



FIG. 2



FIG. 1

*The*

**PAPER  
MAGICIAN**

A NOVEL

**CHARLIE N. HOLMBERG**

# THE PAPER MAGICIAN

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CHARLIE N. HOLMBERG

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Published by 47North, Seattle

[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

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ISBN-13: 9781477823835

ISBN-10: 1477823832

Cover design by Ryan Hobson

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014930971

*To my husband, Jordan, who is the source of all the magic in my life.*

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# CHAPTER 1



FOR THE PAST FIVE years, Ceony had wanted to be a Smelter.

However, while most graduates of the Tagis Praff School for the Magically Inclined got to choose what material they dedicated their craft to, Ceony had been assigned. “Not enough Folders,” Magician Aviosky had explained in her office.

Less than a week had passed since Ceony had heard this, and she still felt the tears that had stung the back of her eyes. “Paper is a wonderful medium,” Mg. Aviosky had continued, “and one that’s lost credit in recent years. With only twelve acting magicians left in that discipline, we have no choice but to direct a portion of our apprentices that way. I’m sorry.”

So was Ceony. Her heart had broken at those words, and now, standing before the gate of Magician Emery Thane’s lair, she wished it had stopped beating altogether.

Her hand gripped the wooden handle of her suitcase as she stared up at the monstrosity, even worse than her fitful dreams had imagined it to be. If it weren’t bad enough that Mg. Thane—the only Folder this side of the River Thames—lived on the wild outskirts of London itself, his abode looked like the creation of a campfire story. Its black walls stood six stories high. Scraps of worn paint peeled beneath the fingers of a sudden, foreboding wind that picked up the moment Ceony stepped foot onto the unpaved lane leading away from the main road. Three uneven turrets jutted up from the house like a devil’s crown, one of which bore a large hole in its east-facing side. A crow, or maybe a magpie, cried out from behind a broken chimney. Every window in the mansion—and Ceony counted only seven—hid behind black shutters all chained and locked, without the

slightest glimmer of candlelight behind them. Dead leaves from a dozen past winters clogged the eaves and wedged themselves under bent and warped shingles—also black—and something drip-drip-dripped nearby, smelling like vinegar and sweat.

The grounds themselves bore no flower gardens, no grass lawn, not even an assortment of stones. The small yard boasted only rocks and patches of uncultivated dirt too dry and cracked for even a weed to take root. The tiles composing the path up to the front door, which hung only by its top hinge, were cracked into pieces and overturned, and Ceony didn't trust a single one of the porch's gray, weathered boards to hold her weight long enough for her to ring the bell.

"I've been shot to hell," Ceony murmured.

Mg. Aviosky, her escort, frowned beside her. "Never trust what your eyes see at a magician's home, Miss Twill. You know that."

Ceony swallowed against a dry throat and nodded. She did know that, but she didn't care to, not now. The dark, foreboding mansion seemed a reflection of herself and everything that had gone wrong the last few days. Perhaps she had jinxed herself last night when she had gathered all the paper she could find in the hotel and burned it sheet by sheet in the fireplace while Mg. Aviosky consulted a map in the receiving hall. Or perhaps Mg. Thane was proof that Ceony's imagination needed a great deal of expanding.

Ceony bit down a sigh. She had come so far during her nineteen years of life, and now everything she had achieved—at steep odds, no less—seemed to flit away from her, leaving her cold and empty. All her aspirations were now to filter down to simple paper. Ceony would spend the rest of her days writing ledgers and reading outdated books, her only cheer in life penning letters home that would open themselves upon arrival. Of all the materials Mg. Aviosky could have chosen—glass, metal, plastic, even rubber—she had chosen *paper*. Mg. Aviosky obviously did not realize that the reason Folding had become a dying art was because the skills it enabled were so completely useless.

