

'Dark, dangerous  
and full of twists.'

**GEORGE R.R. MARTIN**  
author of *Game of Thrones*

# THE MAGICIAN'S LAND

**LEV GROSSMAN**

THE FINAL PART OF  
THE MAGICIANS TRILOGY

THE NEW YORK TIMES NO. 1 BESTSELLER



## **Contents**

[About the Book](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lev Grossman](#)

[Praise for Lev Grossman](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Copyright](#)

## About the Book

Quentin Coldwater has lost everything. He has been cast out of the secret magical land of Fillory and now, friendless and broke, he returns to where his story began: Brakebills Preparatory College of Magic. But Quentin's past soon catches up with him . . .

Meanwhile, Fillory's magical barriers are failing, and barbarians from the north have invaded. To save their beloved world from extinction, Eliot and Janet, High King and Queen of Fillory, must embark on a final, dangerous quest.

Quentin's adventure takes him from Antarctica to the enchanted Neitherlands, where he finds old friends. But all roads lead back to Fillory, where Quentin must put things right, or die trying.

## About the Author

Lev Grossman is a novelist and *Time* magazine's book critic. A graduate of Harvard and Yale, he has written articles for the *New York Times*, *Salon*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Time Out New York* and the *Village Voice*. In 2005 his debut novel *Codex* was published to great critical acclaim. He is also the author of the *Magicians* trilogy. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

ALSO BY LEV GROSSMAN

*Codex*  
*The Magicians*  
*The Magician King*

## **Praise for *The Magicians Land***

‘Richly imagined and continually surprising ...The strongest book in Grossman’s series. It not only offers a satisfying conclusion to Quentin Coldwater’s quests, earthly and otherwise, but also considers complex questions about identity and selfhood as profound as they are entertaining ... This is a gifted writer, and his gifts are at their apex in *The Magician’s Land*’

Edan Lepucki, *New York Times Book Review*

‘[A] wonderful trilogy . . .If the Narnia books were like catnip for a certain kind of kid, these books are like crack for a certain kind of adult. . .Brakebills graduates can have a hard time adjusting to life outside...Readers of Mr. Grossman’s mesmerizing trilogy might experience the same kind of withdrawal upon finishing *The Magician’s Land*. Short of wishing that a fourth book could suddenly appear by magic, there’s not much we can do about it.’

Sarah Lyall, *New York Times*

‘The last (and IOHO, best) book in the hit Magicians trilogy. Savor every word.’

*Cosmopolitan*

‘If you haven’t read the first two books in Grossman’s Magicians trilogy, buy them immediately and set aside a weekend to read them straight through. The series...has been called “Harry Potter for adults.” But it’s way more complex than that. Grossman hones in on the particularly brutal business of being young, and then adds layer upon

layer of literary allusion, creating works that are both homages to fantasy's past and glimpses at its future.'

*New Republic*

'The world of Grossman's 'Magicians' series is arrestingly original, joyful and messy. It's so vividly rendered that it's almost disappointing to remember that it doesn't, after all, exist. The overall effect is—well, there's really only one word for it: It's magical.'

*Chicago Tribune*

'An explosive conclusion to Quentin Coldwater's adventures.'

*Entertainment Weekly*

'Grossman makes it clear in the deepening complexity and widening scope of each volume that he understands the pleasures and perils of stories and believing in them ... *The Magician's Land* triumphantly answers the essential questions at the heart of the series, about whether magic belongs to childhood alone, whether reality trumps fantasy, even whether we have the power to shape our own lives in an indifferent universe.'

*Los Angeles Times*

'Lev Grossman has conjured a rare creature: a trilogy that simply gets better and better as it goes along. The *Magician's Land* is sumptuous and surprising yet deliciously familiar, a glass of rich red wine left out for a hungry ghost. Literary perfection for those of us who grew up testing the structural integrity of the backs of wardrobes.'

Erin Morgenstern, author  
of *The Night Circus*



‘Poignant and messy, fearsome and beautiful—like a good magic spell, the final book in this trilogy is more than the sum of its parts. Also, damn. Just some of the best magic I have read, ever.’

Maggie Stiefvater, author  
of *The Shiver Trilogy*

‘The strength of the trilogy lies...in the characters, whose inner lives and frailties Grossman renders with care and empathy ... Quentin[’s]. . .magical journey is deeply human.’

