Jacob was eight years old—he remembered that most, later, how important an age eight years old felt. Old enough to know his father’s disappointment, and to fear it. To fear the man that Russia would call upon for help, and to forgive him when sent away, farther and farther every year, to schools that had little room for him. Young enough to believe in magic, but old enough to know better. He was eight years old, and they’d gotten onto the train just in time, though he couldn’t quite remember the platform, or what the outside of it looked like—nothing before their train car, with its large square window and its little red door.

And, of course, the woman. She’d called herself Rosa, he remembered, though he couldn’t remember when. She certainly hadn’t introduced herself to his father—no, he’d sat with his newspaper in front of him, ignoring Jacob and the rest of the world, in favor of the printed letters on the page. Rosa had sat with her red pillbox hat on and her brown legs crossed prettily, and had smiled at him. Jacob had smiled
They'd shared the tea service together, and he hadn't even argued about it when she'd offered to do the pouring. That, he thought, would be worth a nod from his father—good behavior, surely, even if it wasn't quite as grown-up as he perhaps would have liked it to be.

Jacob was thankful for her company. He was happy to be on the journey, of course—his father's new job sounded imperative, and it had been a month since he'd seen his mother, who'd taken the journey weeks before towards a special facility, where they'd treat her, she'd said, make her all better. But the ride would take hours yet, and what would he have done? He hadn't had time to take any books—hadn't even had a moment to change out of his school uniform—and all there was to see outside were fields and more fields. An eight year old, he had decided upon boarding, could go mad.

But Rosa, with her strange, unplaceable foreign accent, and the beautiful face he could only remember parts of—not enough, years later, to notice her, should he only have seen her again—was a gift from the heavens, talkative even when he himself couldn't say much, for fear of his father's scrutiny. Behave yourself. Well. He could hardly misbehave in any interesting way, considering the circumstances.

"He is asleep, you know," Rosa said quietly, nodding towards Jacob's father. Jacob blinked at her—he hadn't realized he was being obvious about it. "Oh, yes, I can see you darting your little looks. There's nothing to be worried about. Here, see—"

He watched with mild horror and endless fascination as she plucked a small, round pebble from the heel of her shoe and tossed it at his newspaper. It bounced off, and his father's head did not bounce forward, around the paper, demanding the reason for the disturbance.

She beamed at him. It was brighter than the sunlight coming in through the window. He squinted back.

"How did you know he wouldn't wake up?" he asked, but he leaned towards her anyways, sliding his bottom farther along the seat and farther away from his father's sleeping figure.

"The paper." She nodded at it. "It moves every time he breathes. Out—" The paper rustled, slightly, enough that Jacob would have missed it, had he not been watching— "And in. And again."

They watched the movement together in a peaceful sort of silence. In and out and again, and Jacob found himself almost dozing along with it, his own breathing joining in the slow, even motion.

"Well," Rosa said loudly, "as interesting as this is, I'd much rather play a game."

Jacob snapped his attention back towards where she sat, looking at him with a small, quiet smile on her face.

"I'm good at games," he boasted immediately, and then paused, unsure where the conviction came from. He'd played all sorts of things, of course—football and rugby at various boarding schools, and chess at home, on occasion, when his father or one of his nannies were feeling so inclined. But that was it—not extreme skill, no grounds for boasting.
Still—when she smiled at him, and said, “Glad to hear it,” fishing around in her bag for whatever she meant for them to play, he was glad to have said it. She was, he decided, the sort of woman you wanted to have like you.

“She’re talking about revolution. In Russia,” he blurted out, in as mature a voice as he could manage—so that this way, he told himself, glaring at the board, he wouldn’t have to forfeit. He’d distract her until she forgot whose was where and then—he hadn’t thought through the rest of it, really.

“That sounds like a dangerous journey,” she said thoughtfully, her eyes on the board, her hands fidgeting with her hat. This time, she settled it straight. It looked funny, he thought. Like a sailor. As soon as he thought it, the hat seemed to grow, the center sinking lower and a brim rising from nothing, settling along across her brow.

He blinked. Surely, he thought, it was a trick of the light—hats, in the real world, don’t change. They stay in the same shape until they grow old and misshapen, lumpy in all the wrong spots. They certainly don’t grow.

