

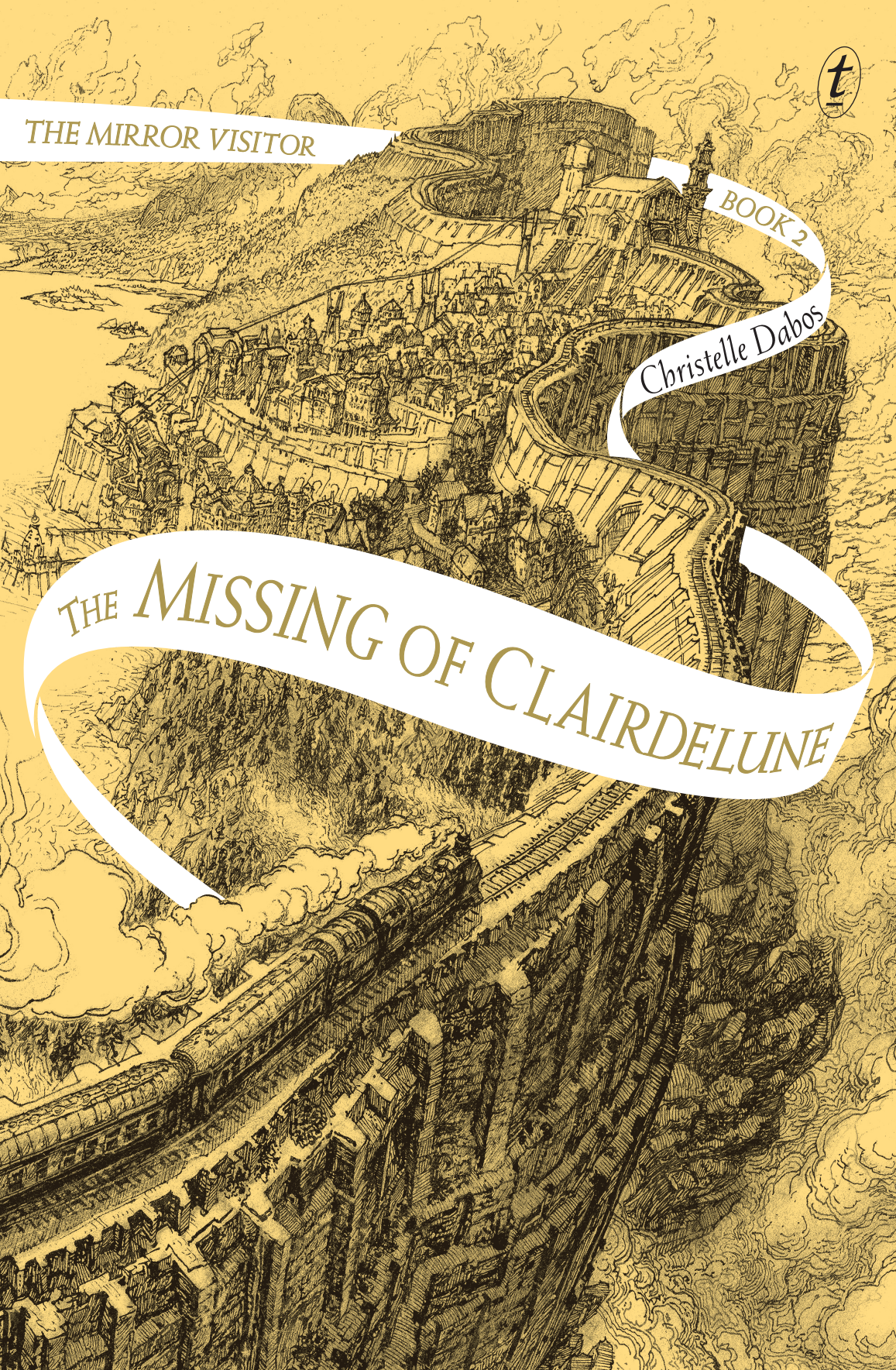


THE MIRROR VISITOR

BOOK 2

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THE MISSING OF CLAIRDELUNE





## THE GAME

Ophelia was dazzled. If she just risked a peek from under her parasol, the sunshine came at her from all directions: down it streamed from the sky; back it bounced off the varnished-wood promenade; it made the entire ocean sparkle, and lit up the jewelry of every courtier. She could see enough, however, to establish that neither Berenilde nor Aunt Rosaline were any longer by her side.