*The New Yorker*

‘A wholly satisfying and stirring conclusion to this weird and wonderful tale. . .Relentlessly subversive and inventive...[Grossman] reminds us that good writing can beguile the senses, imagination and intellect. The door at the back of the book is still there, and we can go back to those magical lands, older and wiser, eager for the re-enchantment.’

*Washington Post*

‘A huge part of the pleasure of this trilogy in general and this volume in particular is that, even as we consume the story just to find out what happens to Quentin, we know that we are collaborating in our own versions of its creation, its animation. The reader gets to be a magician, too.’

*Miami Herald*

‘A triumphant climax to the best fantasy trilogy of the decade.’

Charles Stross, author of  
*Accelerando* and *The Rhesus*

*Chart*

‘*The Magician’s Land* ...does all the things you want in a third book ...so worthy of your reading time, and your re-reading time.’

Cory Doctorow, *Boing Boing*

‘When read straight through, the Magicians trilogy reveals its lovely shape. The world of the books wraps around itself, exposing most everything necessary by its conclusion, but occluding operations that we’ll never need to see. There’s still a series of mysteries and untold tales left unknown deep inside the books.’

*Slate Book Review*

### **Praise for *The Magician King***

‘Lev Grossman’s novel is full of magic. . .stupendous urban fantasy ... *The Magician King* is Harry Potter for grown-ups who have learned to hate Harry Potter.’

*Guardian*

‘[A] serious, heartfelt novel [that] turns the machinery of fantasy inside out.’

*New York Times* (Editor’s Choice)

‘[*The Magician King*] is *The Catcher in the Rye* for devotees of alternative universes. It’s dazzling and devil-may-care...Grossman has created a rare, strange, and scintillating novel.’

*Chicago Tribune*

*'The Magician King* is a rare achievement, a book that simultaneously criticizes and celebrates our deep desire for fantasy.'

*Boston Globe*

'Grossman has devised an enchanted milieu brimming with possibility, and his sly authorial voice gives it a literary life that positions *The Magician King* well above the standard fantasy fare.'

*San Francisco Chronicle*

'Grossman expands his magical world into a boundless enchanted universe, and his lively characters navigate it with aplomb.'

*The New Yorker*

*'The Magician King* is a fresh take on the fantasy-quest novel—dark, austere, featuring characters with considerable psychological complexity, a collection of idiosyncratic talking animals (a sloth who knows the path to the underworld, a dragon in the Grand Canal), and splendid set pieces in Venice, Provence, Cornwall, and Brooklyn.'

*The Daily Beast*

### **Praise for *The Magicians***

'Harry Potter if it had been written by Irvine Welsh ... *The Magicians* is angst-ridden, bleak ...joyous and gloriously readable. Forget Hogwarts: this is where the magic *really* is.'

*SFX magazine*

‘The most entertaining and compelling fantasy I’ve read in a long time ... Harry Potter for grown-ups ... I can’t imagine any lover of well-written classic fantasy ... who won’t love it.’

Lisa Tuttle, *The Times*

‘Grossman explores the boundaries between fiction and reality with great imagination...This is a dark, well-written book that takes the wizard genre into thoughtful places.’

Audrey Niffenegger,  
*Guardian*

‘Fresh and compelling ... *The Magicians* is a great fairy tale, written for grown-ups but appealing to our most basic desires for stories to bring about some re-enchantment with the world, where monsters lurk but where a young man with a little magic may prevail.’

*Washington Post*

‘*The Magicians* is to Harry Potter as a shot of Irish whiskey is to a glass of weak tea. Solidly rooted in the traditions of both fantasy and mainstream literary fiction, the novel tips its hat to Oz and Narnia as well as to Harry, but don’t mistake this for a children’s book. Grossman’s sensibilities are thoroughly adult, his narrative dark and dangerous and full of twists. Hogwarts was never like this.’

George R. R. Martin,  
bestselling author of *A Game of Thrones*

‘Stirring, complex, adventurous...from the life of Quentin Coldwater, his slacker Park Slope Harry Potter, Lev Grossman delivers superb coming of age fantasy.’

Junot Díaz, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wa*

'I felt like I was poppin' peyote buttons with J. K. Rowling ... I couldn't put it down.'