“It won’t be,” he said quickly, staring at a spot between her eyes and ignoring the strange red hat on her head. “I’m with my father. My father’s a genius, you see. Everybody says so. He’ll sort everything out.”

“Will he?” Her quiet, secret smile was back. He drew back a little bit, deeper into his chair, crossing his legs at the ankles. “And what if things only get worse?”
“They can’t,” he said, meaning, of course, that they couldn’t get worse with his father there to make them better. But she misunderstood, nodding sadly and pursing her lips to the side.

“It’s a good thing, then, that I’m not going to Russia,” she said. That startled a laugh out of him.

“Then you boarded the wrong train!”

“No,” she said pleasantly, “I think not,” and looked through the window. She looked through the window in a peculiar way, her eyes tracking across low trees and planted rows as if counting them, careful and precise. He cleared his throat.

“Then where are you going?”

“I’m going... I’m going...” Her eyes went back to him, and then through him, wide and unseeing, lost somewhere he had never been. Before he could clear his throat again to insist on her awareness, she seemed to return from wherever she’d gone, her eyes once again coming to light, and a smile taking over her face. “I’m going to win,” she finished easily, reaching over the board to move his piece forward, and then to jump hers over his, ending the game. She laughed, open and loud, and Jacob looked back at his father once before laughing with her, certain, this time, that he would wake.

“We should play again,” Rosa said later, her laughter settled, her eyes still bright from unshed tears. “Only this time, with stakes. Small ones, I think, like... ah, this teacake!” She pushed a small, flat cake across the table.

Jacob hesitated. Gambling seemed like pushing a limit—his father, were he to wake in the middle of it, would be livid. But Rosa was calm and kind, and seemed so sure, with her loud laughter and open conversation, that he wouldn’t wake.

He reached into his pockets. In them, he found only a little ring he’d made out of spare thread, and a small, glass marble. He held the marble up.

“How’s this?”

“Perfect,” she decreed, setting out the draughts men. This time, she played red.

Rosa began to hum again as they played. He jumped one of his men over two of hers; the tune grew almost frantic, leaps and trills shaking their way out of her throat, her smile never wavering. He glanced down at the cake—the prize that was almost certainly his, now.

Rosa kinged one more of her men.

Something strange began to happen to the cake.

It seemed to bloat, the edges rounding out and the top swelling over, shining like a ripe grape. He watched it as Rosa hummed—no longer Chopin, no, not delicate enough, far too wild—and a little crown of pink frosting shimmered its way across the top.

“Only a few moves left,” Rosa said, smiling when he looked up at her jumpily, ashamed for a reason he could not name to see something impossible happen in front of him.

He moved one of his kings over two more of her pieces. He had two pieces left to her one, king as it was. He watched her face fall when she realized this, a grimace pulling the corners of her lips down as she nudged her piece forward and he completed his final move, plucking the top piece from her last man standing.
“I win,” he said with a grin, holding the stone in the air and pulling the marble from his pocket to hold along with it, both prizes suspended in his palm. She looked towards him. The train rattled into another curve, golden light filling the air once more, and he waited for the train to straighten out, for the light in the compartment to return to its indirect gray standard, but when the train was straight once again, the light remained, trapped in their little compartment, bouncing from window to door and back to the Rosa’s eyes.

He looked back at the palm of his hand for something he understood, because he didn’t understand this. Light with no source, bonding to the air like—

He glanced down at the cake.

Like magic.

“Alright,” Rosa said softly, and plucked the cake from the table, handing it over to him. “Your prize, Jacob.”

“Thanks,” he squeaked, pulling the cake towards him with his other hand. The hand with the marble in it was growing hot. It was the marble itself—it appeared to have drawn the light into it, glowing when he curled his hand around it, golden light filling the little glass ball until it looked like it was pushing to burst.

“That’ll be lucky, now,” Rosa said, nodding at it sagely, as if there was nothing unnatural in a glowing marble, warm to the touch. “It’s always lucky, what you keep in a bet.”

