

Paul Morris**Age 29; Juggling, Human Ladder**

There's something wrong with this whole situation. I mean, something even more wrong than Alice dying. Cecelia needs me to do something about it.

Look, I'll admit it, I've been cruising in this gig for a while, probably my entire time with the company. Circus training started as a hobby when I was a teenager, an outgrowth of gymnastics, and I guess they were both something I did more for the girls than out of love for it. My parents wanted me to go to uni, but I didn't know what I wanted to study, so I got myself a job instead. One job became a succession of odd jobs, and a few years later the job was in circus. I've stuck with that mostly because I like the people, I like the creative atmosphere, but performing... just another job to me.

Then I met Cecelia, and damnit, even if the job still doesn't matter, she does.

Cecelia's one of the riggers here. She's been teaching me how to do that too. Frankly, I never really had much of an appreciation for the craft before meeting her. When it was all just a job, I never really had the drive to go the extra mile needed to become an aerialist... or a tumbler, for that matter, anything that puts my body on the line was just a step too far for me. In clowning, there's not much need for rigging, and I never really appreciated how important it is. Since my informal training with Cecelia, I've come to realise just how important good rigging is. Lives ride on it, my friends' lives.

I've been hoping to be allowed to transition out of performance and into rigging, hopefully by the next show. I think everyone would be happier that way.

Financial Problems

We all know that the circus is having some financial trouble. The owners were trying to conceal that, but when some of us didn't get paid on time one week, we worked it out pretty quickly. Situations like that get ugly fast, but in circus the show goes on.

The aerialists were the first to implement a plan of action. They've started doing their routines without safety harnesses, hoping that the increased danger will draw in the crowds. The riggers have been running the safeties anyway, hoping that they'll come to their senses.

It was Luke who came up with a plan for the rest of us. He wants to change our approach to shows, to produce acts that can be done in smaller venues all the way down to street performance. He hopes that the new opportunities will bring increased revenue. The problem with that is, there will be less opportunity for the aerialists, and less call for riggers too.

But what Nigel told us this afternoon was that Jeremy is pushing a variation on Luke's plan. He wants to do away with big shows entirely, put the company as a whole on hiatus until the economy improves, and just go with smaller shows. Nigel reckons the rest of us are going to have to make a decision on that, and if we clowns want our voices to be heard, we should stick together on the subject. But that's where the conversation was cut short.

The Fall

Rehearsals this morning were shorter than usual, because of the show tonight. Nobody wants the tumblers and aerialists to be tired on opening night, so officially everyone had the afternoon off to rest. Half of us were going to be rehearsing again this afternoon anyway – most of the clowns, 'cause Nige says we aren't ready yet, and some of the others because they're just fanatical perfectionists – but officially nobody *had* to.

But the early finish this morning meant I had some time to kill, so I climbed up into the scaffolding to check the rigging. I mean, I knew it was going to be okay, the aerialists are pretty damn meticulous with their equipment, but I like clambering around up there and if

there's one thing I've learned dating Ceci it's that there's no such thing as checking too often. I did it just like Ceci taught me, orderly, start at one end, work across each cat-walk in turn, then down each upright, top to bottom. Three passes: sounds and lighting first, then aerial apparatus, then safeties. That way if you screw up your earlier work on a later pass, it's never the safeties that are wrong. Not that the aerialists are using the safety rigs lately; they've been ignoring them to make their acts seem more spectacular. I was extra careful not to move anything at all on that last pass, since an unused safety doesn't help if your apparatus fails, and everything was in order so I didn't have to move anything.

When I was done with the check, I took a rest on the edge of the stage, sipping from my water bottle. If I hadn't been so close to the stage door, and sitting still, I probably wouldn't have heard the noise of somebody moving around outside the stage door. I knew the only other way to get out there was a side door from the corridor that between the foyer to the admin offices, but nobody would usually have been using that door at this time of day. I walked quietly, barefooted, to the stage door, and carefully peeked out.