Mickey Rapkin, *GQ*

'*The Magicians* may just be the most subversive, gripping, and enchanting fantasy novel I've read this century ... Grossman is a hell of a pacer, and the book rips along ... [and] comes across as a sheer, seamless face that you can't stop yourself from tumbling down once you launch yourself off the first page. This isn't just an exercise in exploring what we love about fantasy and the lies we tell ourselves about it - it's a shit-kicking, gripping, tightly plotted novel that makes you want to take the afternoon off to work to finish it.'

Cory Doctorow, *Boing Boing*

'This gripping novel draws on the conventions of contemporary and classic fantasy novels in order to upend them, and tell a darkly cunning story about the power of imagination itself... an unexpectedly moving coming-of age story.'

*The New Yorker*

'Anyone who grew up reading about magical wardrobes and unicorns and talking trees before graduating to *Less Than Zero* and *The Secret History* and *Bright Lights, Big City* will immediately feel right at home with this smart, beautifully written book ... *The Magicians* is fantastic, in all senses of the word. It's strange, fanciful, extravagant,



eccentric, and truly remarkable – a great story, masterfully told.'

Scott Smith, author of *The Ruins*

'Remember the last time you ran home to finish a book? This is it, folks. *The Magicians* is the most dazzling, erudite and thoughtful fantasy novel to date. You'll be bedazzled by the magic but also brought short by what it has to say about the world we live in.'

Gary Shteyngart, author of  
*The Russian Debutante's Handbook and Absurdistan*

'*The Magicians* brilliantly explores the hidden underbelly of fantasy and easy magic, taking what's simple on the surface and turning it over to show us the complicated writhing mess beneath. It's like seeing the worlds of Narnia and Harry Potter through a 3-D magnifying glass.'

Naomi Novik, author of the  
*Temeraire* series

'*The Magicians* is a spellbinding, fast-moving, dark fantasy book for grownups that feels like an instant classic. I read it in a niffin-blue blaze of page turning, enthralled by Grossman's verbal and imaginative wizardry, his complex characters and most of all, his superb, brilliant inquiry into the wondrous, dangerous world of magic.'

Kate Christensen, author of  
*The Epicure's Lament* and  
*The Great Man*

LEV GROSSMAN  
THE  
MAGICIAN'S  
LAND



arrow books

*For Halcyon*

*Further up and further in!*

—C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

# CHAPTER 1

THE LETTER HAD said to meet in a bookstore.

It wasn't much of a night for it: early March, drizzling and cold but not quite cold enough for snow. It wasn't much of a bookstore either. Quentin spent fifteen minutes watching it from a bus shelter at the edge of the empty parking lot, rain drumming on the plastic roof and making the asphalt shine in the streetlights. Not one of your charming, quirky bookstores, with a ginger cat on the windowsill and a shelf of rare signed first editions and an eccentric, bewhiskered proprietor behind the counter. This was just another strip-mall outpost of a struggling chain, squeezed in between a nail salon and a Party City, twenty minutes outside Hackensack off the New Jersey Turnpike.

Satisfied, Quentin crossed the parking lot. The enormous bearded cashier didn't look up from his phone when the door jingled. Inside you could still hear the noise of cars on the wet road, like long strips of paper tearing, one after another. The only unexpected touch was a wire birdcage in one corner, but where you would have expected a parrot or a cockatoo inside there was a fat blue-black bird instead. That's how un-charming this store was: it had a crow in a cage.

Quentin didn't care. It was a bookstore, and he felt at home in bookstores, and he hadn't had that feeling much lately. He was going to enjoy it. He pushed his way back through the racks of greeting cards and cat calendars, back to where the actual books were, his glasses steaming up and his coat dripping on the thin carpet. It didn't matter



where you were, if you were in a room full of books you were at least halfway home.

The store should have been empty, coming up on nine o'clock on a cold rainy Thursday night, but instead it was full of people. They browsed the shelves silently, each one on his or her own, slowly wandering the aisles like sleepwalkers. A jewel-faced girl with a pixie cut was reading Dante in Italian. A tall boy with large curious eyes who couldn't have been older than sixteen was absorbed in a Tom Stoppard play. A middle-aged black man with elfin cheekbones stood staring at the biographies through thick, iridescent glasses. You would almost have thought they'd come there to buy books. But Quentin knew better.

He wondered if it would be obvious, if he would know right away, or if there would be a trick to it. If they'd make him guess. He was getting to be a pretty old dog—he'd be thirty this year—but this particular game was new to him.