He stuffed it into his pocket quickly, tossing the red piece back onto the board. As she watched, he took a bite of the cake—to prove that it wasn’t magic, that it was only a confection, nothing more, nothing impossible. The cake split under his teeth, full of butter and sugar, the frosting dissolving like spun sugar on his tongue. It was the strangest cake he had ever tasted. He couldn’t quite say the best, if only because, as soon as he’d eaten it, he forgot what it tasted like— only recalled that it had been sweet, and that he’d never tasted anything like it.

“Now,” Rosa said, rubbing her hands together, her energy returned to her, “another game?”

“Sure,” Jacob mumbled, brushing crumbs from his lips and his lap. He reached his hand into his pocket to pull out the marble.

Rosa held up a hand.

“Ah, ah. You can’t bed what you’ve already bet, dear.”

“I don’t have anything else.”

“What about…” Her eyes slid over him and towards his father. “That newspaper.”

“No,” Jacob hissed, inching farther away from his father still. “He may not’ve woken up yet, but that might do it.”

“It won’t,” she said dismissively, waving away his worry. “I promise you this, Jacob, he won’t be waking up any time soon.”

Jacob closed his eyes and huffed out a sigh through his nose. If he bet his father’s paper, he wouldn’t lose anything, not really. And if his father didn’t wake up until they arrived—well, he wouldn’t miss the paper, would he.
Keeping his eyes closed, Jacob reached over, pinched the center of the paper tightly between two fingers, and tugged it away. He could hear Rosa muffling a laugh. He heard, closer than that, a grumpy, snuffling noise that had his heart in his throat, his pulse thrumming hard enough that the paper shook in his hand.

He opened his eyes. His father had settled the hands no longer holding his paper against his stomach, demurely folded, and was snoring lightly, his head tipped back against the seat.

The relief rushed through Jacob so quickly he dropped the paper, fumbling to pick it up before his flailing could do what his theft did not.

“Red or white?” Rosa asked, clapping her hands together gleefully. She pulled a little red candy from her pocket and waved it in the air, dropping it on the corner of the table.

“You choose,” Jacob told her, folding the newspaper and tucking it underneath the wooden board, pressing it flat.

She chose red.

This game was faster. Rosa’s eyes never strayed from the board, growing wider with every turn, all of her moves coming quickly after his, so that he was never sure whose turn it was, really, only that she was somehow farther ahead than him, and benefitting from it.

She’d won before he realized it, a turn before, all of his remaining pieces lined up in a perfect diagonal row. She cackled as her piece hopped, two, three, four times, knocking the men off of their squares.

“Wonderful,” she crowed, holding out her hand. Jacob pressed the paper into it, grateful, suddenly that she’d asked for that, and not something he would have missed. She handed him the little wrapped candy.

“I thought you said it was good luck, to keep what you didn’t lose,” he said, eyeing it suspiciously. In the light of the compartment, the wrapper looked as though it was made of tiny, iridescent scales.

“Oh, yes,” Rosa said easily, “but the game is over and this is a gift. Please. I’ve got plenty.”

“Thanks,” he said, and tucked it into his pocket for later. She smiled at him. He realized then that her eyes hadn’t simply been wide the whole game—they’d grown, round as an owl’s, the same golden light coiled inside of them, bright as copper.

He watched as some of the light bled away, back into the air, leaving her irises more silver than gold, still bright but cooler, flitting from his face to the board game, quick and still-smiling.

“Let’s play another,” she said. Her eyes were different, but her voice was the same. He clung to that, the way it lilted, dragging across every syllable, blending her words together, rather than the impossibility that was the rest of her.

He felt no fear—only curiosity, and slight disappointment.

“I haven’t got anything left to bet.”

“Sure you do,” she said immediately, collecting the pieces and laying them in clean, precise rows. When he said nothing, she looked up at him, almost impatiently, nodding towards his wrist. “Your mother’s bracelet will do nicely.”

He gaped at her. “It isn’t mine to gamble!”
“She won’t miss it, dear,” she said, and then waved at the board. “Red or white?”