Ophelia had to face facts: she was lost.

For someone who had come to the court with the firm intention of finding her place, things weren't looking too good. She had an appointment to be officially presented to Farouk. If there was one person in the world who absolutely mustn't be kept waiting, it was certainly this family spirit.

Where was he to be found? In the shade of the large palm trees? At one of the luxurious hotels lining the coast? Inside a beach hut?

Ophelia banged her nose against the sky. She'd been leaning over the parapet to look for Farouk, but the sea was nothing but a wall. A vast moving fresco in which the sound of the waves was as artificial as the smell of sand and the distant horizon. Ophelia readjusted her glasses and looked at the scenery around her. Almost everything here was fake: the palms, the fountains, the sea, the sun, the sky, and the pervading heat.

The grand hotels themselves were probably just two-dimensional facades.

Illusions.

What else could be expected when one was on the fifth floor of a tower, when that tower overlooked a city, and when that city hovered above a polar ark whose actual temperature never rose above minus fifteen degrees? The locals could distort space and stick illusions all over the place, but there were limits to their creativity.

Ophelia was wary of fakes, but she was even more wary of individuals who used them to manipulate others. That was why she felt particularly ill at ease among the courtiers now jostling her.

They were all Mirages, the masters of illusionism.

With their imposing stature, pale hair, light eyes, and clan tattoos, Ophelia felt even more diminutive, more dark-haired, more nearsighted, and more of a stranger than ever in their midst. Occasionally, they would look snootily down at her. No doubt they were wondering who this young lady, desperately trying to hide under her parasol, was, but Ophelia certainly wasn't going to tell them. She was alone and without protection; if they discovered that she was engaged to Thorn, the most hated man in the whole city, she'd never save her skin. Or her mind. She had a cracked rib, a black eye, and a slashed cheek following her recent ordeals. Best not to make things even worse.

At least these Mirages proved useful to Ophelia. They were all moving towards a Jetty-Promenade on pilings, which, due to a pretty convincing optical effect, gave the illusion of extending over the fake sea. By squinting, Ophelia realized that the sparkling she saw at the end of it was the light reflecting on a huge glass and metal structure. This Jetty-Promenade wasn't just another *trompe l'oeil*; it was an actual majestic palace.

If Ophelia stood any chance of finding Farouk, Berenilde, and Aunt Rosaline, it would be over there.

She followed the procession of courtiers. She'd wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, but hadn't taken her scarf into account. With half of it coiled around her ankle and the other half gesticulating on the ground, it gave the impression of a boa constrictor in full courting display. Ophelia hadn't managed to make it release its grip. Delighted as she was to see her scarf thriving again, after weeks of separation, she'd have preferred not to shout that she was an Animist from the rooftops. Not until she'd found Berenilde, at least.

Ophelia tipped her parasol further over her face when she went past a newspaper kiosk. The papers all carried the headline:

TIME'S UP FOR DRAGONS:  
HUNTERS BEATEN AT OWN GAME

Ophelia found it in extremely poor taste. The Dragons were her future in-laws and they'd all just perished in the forest in dramatic circumstances. In the eyes of the court, however, it was only ever one less rival clan.

She proceeded along the Jetty-Promenade. What had earlier been but an indistinct shimmer turned into architectural fireworks. The palace was even more gigantic than she'd thought. Its golden dome, whose finial darted into the sky like lightning, vied with the sun, and yet it was but the culmination of a much vaster edifice, all glass and cast iron, studded here and there with oriental-looking turrets.