At least it was warm inside. He took off his glasses and wiped them with a cloth. He'd just gotten them a couple of months ago, the price of a lifetime of reading fine print, and they were still an unfamiliar presence on his face: a windshield between him and the world, always slipping down his nose and getting smudged when he pushed them up again. When he put them back on he noticed a sharp-featured young woman, girl-next-door pretty, if you happened to live next door to a grad student in astrophysics. She was standing in a corner paging through a big, expensive architectural-looking volume. Piranesi drawings: vast shadowy vaults and cellars and prisons, haunted by great wooden engines.

Quentin knew her. Her name was Plum. She felt him watching her and looked up, raising her eyebrows in mild surprise, as if to say *you're kidding—you're in on this thing too?*

He shook his head once, very slightly, and looked away, keeping his face carefully blank. Not to say *no, I'm not in*

*on this, I just come here for the novelty coffee mugs and their trenchant commentary on the little ironies of everyday life.* What he meant was: *let's pretend we don't know each other.*

It was looking like he had some time to kill so he joined the browsers, scanning the spines for something to read. The Fillory books were there, of course, shelved in the young adult section, repackaged and rebranded with slick new covers that made them look like supernatural romance novels. But Quentin couldn't face them right now. Not tonight, not here. He took down a copy of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* instead and spent ten contented minutes at a checkpoint in gray 1950s Berlin.

"Attention, Bookbumpers patrons!" the cashier said over the PA, though the store was small enough that Quentin could hear his unamplified voice perfectly clearly.

"Attention! Bookbumpers will be closing in five minutes! Please make your final selections!"

He put the book back. An old woman in a beret that looked like she'd knitted it herself bought a copy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and let herself out into the night. So not her. The skinny kid who'd been camped out cross-legged in the graphic novels section, reading them to rags, left without buying anything. So not him either. A tall, bluff-looking guy with Cro-Magnon hair and a face like a stump who'd been furiously studying the greeting cards, pretty clearly overthinking his decision, finally bought one. But he didn't leave.

At nine o'clock exactly the big cashier closed the door and locked it with a final, fateful jingle, and suddenly Quentin was all nerves. He was on a carnival ride, and the safety bar had dropped, and now it was too late to get off. He took a deep breath and frowned at himself, but the nerves didn't go away. The bird shuffled its feet in the seeds and droppings on the bottom of its cage and squawked once. It was a lonely kind of squawk, the kind

you'd hear if you were out by yourself on a rainy moor, lost, with darkness closing in fast.

The cashier walked to the back of the store—he had to excuse himself past the guy with the cheekbones—and opened a gray metal door marked STAFF ONLY.

“Through here.”

He sounded bored, like he did this every night, which for all Quentin knew he did. Now that he was standing up Quentin could see that he really was huge—six foot four or five and deep-chested. Not pumped, but with broad shoulders and that aura of slow inexorability that naturally enormous men have. His face was noticeably asymmetrical: it bulged out on one side as if he'd been slightly overinflated. He looked like a gourd.

Quentin took the last spot in line. He counted eight others, all of them looking around cautiously and taking exaggerated care not to jostle one another, as if they might explode on contact. He worked a tiny revelation charm to make sure there was nothing weird about the door—he made an OK sign with his thumb and forefinger and held it up to one eye like a monocle.

“No magic,” the cashier said. He snapped his fingers at Quentin. “Guy. Hey. No spells. No magic.”

Heads turned.

“Sorry?”

Quentin played dumb. Nobody called him Your Majesty anymore, but he didn't think he was ready to answer to *guy* yet. He finished his inspection. It was a door and nothing more.

“Cut it out. No magic.”

Pushing his luck, Quentin turned and studied the clerk. Through the lens he could see something small shining in his pocket, a talisman that might have been related to sexual performance. The rest of him shone too, as if he were covered in phosphorescent algae. Weird.

“Sure.” He dropped his hands and the lens vanished. “No problem.”

Someone rapped on the windowpane. A face appeared, indistinct through the wet glass. The cashier shook his head, but whoever it was rapped again, harder.

He sighed.

“What the shit.”

He unlocked the front door and after a whispered argument let in a man in his twenties, dripping wet, red-faced but otherwise sportscaster-handsome, wearing a windbreaker that was way too light for the weather. Quentin wondered where he’d managed to get a sunburn in March.

