. After a final look to make sure no one was coming, she crouched down. Léa couldn't see what she was doing, but a few seconds later, the gate swung open. The girl slipped through and hurried to the side of the cathedral.

Hang on! Did she just pick the lock? Unbelievable! Léa hesitated for one last moment but then her curiosity got the better of her. She jumped off the bench, stuffed the list into her pocket and ran after the girl.

Léa opened the gate in the fence nervously, and crept over to the vast cathedral wall. The light was more gloomy now and the air felt much colder all of a sudden. There was no sign of the pigeon girl.

What do think you are doing? Léa asked herself. The tingling sensation moved down from her neck to the pit of her stomach. It was incredibly exciting; she had never done anything like this before.

A narrow path ran along the cathedral wall, bordered by a row of bushes. As Léa followed it, the tingling sensation increased with every step. A chestnut tree stretched its branches across the pathway, forming a leafy tunnel. As soon as Léa stepped under the thick canopy of leaves, the tingling sensation gave way to a wave of emotion. Above her, she heard a flurry of flapping wings as something flew away. The next minute sparkling dots of light came swirling through the air towards her.

Léa stopped in her tracks and rubbed her eyes but the sparkling lights were still there. They danced around her like snowflakes as they fell to the ground. She saw three, four, five sparks of light go out one by one the minute they touched the paving stones.

With her heart pounding, Léa continued forward until she saw something shining in the shadows of the cathedral. Entranced, she stepped closer. At eye-level, something glistened in the darkness —something that was *moving*. Léa stared in disbelief at dark green tendrils sprouting from a crack in the brickwork. Before her eyes, leaves unfurled at a tremendous speed along the twisting vines and delicate buds began to blossom.

Léa watched as the plant composed entirely of shadows developed like a time-lapse. Some leaves faded away like wisps of smoke, while star-shaped petals melded with the dark stone backdrop. And there, amidst the tangled trellises, a soft, warm white glow shimmered. A feather! A shining feather caught up in the shadowy foliage. Léa held her breath. There was no one else there and the garden was totally silent, but the feather seemed to be calling her.

Come closer.

She reached out and gently plucked it off the wall. It was so delicate it could have been made of morning dew.

As Léa's heart pounded harder, a sudden wave of yearning washed over her—gentle yet aching. She had no idea what she was yearning for, but she knew she couldn't let go of the feather. With great care, Léa twirled her newfound treasure between her fingertips. A silky shine flowed across its delicate surface, and a sparkling aura glowed around its edges. 'What are you?' Léa whispered. The feather shimmered, quivered for a moment, and then exploded in a whirl of sparkling dust.

The Pigeon Girl

Léa

“AAAH!” Léa leapt back with a yell.

She stumbled and flung her hands up in the air, straight into the cloud of sparkling dust floating around her head. What was all that glimmering stuff? Some of it landed in the corner of her eye and started to itch. She was about to wipe it away but stopped suddenly. Her fingers were covered in dust - a golden powder made of tiny gleaming particles.

“Okay, wow!” someone said beside her. Startled, Léa spun around. The pigeon girl was standing right next her with her skateboard still tucked under her arm. She was staring at Léa’s hands.

“That’s pretty impressive,” she murmured.

“What?” Léa asked. Instinctively, she sniffed her hands.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the pigeon girl said. “You don’t want to breathe in pure unfiltered gleam.”

Léa had no idea what she was talking about. But the warning struck home like a bolt of lightning. *Had she* swallowed any dust? Some of it had definitely got into her eyes.

Before she could start thinking clearly, the pigeon girl pulled a small pouch out of her bag along with a brush.

“Let’s see your hands,” she said.

Léa hesitated and the girl grinned. “Don’t worry, I’m trying to help.”

Léa swallowed and held out her hands. She glanced at the church wall but the trellises of smoky grey vines had disappeared. As if they’d never been there.

“I must be dreaming,” she whispered.