'And all this,' Ophelia thought as she surveyed the palace, the sea, and the throng of courtiers, 'all this is just the fifth floor of Farouk's tower.'

She was starting to feel really nervous.

Her nervousness turned into panic when she saw two dogs, as white and as massive as polar bears, coming towards her.

They were focusing intently on her, but it wasn't them that terrified Ophelia. It was their master.

"Good day, miss. Are you walking alone?"

Ophelia couldn't believe her eyes as she recognized those blond curls, those bottle-bottom glasses, and that chubby cherub's face.

The Knight. The Mirage without whom the Dragons would still be alive.

He might seem like most little boys—clumsier than most, even—but that didn't make him any less of a scourge whom no adult could control and his own family feared. While the Mirages were generally happy to scatter illusions around themselves, the Knight would implant them directly into people. This deviant power was his plaything. He'd used it to inflict hysteria on a servant; imprison Aunt Rosaline in a memory bubble; turn the wild Beasts against the Dragons hunting them; and all without ever getting caught.

Ophelia found it incredible that there was no one, in the whole court, who could prevent him from showing himself in public.

"You seem to be lost," the Knight commented, with extreme politeness. "Would you like me to be your guide?"

Ophelia didn't reply to him. She couldn't decide whether saying "yes" or saying "no" would be the signing of her death warrant.

"There you are at last! Where on earth did you get to?"

To Ophelia's great relief, it was Berenilde. With a graceful swish of her dress, she was making her way through the crowd of courtiers, as serenely as a swan crossing a lake. And yet, when she slid Ophelia's arm under her own, she gripped it as tightly as she could.

"Good day, Madam Berenilde," stammered the Knight. His cheeks had gone very pink. He wiped his hands on his smock with an almost shy awkwardness.

"Hurry along, my dear girl," Berenilde said, without even a glance at or reply to the Knight. "The game is nearly over. Your aunt is saving our seats."

It was hard to make out the expression on the Knight's face—his bottle-bottom glasses made his eyes look particularly strange—but Ophelia was almost certain that he was crest-fallen. She found the child unfathomable. Surely he wasn't expecting to be thanked for causing the death of a whole clan, was he?

"You're not speaking to me anymore, madam?" he still asked, anxiously. "So you don't have a single word for me?"

Berenilde hesitated a little, and then turned her most beautiful smile on him. "If you insist, Knight, I even have nine: you will not be protected by your age forever."

On this prediction, offered almost casually, Berenilde set off in the direction of the palace. When Ophelia glanced back, what she saw sent shivers up her spine. The Knight was looking daggers at her, and not at Berenilde, his face contorted with jealousy. Was he about to set his dogs after them?

"Of all the people with whom you must never find yourself alone, the Knight is top of the list," murmured Berenilde, gripping Ophelia's arm even tighter. "Do you never listen to my advice, then? Let's hurry up," she added, walking faster. "The game is coming to an end, and we absolutely mustn't make Lord Farouk wait."

"What game?" gasped Ophelia. Her cracked rib was increasingly painful.

"You are going to make a good impression on our lord," Berenilde decreed without dropping her smile. "Today we have many more enemies than we have allies—his protection will swing the balance, decisively. If you don't please him at first sight, you're sentencing us to death." She placed a hand on her stomach, including the child she was carrying in this statement.

Hampered as she walked, Ophelia kept having to shake the scarf that had wound itself around her foot. Berenilde's words did nothing to help her feel less nervous. Her apprehension was all the greater for still having the telegram from her family in the pocket of her dress. Concerned by her silence, her parents, uncles, aunts, brother, sisters, and cousins had decided to move their arrival at the Pole forward by several months. They were, of course, unaware that their security also depended on Farouk's goodwill.

Ophelia and Berenilde entered the palace's main rotunda, which was even more spectacular seen from inside. Five galleries radiated within it, each one as impressive as the nave of a cathedral. The slightest murmur from the court or rustle of a dress became greatly amplified beneath the vast glass canopies. In here, only the great and the good were to be found: ministers, consuls, artists, and their current muses.