They all filed into the back room. It was darker than Quentin expected, and bigger too; real estate must come cheap out here on the turnpike. There were steel shelves crammed full of books flagged with fluorescent-colored stickies; a couple of desks in one corner, the walls in front of them shingled with shift schedules and taped-up *New Yorker* cartoons; stacks of cardboard shipping boxes; a busted couch; a busted armchair; a mini-fridge—it must have doubled as the break room. Half of it was just wasted space. The back wall was a steel shutter that opened onto a loading dock.

A handful of other people were coming in through another door in the left-hand wall, looking just as wary. Quentin could see another bookstore behind them, a nicer one, with old lamps and oriental rugs. Probably a ginger cat too. He didn’t need magic to know that it wasn’t a door at all but a portal to somewhere else, some arbitrary distance away. There—he caught a telltale hairline seam of green light along one edge. The only thing behind that wall in reality was Party City.

Who were they all? Quentin had heard rumors about dog-and-pony shows like this before, gray-market cattle calls, work for hire, but he’d never seen one himself. He

definitely never thought he'd go to one, not in a million years. He never thought it would come to that. Stuff like this was for people on the fringes of the magical world, people scrabbling to get in, or who'd lost their footing somehow and slipped out of the bright warm center of things, all the way out to the cold margins of the real world. All the way out to a strip mall in Hackensack in the rain. Things like this weren't for people like him.

Except now they were. It had come to that. He was one of them, these were his people. Six months ago he'd been a king in a magic land, another world, but that was all over. He'd been kicked out of Fillory, and he'd been kicked around a fair bit since then, and now he was just another striver, trying to scramble back in, up the slippery slope, back toward the light and the warmth.

Plum and the man with the iridescent glasses sat on the couch. Red Face took the busted armchair. Pixie Cut and the teenage Stoppard reader sat on boxes. The rest of them stood—there were twelve, thirteen, fourteen in all. The cashier shut the gray door behind them, cutting off the last of the noise from the outside world, and snuffed out the portal.

He'd brought the birdcage with him; now he placed it on top of a cardboard box and opened it to let the crow out. It looked around, shaking first one foot then the other the way birds do.

"Thank you all for coming," it said. "I will be brief."

That was unexpected. Judging from the ripple of surprise that ran through the room, he wasn't the only one. You didn't see a lot of talking birds on Earth, that was more of a Fillorian thing.

"I'm looking for an object," the bird said. "I will need help taking it from its present owners."

The bird's glossy feathers shone darkly in the glow of the hanging lights. Its voice echoed in the half-empty stockroom. It was a soft, mild-mannered voice, not hoarse



at all like you'd expect from a crow. It sounded incongruously human—however it was producing speech, it had nothing to do with its actual vocal apparatus. But that was magic for you.

"So stealing," an Indian guy said. Not like it bothered him, he just wanted clarification. He was older than Quentin, forty maybe, balding and wearing an unbelievably bad multicolored wool sweater.

"Theft," the bird said. "Yes."

"Stealing back, or stealing?"

"What is the difference?"

"I would merely like to know whether we are the bad guys or the good guys. Which of you has a rightful claim on the object?"

The bird cocked its head thoughtfully.

"Neither party has an entirely valid claim," it said. "But if it makes a difference our claim is superior to theirs."

That seemed to satisfy the Indian guy, though Quentin wondered if he would have had a problem either way.

"Who are you?" somebody called out. The bird ignored that.

"What is the object?" Plum asked.

"You'll be told after you've accepted the job."

"Where is it?" Quentin asked.

The bird shifted its weight back and forth.

"It is in the northeastern United States of America." It half spread its wings in what might have been a bird-shrug.

"So you don't know," Quentin said. "So finding it is part of the job."

The bird didn't deny it. Pixie Cut scooted forward, which wasn't easy on the broken-backed couch, especially in a skirt that short. Her hair was black with purple highlights, and Quentin noticed a couple of blue star tattoos peeking out of her sleeves, the kind you got in a safe house. He wondered how many more she had underneath. He wondered what she'd done to end up here.

“So we’re finding and we’re stealing and I’m guessing probably doing some fighting in between. What kind of resistance are you expecting?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Security, how many people, who are they, how scary. Is that specific enough?”

“Yes. We are expecting two.”

