

ROSEMARY & THYME

CHAPTERS 1-2

VICTORIAN FAERIE TALES

BOOK TWO



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STARWATCH
PRESS

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CHAPTER 1



It was nine o' clock on a Friday morning when a faerie walked into Clarimonde's perfume shop in Marylebone and ruined everything.

Technically, of course, it was not *Clarimonde's* perfume shop. The quiet, dignified little building belonged to Mr Aloysius Beagle, who was in turn a quiet, dignified little man. As with many craftsmen, Mr Beagle took great joy in his work and no joy at all in the company of his clients—in consequence of which, he had hired several charming, personable ladies to handle the sordid business of actually *speaking* with the people who hoped to buy his perfumes.

Clarimonde, it must be said, had never been accused of being either charming *or* personable. But perhaps Mr Beagle had seen in her a sort of kindred spirit—for he had hired her regardless. In fact, he often deigned to talk with her when she walked back into the compounding room to take her lunch and watch him work.

Mr Beagle had not protested on the day that Clarimonde attempted a concoction of her own. Rather, he had calmly

informed her that she ought to add less violet to her perfume, as it was likely to overpower her other ingredients.

Bless his soul, but Mr Beagle had clearly never heard the prevailing wisdom that women had no head for chemistry. *Try not to use the jasmine when you're fiddling about*, he'd told Clarimonde. *It's terribly dear*. Apart from this, he'd mostly let her do as she pleased.

Clarimonde was very fond of Mr Beagle. She had realised, very early on, that it would only distress his craftsman's sensibilities to know that she was adding magic to her own perfumes—and so, she did not mention her proclivity for sorcery.

Which was why the faerie in Mr Beagle's perfume shop was so *deeply* vexing.

The gentleman who had entered the perfume shop was tall and willowy, with all the grace of a gazelle and none of its soulfulness. His chestnut hair was long and glossy, pulled back into a tail that nearly reached the back of his knees. This, on its own, would not have announced his vanity—but his narrow features seemed frozen into a perpetually sly expression, and his morning coat was patterned in some monstrously intricate brocade.

Though admittedly eccentric, the man was not *strictly* out of place; the shop was well-regarded, and it regularly drew interest from London's upper-crust. But the gentleman carried with him an intangible air of careless whimsy that tickled at the back of one's neck like the wings of a buzzing fly. It would have been impossible to ignore him.

The offputting fellow turned his glacial blue gaze unerringly to Clarimonde—and smiled.

Clarimonde was not a diviner. As a rule, she left such things as cartomancy to her adoptive sister, Winifred. Even

so, some deep-seated instinct in her stomach informed her that she was about to have a truly *terrible* afternoon.

The gentleman strode directly for the counter, whistling softly to himself. That ridiculous tail of hair swayed idly behind him as he walked. It could not possibly be practical to keep one's hair so long, Clarimonde thought silently. Her own hair—a far less glossy shade of brown—reached just below her shoulders when she didn't have it pinned up into a severe-looking updo. Such length already required far more maintenance than she preferred.

He was not strictly human, Clarimonde decided. It was an abrupt decision, as so many of her decisions often were. Though she did not know which detail had specifically alerted her to the idea, Clarimonde trusted her instincts on the matter implicitly. Most people were very good at overlooking things that they did not expect to see—but Clarimonde had not had that problem since well before her adolescence. Though faeries had not been seen in England for years and years, she was already nearly certain that the man in front of her was one of them.

"I would like one of the magical perfumes you keep behind the counter," the man announced.

Clarimonde's nerves flared with sudden alertness at the statement. Danger tingled on her skin, keen and hot. She glanced swiftly about the shop, reassuring herself that it was otherwise empty of clients.

"Are you *mad*?" Clarimonde hissed at him.

The man smiled at her again, entirely unperturbed. "I have been accused of such before," he said. "But madness is a point of view, I often say."

Clarimonde drew herself up behind the counter. "Mr... whatever-your-name-is—" she began.

"Foxglove," the man interrupted her helpfully. "And it is Lord Foxglove, of course—though you had no way to know that. I forgive you, madam, for the oversight."

Clarimonde pressed her lips together. Each successive word that dripped from his lips only stoked the alarm in her stomach to greater heights. "Of *course* you'd be a lord," she muttered tightly. She didn't bother to examine that idea too closely, however, given the exigency of the situation in which she'd found herself.