The girl grinned again. “You’re a freshling, huh?” she asked. “Take a few deep breaths. You’ll get used to it.” Quickly, she brushed the shining powder off Léa’s fingers into the pouch, until every last sparkling spec was gone.

“All done,” the girl said and put everything back in her bag. “Are you okay? You’re not going to faint, are you?”

Léa swallowed again. “Don’t think so... not sure.”

The girl laughed. "You'll be all right." The sound of flapping wings caused Léa to look up. The next minute, the pigeon landed clumsily on the girl's outstretched arm. The tip of its left wing was white as if it had been dipped in a pot of cream. It cooed and the feathers around its neck fluffed up.

The girl drew a sharp breath.

"Darn! I knew it," she said, looking around before turning to Léa.

"What's your name?"

"Léa."

Somewhere nearby, something scraped along the paving stones, and the bushes rustled. Léa frowned. Was she imagining things, or had the girl suddenly gone pale?

"What the..." Léa began, but just then, the pigeon caused a commotion, flapping up into the air and circling high above them. The girl grabbed Léa's sleeve, tugging her away as she glanced nervously at the back of the cathedral. "Look, Léa," she said. "I know you've got loads of questions, but I'm afraid now is not the time for answers."

She ducked behind a buttress and Léa followed her, mainly because she wanted to know more about the exploding feather. "What's going on?"

The girl grimaced. "There are a couple of people out to get me," she said peeking out from behind the wall. "And I think they might have found me."

There was another scraping sound close by, accompanied by a rattling noise and a croaky meow that sounded nothing like a cat. Léa's skin bristled with goose pimples.

"What sort of people?" she wanted to know. "And what about the feather and the shiny dust on my hands?" But as she finished speaking, the pigeon returned and started cooing loudly and persistently as it landed on the fence, staring at them with beady eyes.

"Here," the girl said, pushing the pouch into Léa's hands. "There's a bookshop in the Rue de la Bûcherie called the *Quill and Inkpot*. Take this bag of gleam there and give it to Ari. He'll explain everything."

"No! Wait!" Léa said, but the girl carried on speaking.

"Tell him I sent you," she said, "and give him this." She pulled a notebook and pencil out of her jacket pocket and quickly jotted something down on the front page. Then she held out the book.

Léa started to back away.

"Please!"

Something in the worried way the girl looked at Léa made her change her mind. She grabbed the book and pocketed it.

“Thank you,” the girl said in relief and grabbed Léa’s hand. Léa flinched but then she felt the tingling feeling spreading through her chest again.

“Ari will be suspicious. So, show him this sign. She turned Léa’s hand around and traced a figure of eight on her palm. “Tell him you are one of us.”

Léa eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

“Rue de la Bûcherie“, can you remember that?”

“Yes,” Léa said hoarsely.

The girl smiled at her. “You’ve got guts, I like that.” she said. “Slink out the gate, while I distract the enemy.”

Realising that the pursuers might be after her too sent shivers down Léa’s spine. The girl ran over to the metal fence and pushed her skateboard through a gap next to one of the posts. Then she scaled the fence and crouched on the top

“Wait!” Léa called. The girl looked down over her shoulder.

“What’s your name?”

“Alex,” she said softly, as she tugged her hood over her head. She kicked the fence with her heel, making it clang loudly, then leapt to the ground and sped away on her skateboard. The next thing Léa heard was a hissing meow followed by someone clattering over the fence and the sound of footsteps echoing in the same direction as the pigeon girl.

Over the Rooftops of Paris

Roux

It was a real challenge to climb up the drain pipe using just one hand. But there was no way Roux was going to put the small box he was carrying in his pocket. He had spent too many hours working on its contents to risk squashing them at the last minute.

When he reached the roof with the box still intact, he sighed happily. He looked around and spotted Ari immediately. He was sitting by the railings at the edge of the roof, looking out across the River Seine to the island of Notre Dame.