A butler in gold livery came towards Berenilde. "If the ladies would care to follow me to the Goose Garden. Lord Farouk will receive them as soon as his game is over."

He led them along one of the five galleries, having relieved Ophelia of her parasol. "I would rather keep it," she told him, politely, when he wanted to take her scarf, too, perplexed at finding this accessory placed somewhere as inappropriate as an ankle. "Believe me, it gives me no choice."

With a sigh, Berenilde checked that Ophelia's veil was properly concealing her face behind its lace screen. "Don't show your injuries—such poor taste. Play your cards right, and you can consider the Jetty-Promenade your second home."

Deep down, Ophelia wondered where exactly her first home might be. Since she'd arrived at the Pole, she'd already visited Berenilde's manor, the Clairdelune embassy, and her fiancé's Treasury, and she hadn't felt at home in any of them.

The butler led them under a vast glass canopy just as there

was a burst of applause, punctuated with “Bravo!” and “Good show, my lord!” Despite the white lace of her veil, Ophelia tried to work out what was going on between the palms of the indoor garden. A group of bewigged nobles was gathered on the lawn around what looked like a small maze. Ophelia was too short to glimpse anything over the shoulders of those in front of her, but Berenilde had no trouble clearing a path for them to the front row: the nobles, as soon as they recognized her, withdrew of their own accord, less for decorum’s sake than to be at a safe distance. They would await Farouk’s verdict before aligning their behavior to his.

Seeing Berenilde return with Ophelia, Aunt Rosaline hid her relief behind a look of annoyance. “You must explain to me someday,” she muttered, “how I’m supposed to chaperone a girl who’s forever giving me the slip.”

Ophelia’s view of the game was now unrestricted. The maze comprised a series of numbered tiles. On some of them, there were geese attached to stakes. Two servants stood at specific stages along the spiraling path and seemed to be waiting for instructions.

She turned to see what everyone was looking at right then: a small, round rostrum overlooking the maze. There, sitting at a dainty table painted the same white as the rostrum, a player was shaking his fist and taking obvious delight in annoying the spectators. Ophelia recognized him from his gaping top hat and cheeky, ear-to-ear grin—it was Archibald, Farouk’s ambassador.

When he finally opened his fist, a rattling of dice rang out in the silence.

“Seven!” announced the master of ceremonies. Immediately, one of the servants moved forward seven tiles and, to Ophelia’s astonishment, disappeared down a hole.

“Our ambassador’s really not lucky at this game,” said



someone behind her, sarcastically. "It's his third turn and he *always* lands on the pit."

In one way, Archibald's presence reassured Ophelia. He was a man not without faults, but in this place he was the closest thing she had to a friend, and he at least had the merit of belonging to the Web clan. With very few exceptions, there were only Mirages among the courtiers, and the whiff of hostility that hovered around them made the air unbreathable. If they were all as devious as the Knight, it promised some delightful days to come.

Like the rest of the spectators, Ophelia now concentrated on the table of the other player, further up the rostrum. At first, due to her veil, the only impression she got was of a constellation of diamonds. She finally realized that they were attached to the numerous favorites cradling Farouk in their entwined arms, with one combing his long, white hair, another pressed to his chest, yet another kneeling at his feet, and so on. Leaning his elbow on the table, which was far too small for his stature, Farouk seemed as indifferent to the caresses being lavished on him as to the game he was playing. That, at any rate, is what Ophelia inferred from the way he yawned noisily as he threw his dice. From where she was, she couldn't see his face that clearly.

"Five!" sang out the master of ceremonies in the midst of applause and joyful cries.

The second servant immediately started leaping from square to square. Each time he landed on a tile occupied by a goose, honking furiously and trying to snap at his calves, but he was straight off, going from five to five, until he finished bang on the final square, in the centre of the spiral, to be hailed like an Olympic champion by the nobles. Farouk had won the game. As for Ophelia, she found the spectacle unreal. She hoped someone would bother to get the other servant out of his hole soon.