"Perhaps you have been gone from England for too long," Clarimonde continued bluntly. "The current Lord Sorcier has outlawed most forms of folk magic—or rather, he has made it criminal for any commoner to practice magic, when one reads between the lines. I cannot sell you any magical perfumes. I would be called a black magician; they would drag me to the gaol."

Lord Foxglove laughed. It was a lovely, pleasant laugh that would have warmed her blood if she had been anyone else. That beautiful laugh only heightened Clarimonde's unease. In her experience, beautiful people rarely meant her well.

"I did not say that I wished to *purchase* a magical perfume," Foxglove assured her. "What foolishness. I said that I would like one of the magical perfumes behind your counter; I will not pay for it. Well... not with *money*." His cold blue eyes were merry with amusement. "As I flew here, I saw a dark shape heading down Oxford Street. Even now, it slouches its way towards your shop. Give me the perfume that I seek, and I will see you away from here before it arrives."

Clarimonde pressed her lips together. Faeries could not lie, she knew—and all of her instincts still assured her that Lord Foxglove was a faerie. But something about his manner continued to trouble her in a way that she could not ignore.

He was... *deceptive*, she decided. Somewhere in his offer, he had lied to her by telling her the truth.

If I give him the perfume, Clarimonde realised, he will have proof that I am a magician. He could do any number of terrible things with that proof.

And what dark shape was headed towards the shop? Perhaps Lord Foxglove had seen an old man in a black coat. He hadn't told Clarimonde that the shape was *dangerous*. Certainly, it could not be any more dangerous than asking a faerie to 'see her away' from the shop.

Clarimonde calmed her heartbeat forcibly, curling her fingers against her palms behind the counter. "I fear that you have wasted your time, such as it is," she told Foxglove. "I cannot give you any magical perfume, Your Lordship."

Foxglove frowned at her. The merriment in his blue eyes dimmed into consternation. "We really do not have time for these games, Clarimonde Betony," he said slowly. "I do not wish to meet what hunts you—"

For the second time that morning, the shop's door opened.

The shape that entered was indeed both dark and foreboding. At first, Clarimonde mistook it for a living shadow, given the way that it blotted out the daylight. After a moment, however, her eyes adjusted, and she understood that it was a man—or else, at the very least, shaped *like* a man. Dark-haired, deathly pale, and ever-so-slightly unkempt, Clarimonde's newest client was nearly as tall as Lord Foxglove, though broader by far in the shoulders. His sombre gentleman's attire seemed subtly ill-fitting, as though the clothing had trouble containing him.

The newcomer smiled tightly at Clarimonde, showing off his very white teeth. "I would like to speak with the person who makes this shop's perfume," he said. His voice was

sonorous and deep, with some intangible quality that made her skin crawl.

Clarimonde glanced instinctively towards Lord Foxglove—but of course, the faerie had entirely disappeared. She internally cursed both herself and the missing creature, before raising her eyes to the new arrival once again.

“Mr Beagle does not generally speak with clients himself,” Clarimonde said. “If it suits you, sir, I could take down a message for him.” Even as she spoke, she started silently calculating her best means of escape. What this man was, precisely, she had little idea—but Lord Foxglove had admitted far too late that he had no wish to meet him, and Clarimonde had detected no deception in *that* statement.

Thankfully, Clarimonde had always been very practised at paranoia. Every morning lately, she had risen with the knowledge that today might be the day that she was finally taken into custody. Even now, there was a sturdy leather valise behind the counter which contained her most useful perfumes, along with a small pile of pence and shillings—certainly enough to purchase a train ticket out of London.

“Mr Beagle will be pleased to hear that I am not a client, then,” the man informed her. “My name is Mr Gabriel Brand. I serve at the pleasure of the Lord Sorcier, under whose authority I must insist on asking him some questions.”

Clarimonde’s body went cold; all thought of escape abruptly fled her mind, as she realised the implications of this statement. Somehow, she had been careless enough to draw attention to the shop. If she left now, it was entirely possible that poor, distracted Mr Beagle would be branded a black magician in her place.

Clarimonde was not fond of very many people—nor were very many people terribly fond of *her*. Mr Beagle had long

been a glaring exception to this rule in both respects. She could not possibly bring herself to leave him in such dire circumstances.