“Two magicians?”

“Two magicians, plus some civilian staff. Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I know.”

“As far as you know!” The red-faced man guffawed loudly. He seemed on further examination to be a little insane.

“I do know that they have been able to place an incorporate bond on the object. The bond will have to be broken, obviously.”

A stunned silence followed this statement, then somebody made an exasperated noise. The tall man who’d been shopping for greeting cards snorted as if to say *can you believe this shit?*

“Those are supposed to be unbreakable,” Plum said coolly.

“You’re wasting our time!” Iridescent Glasses said.

“An incorporate bond has never been broken,” the bird said, not at all bothered—or were its feathers just slightly ruffled? “But we believe that it is theoretically possible, with the right skills and the right resources. We have all the skills we need in this room.”

“What about the resources?” Pixie Cut asked.

“The resources can be obtained.”

“So that’s also part of the job,” Quentin said. He ticked them off on his fingers. “Obtaining the resources, finding the object, breaking the bond, taking the object, dealing with the current owners. Correct?”

“Yes. Payment is two million dollars each, cash or gold. A hundred thousand tonight, the rest once we have the object. Make your decisions now. Bear in mind that if you

say no you will find yourself unable to discuss tonight's meeting with anyone else."

Satisfied that it had made its case, the bird fluttered up to perch on top of its cage.

It was more than Quentin had expected. There were probably easier and safer ways in this world for a magician to earn two million dollars, but there weren't many that were this quick, or that were right in front of him. Even magicians needed money sometimes, and this was one of those times. He had to get back into the swim of things. He had work to do.

"If you're not interested, please leave now," the cashier said. Evidently he was the bird's lieutenant. He might have been in his mid-twenties. His black beard covered his chin and neck like brambles.

The Cro-Magnon guy stood up.

"Good luck." He turned out to have a thick German accent. "You gonna need this, huh?"

He skimmed the greeting card into the middle of the room and left. It landed face up: GET WELL SOON. Nobody picked it up.

About a third of the room shuffled out with him, off in search of other pitches and better offers. Maybe this wasn't the only show in town tonight. But it was the only one Quentin knew about, and he didn't leave. He watched Plum, and Plum watched him. She didn't leave either. They were in the same boat—she must be scrabbling too.

The red-faced guy stood against the wall by the door.

"See ya!" he said to each person as they passed him. "Buh-bye!"

When everybody who was going to leave had left the cashier closed the door again. They were down to eight: Quentin, Plum, Pixie, Red Face, Iridescent Glasses, the teenager, the Indian guy, and a long-faced woman in a flowing dress with a lock of white hair over her forehead;

the last two had come in through the other door. The room felt even quieter than it had before, and strangely empty.

"Are you from Fillory?" Quentin asked the bird.

That got some appreciative laughter, though he wasn't joking, and the bird didn't laugh. It didn't answer him either. Quentin couldn't read its face; like all birds, it had only one expression.

"Before we go any further each of you must pass a simple test of magical strength and skill," the bird said. "Lionel here"—it meant the cashier—"is an expert in probability magic. Each of you will play a hand of cards with him. If you beat him you will have passed the test."

There were some disgruntled noises at this new revelation, followed by another round of discreet mutual scoping-out. From the reaction Quentin gathered that this wasn't standard practice.

"What's the game?" Plum asked.

"The game is Push."

"You must be joking," Iridescent Glasses said, disgustedly. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

Lionel had produced a pack of cards and was shuffling and bridging it fluently, without looking, his face blank.

"I know what I require," the bird said stiffly. "I know that I am offering a great deal of money for it."

"Well, I didn't come here to play games."

The man stood up.

"Well why the fuck did you come here?" Pixie asked brightly.

"You may leave at any time," the bird said.

"Maybe I will."

He walked to the door, pausing with his hand on the knob, as if he were expecting somebody to stop him. Nobody did. The door shut after him.

Quentin watched Lionel shuffle. The man obviously knew how to handle a deck; the cards leapt around obligingly in his large hands, neatly and cleanly, the way they did for a

pro. He thought about the entrance exam he'd taken to get into Brakebills, what was it, thirteen years ago now? He hadn't been too proud to take a test then. He sure as hell wasn't now.

And he used to be a bit of a pro at this himself. Cards were stage magic, close-up magic. This was where he started out.