Ophelia was out there, peering through the side door into the corridor beyond. As I watched, she jerked back against the wall, to where she'd be hidden by the door from anybody inside. I jerked back then too, in case she turned her head my way, then listened until I heard her shoe scrape on the cement. I took another look then, quickly, and she was gone – back inside, there was no other way she could have left that quickly.

I was a little curious, but it wasn't really my business, so I went back inside, grabbed my stuff and hit the showers. I wanted to smell a bit better by the time Cecelia showed up.

Cecelia knocked on the door just as I was finishing up. We headed backstage, where we ate sandwiches while laying out harnesses for inspection. A little while later, Hannah came to find me. Nigel had asked me to meet with him and some of the other clowns this afternoon, and Hannah came to tell me that they were waiting for me. I told Ceci I wouldn't be long, and followed Hannah to the canteen. On the way past, I noticed that Susan and Luke were practicing on stage, separately, while Lily and Maria were on the tightwire together.

Just after Hannah and I sat down with Nigel and Dominic, Matt stormed across the room to where Alice and Beth were talking at another table and demanded that Alice do another rehearsal with him this afternoon. I immediately looked to Nigel, knowing how I'd react if someone talked that way to Cecelia, and I heard Dominic warn him, "Don't". Then Alice snapped an agreement and stalked out, Matt close on her heels.

That's when Nigel told us about Jeremy's schemes, after taking a moment to calm himself. We started to discuss how we would handle that issue, but we didn't get very far when we were interrupted by screams from the auditorium. We all rushed towards the shouts and soon learned that Alice had fallen from the trapeze.

The police came and asked everyone a whole lot of questions. There were forensics people, counsellors, the whole works. I'm pretty low on the totem pole around here, so I was one of the last performers to be interviewed. Cecelia and I comforted each other while we waited.

When I came back from my interview, Cecelia was gone. I went looking for her, only to find her being marched towards a police car by two blokes in uniform. I ran up to them, demanded to know what they were doing, but another cop held me back when I got too close. Cecelia was telling them she hadn't done anything wrong, they just had to listen to her.

As they were pushing her down into the car, she looked at me, and shouted, "Paul, check the rigging!" Then the cops slammed the door and the car pulled away.

What was she talking about? The rigging was right, I already checked it this morning.

Cecelia's smart and tough, she'll lawyer up and be alright for a few hours, but she's in trouble. She said what she did for a reason, I know it, and I'm the only one who can help her.

Other People

Alice Taylor (NPC)

Alice was good, but not perfect, and that's what safety harnesses are for. She knew she wasn't perfect, too, she wasn't an egomaniac like some aerialists, so I don't understand why she agreed to work without the safeties. Even having agreed initially, she still had the option to back out, but she didn't, even when her performance started going downhill a few months ago. Oh, sure, it wasn't much, but I'm getting used to looking at the safety aspects, and while she looked as spectacular as ever, there have been other dangerous little slips.

Bethany Summer

Bethany has become Alice's little protégé. I've watched her from the rigging, and somehow Alice has instilled in Beth that same ecstasy that she felt herself. I could tell by the look on her face as she flew from the trapeze, something you wouldn't necessarily see from the ground. I wonder how Alice turned Beth around? For ages, Bethany resisted doing anything that put her higher than a partner's shoulder.

Caitlin Chin

I get to chat to Caitlin a fair bit now that I spend more time in the rigging. She's had a lot of experience and it was good to hear her perspective on how equipment should be checked over. She can be a little brusque but that's just because she prefers to cut through any bullshit.

Daniel Higgs

Daniel is a good man and a good acrobat, solid and sensible, though not exactly the friendly type.

Dominic Richards

Dominic and I have become pretty good friends since he started with the troupe just recently. Him, me and Nigel, kind of the Three Musketeers of the troupe. Or maybe Larry, Curly and Moe. Oh, to be that young again...

... would probably be hell, come to think of it. I can guess how hard it is for him to be there for Gwen, when what she needs is a friend and, if Dominic's anything like I was at his age, he wants so much more.