The dark night sky loomed above, while bright spot lights illuminated the cathedral, their beams reflecting in the water.

As he sat down beside Ari, Roux greeted him with a friendly shove of the shoulder. Ari shoved him back and grinned. His hood was down and his black hair was more unruly than usual.

“How’s it going?” Roux asked.

“Good, and you?”

“Everything is fine,” Roux answered. He handed Ari the small box and Ari’s eyes lit up. A picture of a golden feather shimmered on the lid - the trade mark of the bakery where Roux worked.

“Cool!” Ari opened the box, grabbed the lemon tartlet inside and popped it into his mouth, intricate chocolate icing and all.

“Hey!” Roux complained. “You have no idea how long it took to get that right.

“It looked great,” Ari said with his mouth full. “Tastes even better.”

Roux groaned but he was glad his friend was pleased. Considering he was such a small wiry guy, Ari could sure eat a lot of cakes, croissants and crepes.

Roux dangled his legs over the edge. Down in the street, cars were parked and revellers strolled by. “Was Alex here?” he asked.

Ari picked the last crumbs out of the box, licking his chocolatey fingers. “Nope.”

“She’s late as usual.” Roux said.

Ari shrugged. “That’s nothing new,” he said. “She probably got distracted or something.”

“Shall we wait?” Roux asked.

Ari folded the box and put it in his hoodie pocket. “If we want to find any feathers tonight, we should get going now.”

He pulled out a piece of chalk and drew the letters *A* and *R* on the railings. If Alex turned up, she’d know the two of them had been here and had set off already.

Ari put the piece of chalk back in his pocket and pulled his bird mask out from under his hood. When they’d had their masks made, three years ago, Ari had been expecting a magpie mask or a crow perhaps. He was certainly as clever as a crow, and he collected information and odd facts the way magpies collect shiny objects. Instead, he was given a robin mask with grey-brown and orange-red feathers. Roux thought it suited him far better.

“Last one out does the dishes for a week,” Ari shouted as he stood up.

“Deal,” Roux shouted back. He jumped to his feet and tugged his own mask out of his pocket. “On the count of three?”

Ari nodded, as he looped the leather strap over his head and pushed his mask up onto his forehead. “One.”

Roux’s heart started beating faster. “Two.”

Ari grinned. “Three!” he shouted and was off.

Roux swore and chased after him. They jumped down onto the roof of the house next door, and ran even faster. Ari pulled his mask over his eyes as he leapt over a skylight. The rooftops of the houses stretched out before them like an obstacle course, while the city lights cast their golden beams into the night sky.

Roux felt joy fizzing in his veins like lemonade. Up ahead, the edge of a house loomed, with a gap at least six feet wide just beyond it.

He inhaled through his nose and ran as fast as he could. He caught up with Ari, and together they raced side by side, neck and neck, towards the approaching abyss. Roux pulled down his mask and his heart soared. Scanning the rooftops, he spotted a glistening pathway of light in the sky just two blocks away. As he reached the edge, his feet barely touched the ground — he was so fast, so light. Ari hollered with delight beside him and the two boys sprang off the roof, catapulting themselves up into the air.

[...]

Excerpt pp 49-53: The story of the shimmer birds

Nina ran her fingers over the leather binding of the book. “In the days when wishes came true,” she began, “humans and magical creatures lived together in perfect harmony. Fawns with horns and pointed ears played the flute in our evergreen forests, dragons slept on warm hearths, sprites danced across the moors and unicorns bathed in the moonlight. Each of these mystical beings had their own special magic, but the shimmer birds had the most powerful magic of all.”

Carefully, Nina opened the book and showed Léa a brightly coloured full-page picture of a bird with a crown of feathers, a delicate swan-like neck and a tail of feathers reminiscent of a peacock’s train. The bird, the colour of freshly fallen snow, perched gracefully on a branch against a backdrop of sea-green leaves.