“No,” Jacob said stubbornly, scowling back at her and crossing his arms, careful to tug the sleeve of his jacket down over the little silver band. Rosa sighed and plucked the red hat from her head in a quick, rough motion. The pins in her hair fell down around her in a small shower of silver, and as he watched, her hair began to unfurl. It fell apart slowly, in thick, tightly curled strands that slipped and slithered their way down to her shoulders, undulating in the air like tentacles, like snakes, creeping towards the window and towards the compartment door.

Her hat, on her lap, shrank itself back to pillbox size, but that mattered little. The largest hat in the world couldn’t contain this.

A few strands of her hair twitched towards him like curious noses. He flinched back.

“Oh, Jacob, you needn’t be frightened,” she teased, not quite sympathetically, one lock of her hair rising to push a mass of others out of her face. He glared back at her reaching out towards her hair in all the manner of a dare, not wanting to, perhaps, but not wanting her to know that. The locks reached back, wrapping lightly around his fingers. The light seemed to follow his fingers’ decision, twirling into and through her hair, striping her face with sunlight. She beamed at him. He fought back a shudder and pulled away.

Rosa reached down to the ground, and then sat back up, straightening her skirt around her knees and tucking the hat a little straighter across her thighs, calm and easy.

“Here. This for your mother’s bracelet,” she said, holding up one of the silver pins. “Watch.” She ran her finger along the edge of it. A small pattern of stones rippled their way into being, garnets and emeralds twisting along a thin silver seam. It was beautiful. It was worth more, certainly, than his mother’s bracelet, which didn’t even shine anymore, really, and certainly couldn’t fit his mother’s wrist if it fit his, not anymore.

But he paused, frowning up at her. “How did you know that it’s my mother’s?”

Her eyes were flintier when they looked at him, going back to the bracelet too covetously, too often.

“You told me, of course,” she said softly, and began to whistle. It was wilder yet, sharp and piercing, and Jacob didn’t believe her. Something nudged at the bottom of his foot. Jacob looked down. Quietly, as if seeking to avoid notice, grass had begun to sprout below their feet. One blade made its way over the top of Jacob’s good shoes, and stayed there, as if proud it had made it that far, waving while its comrades spread far and fast. When the patches of green reached the Rosa’s feet, her whistling softened, growing sweeter and less piercing. The grass continued to grow.

Jacob chose red, and they began to play.

Slowly enough that he didn’t notice until several moves in, the air began to smell like his mother’s perfume, ambergris and musk and something sweetly floral. The dust motes seemed to hang with it, the air growing heavy and thick. Jacob looked at Rosa. She laughed. It sounded like his mother’s.
He did his best to play the way Rosa had, during the last game, his eyes only on the pieces, not on her, even as her whistle grew louder and fuller, layered in a way that a human voice could not be, her hair conducting an imaginary orchestra behind her, tendrils waving on an imaginary breeze.

One lock draped itself around his ankle. He jumped over two of her pieces. She stomped her feet, twice, hard enough to shake the floor of their train car. With a terrible noise, the roof peeled away and the sky dove in, wind ripping around the compartment, though not, Jacob noted with some grim, teary-eyed satisfaction, around the draughts board. She jumped over three of his men.

He finished the game with his arm pressed over his face, his eyes streaming from the wind. Easier to blame that—to blame the wind for the tears down his face, rather than a foolish bet made with something that didn't belong to him. Still—a win was a win, and when her whistling stopped, she held out her hand, and he conceded, sliding the little bracelet off of his hand and into hers.

“A good game,” she said, and waved a hand in the air. The wind cut in half. Jacob dropped his arm and breathed easily, but he closed his mouth around the automatic thank you that threatened to escape.

“Yes,” he said instead, and she laughed. This time, it sounded nothing like his mother’s. He wondered if he had imagined it.

For a moment they simply sat, Jacob looking outside and marveling at how much prettier it was inside—outside, it was fields upon fields, gray and green and green and yellow. The light was cold, though the sun was out, bleaching the countryside of its color. Inside looked like every summer he’d ever dreamt of, color and sound and a gold and a green that shone with its own heady, eternal light. A small bundle of flowers blossomed between his left foot and his father’s right. The petals were small and white, curled around a little yellow heart.

“Jasmine,” Rose said, when she caught him looking. “Your mother had good tastes.”