Refusing to be pulled along like a schoolgirl, Ceony straightened her back and trudged up the lane toward the gates. The fence itself was little more than spears shoved into the ground butt-first and tied together with barbed wire. The wind's strength built with every step, threatening to blow Ceony's hat off as she reached for the gate's catch—



The scenery around her changed so abruptly Ceony jumped, nearly dropping her suitcase. Her hand rested on a simple chain-link fence, and not one built from the refuse of old battles and dilapidated prisons. The sun broke through the clouds above, and the wind settled down to the faintest, most uneven breeze. The house before her shrunk to three stories, built of simple yellow brick. The shutters, all open, were white, and the porch looked sturdy enough for an entire team of horses to prance upon.

Ceony lifted her hand, wide eyes taking in the transformation. She half expected that breaking her connection to the gate would restore the dreary illusion, but the house remained the same when she released the catch. The path to the door was unpaved, but an array of red, violet, and yellow tulips lined it instead of jagged rocks.

Blinking, Ceony unlatched the gate and stepped closer. Not tulips. At least, not real ones. Every flower in the yard looked to be crafted of folded paper, each blossom perfectly creased. The buds appeared real—so much so that, when a cloud passed over the afternoon sun, they all closed their petals ever so slightly. Like flowers trying too hard to be flowers.

With a quick glance, Ceony noticed the strips of paper hanging from the chain-link fence, and beyond them whole sheets of paper taller than any person and wider than the buggy that had brought her here. *An illusion.* Ceony recalled attending a lecture on espionage at the school last winter where the speaker had mentioned using paper dolls to mask one's appearance, but she had never imagined using the tactic for an entire *house*, however it was done.

Mg. Aviosky stepped up beside her, casually pulling off her silk gloves finger by finger. The transformation didn't jar her one bit, but she didn't gloat, either.

Ceony half expected Mg. Thane to show up at the door there and then, but the door—now of solid wood and painted such a light brown it looked orange—remained closed and quiet.

*Perhaps he's not evil at all,* Ceony thought with a frown. *Just mad.*

Passing the paper flowers, Ceony stepped up to the door, Mg. Aviosky not a pace behind her, and knocked firmly with her knuckles, trying to stand as tall as her five-foot-three frame would allow. She absently touched her hair, which was the color of uncooked yams and hung over her left shoulder in a loose braid. She had purposely chosen not to do it nicely that morning, just as she didn't wear her best dress or her student's uniform. She had

nothing to be excited for—why dress up? It was clear Mg. Thane had made no special allowances for her.

The knob turned without the faintest trace of footsteps on the other side, and when the door opened, Ceony screamed and fell back a step.

A skeleton greeted her.

Even Mg. Aviosky seemed surprised, though she only showed it by pursing her lips and adjusting the round-framed glasses that sat atop a rather prominent nose. “Well,” she said.

The eyeless head of the skeleton looked up and down almost mechanically, and Ceony, with a hand over her heart, realized all six feet of it was comprised of paper—its head, its spine, its ribs, its legs. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of pieces of paper, all white, rolled and folded and pinched together to connect in a variety of joints.

“He’s mad,” Ceony said, aloud this time. Mg. Aviosky sniffed loudly in a subtle attempt to scold her.

The skeleton stepped aside.

“Any more surprises?” Ceony asked no one in particular as she entered the house, staying as far from the skeleton as the narrow doorframe would allow. The house started in a long hallway that smelled of old wood and branched off in three directions, two to the right and one to the left. The first right opened onto a small front room that, despite being filled with clutter, was deftly organized: everything from candlesticks to books shoved in a most orderly fashion onto shelves, with clay ocarinas, marble sets, and more books crammed into straight lines across the mantel. Ceony noticed every detail of the room, as she was prone to do—such as the threadbare cushion on the couch, which told her Mg. Thane preferred to sit on the far-left side and scooted back. A small wind chime hung in the corner—an odd place for a wind chime, as no wind would pass through the front room unless he opened the window, and even then, very little. She surmised that Mg. Thane liked the look of it, but not the sound.

Mad, indeed.

A perfect stack of unread mail sat on a side table in the corner next to what looked like a music box and some sort of blacksmith’s puzzle, which rested in perfect alignment with the stack and the box. Ceony had never known a pack rat to be so . . . tidy. It disturbed her.