Nina tilted the book and the play of light revealed golden patterns glittering on the bird’s wings. Suddenly, Léa felt a familiar tingling sense of wonder, the same sensation she had experienced amidst the flurry of light by the cathedral.

“Their coat of feathers was as soft as silk and shimmered like a pale sunrise in May,” Nina continued. “But that wasn’t the only reason why all the living beings revered the shimmer birds.

Not only were they the bearers of good fortune. They were also the guardians of a childlike light-heartedness and a source of courage on earth. Wherever they settled, the hearts of those around them filled with joy as refreshing as a forest lake on a summer’s day. If they flew over someone who was feeling sad or helpless they would drop a feather. When someone caught it, a feeling of comfort filled their heart. If a person was plagued by self-doubt, the shimmer birds’ magic helped them to regain their confidence and achieve the most amazing things. The magic was different for everyone but it always worked. A moment of peace when the world was out of kilter, laughter if the days were grey and dreary, a flash of inspiration in a seemingly hopeless situation, the memory of a kind hug when it was needed most. The shimmer birds offered all of this generously and freely, driven by their desire to improve the lives of every living being. Things could have stayed this way for ever if not for human greed.”

Nina turned the page and Léa gasped. Dark colours covered the next page - a backdrop of shadows as black as night from which three tall grey figures emerged. They had the bodies of humans, but their faces were hidden behind pale cat masks with pointed ears and holes for eyes.

“As time went by, the humans were no longer happy to make do with gifts. They wanted more. They wanted to lock the shimmer birds away and control them. They wanted to use the magical feathers for their own purposes, or hoard them, and sell them for profit whenever they pleased.”

Léa listened to the story, completely enthralled, while Coralie cuddled up beside her. “I hate the next bit,” she whispered.

“The shimmer birds feared nothing more than human greed,” Nina continued. “The harder the humans searched for them, the more they retreated. But the humans were relentless. They pursued the shimmer birds until they located their nesting tree. They headed there, intending to raid their nests and steal their eggs and fledglings. In the face of this threat, the shimmer birds made a decision that would change our world forever. They decided to weave a veil to hide themselves from prying eyes.”

Léa closed her own eyes. Listening to the story was like watching a film inside her head. She could see a gigantic tree with a crown so high it touched the sky. The shimmer birds flashed between the branches as they flapped frantically, darting this way and that. On the ground, grey men wearing cat masks battled their way through high ferns and over fallen branches. They carried traps and mirrors, nets and snares to catch the birds. But as they approached the nesting tree, they found themselves engulfed in fog. It swirled around them, thick and dense like an impenetrable white curtain, which soon shrouded everything from sight.

“And so, the shimmer birds were hidden behind a veil of fog,” Nina continued, “safe at last. Their pursuers could no longer see them, or find their forest and raid their nesting tree.”

Léa opened her eyes and Nina smiled at her.

“Shimmer birds are inherently good and kind, so they didn’t abandon the humans all together. Hidden behind the veil, they continued to fly across fields and cities, glide through twisting alleys and land on windowsills. Wherever they stopped, they left a feather on our side of the veil. Although the feathers still contained the same magic, they disintegrated after a short while. They exploded, leaving a shimmering powder, which gleamed for a moment and then faded away and vanished if it wasn’t found in time. For most people, with their

dulled sense of magic, it was almost impossible to find a shimmer bird's feather, let alone receive the gifts it contained."

"But there was some hope left," Coralie whispered.

Nina winked at her, "The shimmer birds still wanted to share their gifts, so they gave children special masks that allowed them to see the trail they left behind and collect the feathers before it was too late."

Nina turned to the next picture. It showed a child surrounded by leafy vines and red berries, wearing a mask made of brown feathers and holding out its cupped hands like a bowl. A white and gold feather floated above its upturned palms.

"The shimmer birds trusted children because their hearts were open and full of wonder. And so, people were left with a sliver of hope. Even though most of them had forgotten all about the shimmer birds and the magic that was once a part of their world as much as sunshine and rain."