Of course—the flowery notes in his mother’s perfume, stronger, now, with the buds opening so close to him. She reached down to pluck two of them, handing one over to him and pressing one under her nose.

“You asked me,” she said, her voice slightly nasal, muffled by the flower she spoke around, “where I was going. You see, Jacob, I’m going home.”

A little bit of yellow pollen dusted off against her upper lip.

“Where’s home?” Jacob asked. He believed less and less that she belonged in Russia—or anywhere else he’d heard of or read of, even dreamt of. She was too bizarre, too uncanny. Her hair seemed to be multiplying, laying across both seats on her side of the compartment and creeping, like vines, up the window and across the door.

“The spirit world,” she told him easily, tossing the flower aside and grinning as if she’d told a joke. But Jacob believed her entirely; the air around her began to take on a strange, shimmering quality, as if a mirage had taken residence on either side of her. A different world, to him, sounded entirely appropriate.

“Now,” she said, pulling her legs up towards her and crossing them in a child-like fashion, her hair pressing down along her skirt to keep it in place over her knees. “One last game, I should think.”
"I have nothing left to bet," he said, sure, this time, that there was nothing of his father’s or his own to give, short of clothing, or perhaps his father’s pocket watch. Nothing, surely, that a spirit would want anything to do with.

She laughed harder than she had yet, a full-bodied chuckle that had her gripping the seat on either side of her for balance.

"Why, my dear, you have the last best thing of all!" Her smile grew sharper. Her eyes grew wider. Her mouth, too, began to grow, the smile taking up more of her face than physicality allowed. "You have yourself."

Jacob frowned and looked down at himself. He saw a small boy of eight in his school clothes, his pants a little dirty from the teacake and the elbows of his jacket slightly worn. Rosa smiled at him. Her eyes flickered from silver to gold, like a candle half blown out.

"Here are the stakes: I shall take myself and my home away from this place—but you shall have to come with me."

Jacob swallowed. It looked like a dream—her face slid into impossible, beautiful shapes, but never for long enough for him to focus on. The light seemed to be as much a part of her form as anything else. Tendrils of it brushed against his face, his hair; the wind puffed in warm breaths against cheeks.

"It’ll be great fun," she cajoled, and he almost believed her. The smell of jasmine grew stronger.

"And if I win?" he asked.

She snorted, and her hair bristled up towards the hole that used to be the ceiling. "That would be a win. You’d never grow old, you’d always be cared for. Never too hot or too cold, never sick, never dead. You’d be—"

"If I win," he stressed, curling his fingers around the marble in his pocket. The heat was beginning to leech away. She sighed with her whole being, her spine sliding down the seat and her hair drooping back towards the floor. "If you win, I’ll give you back your mother."

That drew him up short.

"Back?" he asked, leaning towards her. "What do you mean, back? I know where my mother is. She’s receiving treatment in Moscow—"

She blew a raspberry and held up a hand, her hair wrapping itself around her body and down her arm.

"Afraid not, dear. She took too ill, you see. But," she added quickly, drawing her arm back, "She’s only halfway here, really. And so I can give her back to you, good as old. If you win."

"I will," he blurted, and then balled his fingers into his palms, digging the nails into his skin. He’d have to—what would losing a bracelet matter, in the scheme of things, if he got back his mother? A mother he’d lost—when?

"When?" he asked Rosa, clearing his throat before the lumps in it could wring his voice any thinner. "When did she—"

Rosa shook all over. When she stopped, her hair had turned to feathers, a layer of down covering her from head to ankle. Her little black boots were still on her feet. She raised her arms in a careless shrug. They looked like wings.

"Red or white?" she asked sweetly.
He played white against her red. In the third move, he took one of her men to have her take two of his. He took three of hers, to have her take four. When the temperature once again began to fall, he leaned in closer to his father, who snuffled out another snore, and slept on.

“We’d have such fun,” Rosa hummed as they played, knocking down another one of his men as he did the same to her. “It’s beautiful there. Always summer.”

“It’s beautiful here,” Jacob retorted, kinging another one of his pieces. She hissed down at it, and began to hum again, reckless and quick. With one high, pure note, snow began to fall into their compartment, blanketing the grass in moments. Jacob shivered, but played on, tucking his hands into his pockets after every turn. And then he began to hum in return—something his mother used to sing to him, a lullaby about long winters. As he hummed, the snow melted. He untucked his hands. Rosa sneezed. More jasmine blossomed between them.