The closed door to the left of the hallway hid whatever room lay beyond it, but instead of walking farther into the house to see what the

second right revealed, she shouted, “Magician Thane! Your guests are here and would greatly appreciate a real person at the door!”

“Miss Twill!” Mg. Aviosky said in a suppressed sort of hiss as the paper skeleton shut the front door. “Manners!”

“Well, the absence is rude, isn’t it?” Ceony asked, hating how childish the words sounded in her mouth. She cleared her throat and sucked in a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I’m a little on edge.”

“No need to remind me,” Mg. Aviosky quipped just as a real person emerged from that second right, some sort of ledger in his hands.

“There *are* guests at the door,” the man said, closing the ledger. The ensuing burst of air rustled his wavy black hair. In words pitched at a light baritone, he added, “And I would have thought the knock gave it away.”

Ceony gripped her suitcase all the harder to keep herself from starting, or from thinking too hard on the man’s words, for she couldn’t decide if they had been meant in mockery or not.

Mg. Thane looked much younger than Ceony had expected, perhaps about thirty or so, and he hadn’t taken the effort to dress up, either. He didn’t wear his magician’s dress uniform, or anything particularly fancy at all, just plain slacks with an unadorned high-necked shirt, over which hung a lightweight, oversized indigo coat that dropped clear to his ankles, with loose sleeves that fell nearly to his palms. He seemed quite average, his skin neither light nor dark, his height neither short nor tall, and his build neither thin nor broad. His dark hair fell just below his ears in a sort of kempt-but-unkempt way. He had black sideburns down to his jaw, and his nose had a slight bump to it, just above the middle of the bridge. The only thing extraordinary about him was the brightness of his eyes—green as summer leaves and shining as if someone had hid a light behind his forehead.

Mg. Thane glanced at Ceony without the slightest smile, gesture, or draw of the brow, but in those bright eyes Ceony could tell the man was rather amused. Whether with her or with himself, she couldn’t be sure. She ground her teeth together.

“Magician Thane,” Mg. Aviosky said with a nod of her head, and Ceony wondered how well they knew one another, “this is Ceony Twill, whom I telegraphed you about.”

“Yes, yes,” Mg. Thane said, setting down the ledger on the stack of unread mail by the couch, aligning the book’s corners just so. He turned and

met Ceony's stare. "Ceony Twill, eldest of four and top of her graduating class. How many students made it out of that prison this year?"

Ceony adjusted her hat, if only to give her free hand something to do. "Twenty-two."

"Still an accomplishment," he said, almost offhandedly. "Hopefully you can put those study habits of yours to good use here."

Ceony only nodded. She did have good study habits—she prided herself on them—but schoolwork had always come easily to her. She had a sharp memory, and often remembered things after reading them through only once or twice. It was a blessing that had pulled her through many difficult and dull lectures. Hopefully it would help her here as well.

Mg. Aviosky cleared her throat, breaking through the silence before it could settle. "I have her new uniform in my case. Do tell me you prepared the bonding."

"Of course," he answered, dismissing the question with a slight wave of his hand. He looked at Ceony. "I suppose you'll want a tour of sorts."

Ceony felt herself shrink. How easily this man could crush her future with a wave of his hand! For once she bonded to a material, there would be no turning back—a bond was for life. She searched for a possible escape route should she need one and spied the paper skeleton immediately behind her and shrieked for the second time. Who needed ghosts to haunt a house when one could form his own demons out of paper?

"Jonto, cease," Mg. Thane said, and the skeleton collapsed in a heap of paper bones right there on the floor, his carefully Folded skull resting right at the top.

Ceony stepped away from it. What sort of morbid man constructed a butler out of paper? Was there no one else to answer the door?

"Do you live alone?" Ceony asked.

"As it suits me," Mg. Thane replied, leading them down the hallway. "The study," he said, gesturing to the closed door on the left, "and the dining room is through here," he added, pausing at the second right in the hallway.