"All right," Quentin said. He got up, flexing his fingers. "Let's do it."

He dragged a desk chair over noisily and sat down opposite Lionel. As a courtesy Lionel offered him the deck. Quentin took it.

He stuck to a basic shuffle, trying not to look too slick. The cards were stiff but not brand new. They had the usual industry-standard anti-manipulation charms on them, nothing he hadn't seen before. It felt good to have them in his hands. He was back on familiar ground. Without being obvious about it, he got a look at a few face cards and put them where they wouldn't go to waste. It had been a while, a long while, but this was a game he knew something about. Back in the day Push had been a major pastime among the Physical Kids.

It was a childishly simple game. Push was a lot like War—high card wins—with some silly added twists to break ties (toss cards into a hat; once you get five in, score it like a poker hand; etc.). But the rules weren't the point; the point of Push was to cheat. There was a lot of strange magic in cards: a shuffled deck wasn't a fixed thing, it was a roiling cloud of possibilities, and nothing was ever certain till the cards were actually played. It was like a box with a whole herd of Schrödinger's cats in it. With a little magical know-how you could alter the order in which your cards came out; with a little more you could guess what your opponent was going to play before she played it; with a bit more you could play cards that by all the laws of probability rightfully

belonged to your opponent, or in the discard pile, or in some other deck entirely.

Quentin handed back the cards, and the game began.

They started slow, trading off low cards, easy tricks, both holding serve. Quentin counted cards automatically, though there was a limit to how much good it could do—when magicians played the cards had a way of changing sides, and cards you thought were safely deceased and out of play had a way of coming back to life. He'd been curious what caliber of talent got involved in these kinds of operations, and he was revising his estimates sharply upward. It was obvious he wasn't going to overwhelm Lionel with brute force.

Quentin wondered where he'd trained. Brakebills, probably, same as he had; there was a precise, formal quality to his magic that you didn't see coming out of the safe houses. Though there was something else too: it had a cold, sour, alien tang to it—Quentin could almost taste it. He wondered if Lionel was quite as human as he looked.

There were twenty-six tricks in a hand of Push, and halfway through neither side had established an advantage. But on the fourteenth trick Quentin overreached—he burned some of his strength to force a king to the top of his deck, only to waste it on a deuce from Lionel. The mismatch left him off balance, and he lost the next three tricks in a row. He clawed back two more by stealing cards from the discard pile, but the preliminaries were over. From here on out it was going to be a dogfight.

The room narrowed to just the table. It had been a while since Quentin had seen his competitive spirit, but it was rousing itself from its long slumber. He wasn't going to lose this thing. That wasn't going to happen. He bore down. He could feel Lionel probing, trying to shove cards around within the unplayed deck, and he shoved back. They blew all four aces in as many tricks, all-out, hammer and tongs. For kicks Quentin split his concentration and used a simple

spell to twitch the sex amulet out of Lionel's pocket and onto the floor. But if that distracted Lionel he didn't show it.

Probability fields began to fluctuate crazily around them—invisible, but you could see secondary effects from them in the form of minor but very unlikely chance occurrences. Their hair and clothes stirred in impalpable breezes. A card tossed to one side might land on its edge and balance there, or spin in place on one corner. A mist formed above the table, and a single flake of snow sifted down out of it. The onlookers backed away a few steps. Quentin beat a jack of hearts with the king, then lost the next trick with the exact same cards reversed. He played a deuce—and Lionel swore under his breath when he realized he was somehow holding the extra card with the rules of poker on it.

Reality was softening and melting in the heat of the game. On the second-to-last trick Lionel played the queen of spades, and Quentin frowned—did her face look the slightest bit like Julia's? Either way there was no such thing as a one-eyed queen, let alone one with a bird on her shoulder. He spent his last king against it, or he thought he did: when he laid it down it had become a jack, a suicide jack at that, which again there was no such card, especially not one with white hair like his own.

Even Lionel looked surprised. Something must be twisting the cards—it was like there was some invisible third player at the table who was toying with both of them. With his next and last card it became clear that Lionel had lost all control over his hand because he turned over a queen of no known suit, a Queen of Glass. Her face was translucent cellophane, sapphire-blue. It was Alice, to the life.

"What the shit," Lionel said, shaking his head.

*What the shit* was right. Quentin clung to his nerve. The sight of Alice's face shook him, it froze his gut, but it also