Ellen Telyanin

Ellen is from an old circus family and won't let anyone forget it. I know doing away with the safety harnesses was her idea. Nobody else would have pushed for something so dangerous. But why wasn't she shot down in flames? The other girls had to see that it was a ploy on her part, so why back her up on it?

Ethan Telyanin

Stuck-up, spoiled little boy who doesn't seem to realise that he's not in control of his life – his twin sister Ellen is. And what Hannah told me about what he did to Gwen's attacker...

Gwen Palmer

Really sweet girl, almost naïve in a way. I'd say "innocent", but I think she's rather beyond innocence now, unfortunately. Hannah told me the story of the man who attacked Gwen in the dressing rooms after a show one night. If Hannah hadn't worked out something was up before it happened, and fetched Dominic, Daniel and Ethan... well, Gwen could have come to much worse harm than having her eyes opened to a harsh world. Heh, Hannah a hero, who'da thunk it?

Was it something to do with the attack that led her to set up house with the resident witch, Ellen? Or maybe her new-opened eyes see something in her the rest of us can't?

Hannah Riordan

I like Hannah – she calls things as she sees them even when what she's seeing is completely off-base. She hasn't kept it a secret that she's unhappy with my recent performance as a clown, but I know she just says it because she sees it as true, not out of spite. She has trouble relating to people but

she really tries hard to understand everyone and I'd swear that there's nothing around here that escapes her notice.

Jeremy Telyanin

Jeremy has started hanging out with us clowns a fair bit since Dominic and Susan joined us, and it sure isn't Dom who has caught his eye. I used to think he was less dangerous than his brother and sister, but with this plan of his... maybe he's just dangerous in a different way.

John Perrett

The big little man of the troupe, John was always Luke's offsider back in his wild days. I guess he's carrying the torch now.

Lily Gardner

I've partnered with Lily for a few acts in the past. For this show, I've done some work with her on the human ladder act, and she really hasn't been coming up to her usual standard on that. Luckily she's only one of two understudies for that act, and we'll only use it at all if Luke and Maria aren't up to doing their risley or are unavailable, but I'd still rather Lily pulled it together.

I made the mistake of asking her if something was wrong, after a human ladder rehearsal a few weeks ago. When I said I was concerned that she was having trouble with it, she looked like she was about to slap me. I've never seen her like that before. I was just concerned, really!

Luke Conolly

When Nigel and I cough "groupies", everyone knows we're referring to Luke's past. Only his past, though. He's really devoted to Maria, his new wife.

Maria Conolly

Maria has formed some really strong relationships since she started here, especially with Lily, John and, of course, her new husband Luke.

Matthew Mills

Matt's one of the show's stars – decent guy and great to watch on a trapeze. But he can't have missed the little slips. So why did he continue to work without the safety harnesses? Why did he force Alice into yet another rehearsal and then do it without the safeties again? They could have used the rehearsal to get used to the harnesses again, at least a little, but he didn't. He was almost abusive, the way he talked to her.

Nigel Telyanin

If it wasn't for Nigel, I'm sure I would have been fired ages ago. I've come to rely on him pretty heavily to get my performance up to scratch. I'm lucky that he'd rather spend extra time making sure all the acts are right than let us screw it up on the night.

With all the time we've spent together, we've come to know each other pretty well. Nigel has even told Dominic and me that he was dating Alice. He has been keeping it quiet, though, because the whole deal was... well, tentative, I guess. Nigel was frustrated that he wasn't getting more out of the relationship, that Alice wasn't willing to commit to it. As far as I know, only the four of us knew about it.

Ophelia Seymour

Nigel is a clown because he loves it. I'm a clown because I didn't really love anything. Everybody else uses clowning to step up to something else. But Nigel has mentioned that Ophelia was with the company even before he joined, and he was in the very first show. So what's up with her? She doesn't seem to be getting a big kick out of clowning these days. She's all smiles and friendly when she knows people are watching, but she gets this pinched, worried look when she doesn't remember to play the happy clown.

Susan Michaels

Susan's the new baby of the group. She's never performed with any troupe before us, apparently was barely even trained. She's a good kid. Jeremy seems to have her a bit overwhelmed, but we'll look after her.