Ceony followed with slow steps and peeked around the corner, half expecting another paper atrocity to jump out at her.

Instead she found a short hallway with mirrors hanging across from one another on either wall, a bench, and a simple stunted dresser with an empty vase on top of it. Tightly Folded paper triangles lined the walls close

to the ceiling in teal and yellow where the hall opened into a small, well-stocked kitchen. A marble countertop surrounded a single-basin sink. Dark-stained cupboards loomed to either side, but gave enough room to work in. A metal grating above the sink carried a small set of pots and pans, their dark bottoms denoting that they were well used. Around the edges of the grating wrapped a paper vine that looked very similar to the skeleton's—Jonto's—bones. Did it have a use, or did the paper magician merely grow bored being cooped up here, away from real people? How much of the paper décor in this house was actually used for spells, and how much of it was pointless ornamentation?

Would Ceony spend her days as little more than a glorified decorator?

Shaking the thoughts from her head, Ceony eyed the rest of the kitchen. Mg. Thane had a more narrow stove than what she was accustomed to, and an old-fashioned one at that, but not poor. Ceony felt somewhat assured knowing that between her lessons on Folding she could escape here to cook. After all, had she not received her scholarship, she would have attended culinary school as an alternative. The tuition for that was a tenth of what the Tagis Praff School demanded, and Ceony had a knack for food. She felt confident she would have been enrolled.

Ceony moved past the kitchen to the dining room. Hundreds of paper birds hung from the ceiling by filament threads, looking nearly alive. They dangled quietly, out of the way, suspended above a simple square table that sat atop a brown woven rug. Near it stood a tall, dark-stained hutch neatly cluttered with dishes, books, napkins, jars, and jugs—everything fit together so tightly that removing just one item might make the rest avalanche. Along the top of the hutch rested strange paper balls and cones made of smaller balls and cones and smaller ones yet. They hurt Ceony's eyes. The house would be cozy were it not so crammed with things.

She wandered to a thick stack of parchment at the edge of the table and rested her hand on it, thinking of the paper illusions lining the cottage's fence. "The front you put onto your home is horrid," she quipped.

Mg. Aviosky passed Ceony a warning look as she stepped into the dining room. Mg. Thane merely replied, "Yes. Pleasant, isn't it?"

He passed her and opened a door with a long handle, which revealed a steep set of stairs leading up. "If you'll follow me."

Ceony did so, suitcase still in hand. The ninth step creaked under her weight, and her knees hurt by the time she reached the second floor.

“Your room,” Mg. Thane said, pushing a door open, “if you want to set down your luggage.”

Ceony stepped into the room, a stark contrast from the rest of the house, as all its shelves were empty. No stacks, piles, or knickknacks, but judging by the indentations in the carpet, the room had recently held furniture that had been moved or removed. Mg. Thane must have only just prepared for her arrival, despite having a week’s notice.

Even stranger, no paper ornaments adorned the walls or the ceiling—they had been left starkly bare. A simple twin-sized bed rested against the only window. A set of three shelves had been built into the wall beside it, and a simple writing desk with one drawer rested a couple paces from the bed’s foot. There was a small closet, large enough for Ceony’s few changes of clothes, and a small table with a new candlestick and holder upon it.

It offered her a little more space than her dorm room at Tagis Praff, albeit with fewer shelves. Still, she thought her dorm room somewhat warmer and more hospitable, though that may have been because she’d earned her place there. She’d *wanted* to be there.

“Thank you,” she managed, setting her suitcase down. She briefly thought of the 1845 Tatham percussion-lock pistol she had stowed away in there—a graduation gift from her father, for she had *planned* on being a Smelter—and decided to unpack later, away from watching eyes. Mg. Thane must have expected as much, for the tour continued on.

“Down here,” Mg. Thane continued as Ceony shut her bedroom door behind her, “is the lavatory, my room, and the library,” he said, stopping at the end of the hall and another set of stairs. To Mg. Aviosky he said, “I’ve set up the bonding in here,” and gestured to the library.

Ceony’s steps slowed. So the tour ended at the bonding.