There were two pieces left on the board. White and red. A white piece that looked like a stone, or maybe bone. A red that gleamed.

It was Jacob’s turn.

“You know,” he said, watching the way her face turned up towards him, surrounded by feathers. “Feathers suit you.”

“Well, thanks,” she said, turning her neck slightly to preen the feathers along the top of her wing, where her shoulder used to be, a few feathers knocked askew by falling snow.

Quickly, he nudged one of her pieces forward.

When she turned her head back around, a smile on her mouth, he jumped his piece forward, over hers, knocking it off of its square and into his hand. He curled his fingers around the piece and held it up, smiling at her. She blinked at him. And blinked again. And again.

“I win,” he said weakly, but she continued to blink, faster, now. Her eyes grew larger, pushing against each other and her nose for space. They grew until they were the only things Jacob could see, huge and round and threatening to swallow both each other, then Rosa, whole. He took a deep breath, ready to shout his father awake if he had to—

Jacob jolted awake with a shout, jumping up to his feet and spinning around the compartment. The only person there, besides himself, was his father, blinking himself awake and grumbling about it, glaring at Jacob until he sat down again. Without a word, he turned back over and settled back into sleep. Jacob struggled to control his breathing. There was no grass on the floor. No jasmine. Rosa’s seat was empty, and the light in the cabin was dim, the ceiling firmly affixed to the walls of the train car.

Jacob sat down, brushing his hands over his pant legs. A small, dried piece of frosting, perhaps pink, though it was too dark to tell, fell from his lap into his hand. He reached into his pockets out of curiosity and a small, desperate hope that it wasn’t a dream—that everything would be as alright, if strange, as he’d been promised.
First he found his marble, warmer to the touch than it should’ve been, body heat or not. Next, a small, hard candy. And in his other pocket, a small red stone—polished and shined and flat as a draughts man.

A few hours later, when the train stopped and he and his father—complaining about a missing newspaper and petty thieves with nothing better to do than attack poor, sleeping passengers—disembarked, he held the piece up to the light, just to check again. Away from Rosa, it didn’t look magical—only well-taken care of, carefully collected and preserved. Still, the air at the station smelled remarkably of his mother’s perfume, without a jasmine bush in sight.

Revolutions came and went. The bracelet was forgotten long before they left Russia, though Russia never forgot his father. They changed their name to something generic enough to hide under, in one new country, and then another, until, one day, his father died of old age, and his mother soon after that. Still, it wasn’t until Jacob himself was an old man that he found himself in front of their graves, countries and decades away from where he first received it, unwrapping a small, red candy from an iridescent wrapper, marveling at the way that, even with his rheumy eyes, desperately in need of glasses but without an inclination of putting up with the fuss, he could see the tiny scales.

He popped the candy into his mouth, and caught his breath, for a moment. An indescribable flavor erupted across his tongue. It tasted the way jasmine smelled. It reminded him of summer. It reminded him of draughts.

“Are you planning on resting yourself, any time soon?”

Jacob turned. A woman leaned against one of the gravestones. She had a little black pillbox hat on, a small lace veil set at an inappropriately jaunty angle, all things considered. He smiled. He couldn’t see her face, not clearly, and he wouldn’t be able to recognize it besides, but he knew that voice.

“Perhaps,” he rasped, and laughed a creaky, croaky, old-man’s laugh, stepping forward to tap the end of his cane between the two stones. “It’s getting to be about that time.”

Rosa laughed back, and walked forward far enough to slip an arm through his, her hat growing daringly small as he watched it—or, perhaps, a trick of the light.

“Oh, yes, but you’ll love it,” she said cheerfully. “Never too hot or too cold, never sick, never dead...”

They walked along together, down the walkway through the cemetery, until the mist swallowed them up. The last golden light of the sunset silhouetted their figures, that of a young woman and an old, hunched man, his poise becoming straighter the further away they moved, until that, too, was gone, ray by ray swallowed by a changing world.