Up on the rostrum, a small man in a white suit took advantage of the game ending to approach Farouk with what looked like a writing case. He smiled broadly as he had a word in the lord's ear. Baffled, Ophelia saw Farouk casually stamping a paper that the man held out to him, without reading a single word on it.

"See Count Boris as a model," Berenilde whispered to her. "He waited for the right moment to obtain a new estate. Prepare yourself, our turn's coming up."

Ophelia didn't hear her. She'd just noticed the presence of another man on the rostrum who was absorbing all her attention. He stood in the background, so dark and still that he might almost have gone unnoticed had he not suddenly snapped his watch cover shut. At the sight of him, Ophelia felt a burning flash surge up from deep within her until even her ears were red-hot.

Thorn.

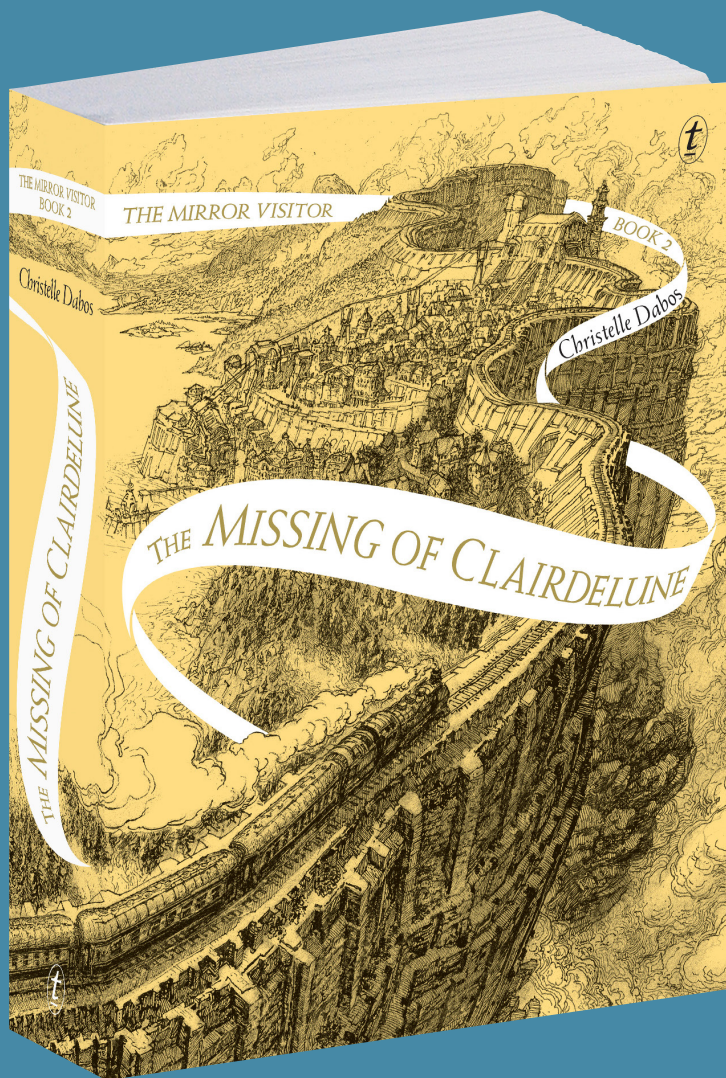
His black uniform, with its mandarin collar and heavy epaulettes, wasn't suited to the stifling heat—an illusion, certainly, but a very realistic one—beneath the glass canopy. Stiff as a poker, starchy from head to toe, silent as a shadow, he seemed out of place in the flamboyant world of the court.

Ophelia would have given anything not to find him here. True to form, he would take control of the situation and dictate her role to her.

"Madam Berenilde and the ladies from Anima!" announced the master of ceremonies.

As all heads turned towards Ophelia in a deadly silence, broken only by the honking of the geese, she took a deep breath. The time had finally come for her to join the game.

She would find her place, despite Thorn.



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