She eyed the door at the end of the hall, identical to the one in the kitchen that opened onto the stairwell. “What’s on the third floor?” Ceony asked. Perhaps something uplifting lingered up there. Perhaps she’d find a window to leap from. Judging by the height of the ceilings on the first and second floors, the third was by far the tallest, which was strange for a backcountry house like this one.

“The big spells,” Mg. Thane answered, his expression plain but his bright eyes smiling. Did he know how much those eyes gave away?

Ceony made a note not to tell him. She needed all the advantages she could get if she were to survive here.

With Mg. Thane barring the stairs to the third floor with his shoulder, Ceony dragged her feet after Mg. Aviosky into the library, which appeared only slightly larger than her bedroom and had bookshelves only on the sidewalls, albeit ones that stretched clear to the ceiling. As Ceony expected, books had been crammed into every available space, spine against spine, some forming double rows so she couldn't see what titles lay in the first. The shelves seemed recently dusted—very recently, for the moment Ceony thought it she sneezed, which made her notice the path of dust highlighted by a large window on the far wall. Her eyes landed on a loop of paper chains that surrounded the window, as well as the pinewood table beneath it, which held stacks of paper in varying sizes and colors organized from lightest to darkest, and then from roughest to smoothest. A small telegraph hung off its back-right corner.

The table's single chair had been turned around, and upon it rested a short easel bearing a canvas of thick, plain paper, eggshell white and fine grained. No ornamentation, no hoopla, just a plain sheet of paper.

Studying it, Ceony realized what it was.

Her grave.

She knew about material bonding—it was one of the dozens of subjects she studied over the last year of rigorous courses at the school. It was nothing fancy, just an oath that tied your spirit into the subject, allowing you to conduct magic through it and *only* it. A woman could not, for instance, cast spells with both glass *and* fire. Only one. Ceony couldn't bond paper and still hope to be a Smelter, enchanting jewelry and bespelling bullets as she had often daydreamed during her lessons.

It wasn't fair, but there was no use in further complaining. They all knew it. Mg. Aviosky knew it, and Mg. Thane likely knew it, too. Ceony had earned the right to choose her material, but because those before her had neglected Folding—the weakest of the magics—she had been forced into it.

Mg. Thane handed her a smaller piece of standard white eight-by-eleven paper. Ceony pinched it between her fingers and turned it over, but it bore no instruction. No writing of any kind graced its surface, nor did any Folds, magical or otherwise.

“What is this for?” she asked.

“Feel it,” Mg. Thane said, clasping his hands behind his back once more.

Ceony continued pinching the paper, waiting for some sort of clarification, but Mg. Thane merely held his stance. After several seconds Ceony pressed the simple paper between her palms and rubbed her hands back and forth, thoroughly “feeling” the paper.

The paper magician’s eyes smiled, and he took the slightly wrinkled paper back without comment. “Do you know the words?” he asked, softer. Perhaps her eyes were as easy to read as his.

Ceony nodded, numb. The long talk she had had with Mg. Aviosky in the buggy surfaced in her mind. *“It’s this or nothing. It has to be that way, for balance,”* Mg. Aviosky had said. *“Don’t let rumor and comedy dissuade you, Miss Twill. Folding takes a keen eye and deft hands—you have both. The others have accepted this fate; so must you.”*

Accepted this fate. But had they? Were the words only meant to persuade Ceony to be more willing to sign away her dreams?

The two magicians watched her, Mg. Aviosky with her usual blank-canvas countenance and Mg. Thane with a strange sort of humor to his eyes.

Ceony pressed her lips together. As far as magic went, she knew it was paper or nothing, and she’d rather be a Folder than a failure.

She lifted a clammy hand and pressed it to the sheet of paper resting on the chair. Closing her eyes and gritting her teeth, she said, “Material made by man, your creator summons you. Link to me as I link to you through my years until the day I die and become earth.”

Such simple words, but they did the deed.

Ceony’s hand grew warm, and heat flashed back through her arm and body, then left just as quickly.

It was done.