“Ah, well.” Mr Beagle’s high, nasally voice sounded just behind Clarimonde, startling her out of her thoughts. “I knew this day would come. Let’s not belabour the matter, sir. I am the black magician you are searching for, of course.”

Clarimonde whirled in place, staring at her employer. Mr Beagle had roused himself from his compounding room to look in on the store. He spoke mildly from behind his over-large spectacles, pulling off his gloves and tucking them into his apron as though he were preparing to go for a stroll outside.

Horror rose within Clarimonde as she absorbed Mr Beagle’s claim. “Absolutely not!” she burst out. “Shame on you, Mr Beagle. We both know you haven’t a drop of magic to your name.” She glanced back at Mr Brand quickly. “I am the magician you’re searching for. I will prove it in a heartbeat.”

Mr Brand arched an eyebrow at them both. “I will admit,” he said, “I expected far more trouble extracting a confession. I cannot say that I have ever before had too *many* confessions. This promises to be an interesting morning—”

Whatever Mr Brand *intended* to say next was interrupted, as a small white fox streaked out from behind the counter to close its jaws upon his leg.

Mr Brand let out a low sound of surprise. Though dark blood dribbled from the injury, however, he seemed less pained than Clarimonde would have expected. Nevertheless, the sudden appearance of the white fox had certainly *distracted* him; he lashed out quickly with his other foot, grazing the animal across the ribs as it darted away again. A tiny yelp resulted, and Clarimonde nearly launched herself across the

counter with indignation—but Mr Beagle had caught her firmly by the elbow and begun to usher her towards the compounding room.

“Lord Foxglove assured me that he could handle himself,” Mr Beagle told Clarimonde calmly. “He said there is a carriage waiting in the mews, out back.”

Clarimonde lunged to grab her leather valise. As she did, she saw that Mr Brand had recovered himself with unnatural speed. He rounded the counter far too quickly, closing his fingers painfully in her hair. His eyes were just as black and terrible as the shadow that he cast behind him. Clarimonde might have expected to see anger in his expression as he hauled her back—but there was *nothing* in those eyes but placid darkness, and that was somehow even worse.

Clarimonde shoved her elbow into Mr Brand’s midsection. Normally, this would have sufficed to dissuade a man of his stature—she had been told that her elbow was unusually sharp and bony. But Mr Brand merely let out a soft grunt, maintaining his grip on her hair.

Clarimonde fumbled desperately within her valise, searching for one of her perfumes. Her fingers closed upon a vial, even as an impossibly large, snowy white serpent wound its way around Mr Brand’s neck.

Mr Brand released her, reaching up to claw at the snake. It quickly became apparent that no strength of his could pry it loose; instead, he stumbled against the counter, gasping uselessly for breath. His pale face remained unnervingly calm for a man in danger of death.

Part of Clarimonde wanted to protest, to demand that Foxglove relent before he murdered the man—for surely, both the fox and the serpent were merely faerie forms. But again, her instincts told her that Mr Brand was far too dangerous to

treat with kid gloves. If even a lord of faerie was afraid of him, then maybe it was best he died before he could properly fight back.

Instead, Clarimonde pulled the vial from her valise and upended it onto Mr Brand's head.

Thankfully, it was the vial she had thought it was. The awful, garlicky scent of asafoetida instantly overwhelmed the store. Though Mr Beagle kept a bottle of the oil on hand, it was his least favourite ingredient by far—Clarimonde had therefore heard no protests when she'd used a sizeable amount of it to craft a banishing perfume.

This bit of magic finally broke through Mr Brand's strange indifference. His pale skin erupted into crimson streaks where the perfume dripped down his face. He forgot the serpent twined about his neck, opting instead to claw at his eyes. Soon, he had tumbled to the floor; a moment later, Clarimonde heard his screams begin, as the white serpent slithered quickly away.

An instant later, Lord Foxglove was beside her, taking her other arm in his. His long brown tail of hair had bleached to perfect white; his narrow features were even more vulpine and inhuman, and his very fine waistcoat now glowed like silver moonlight. Between the faerie and Mr Beagle, Clarimonde found herself neatly propelled along towards the back room.

"Goodness," Lord Foxglove said cheerfully. "I should like one of *those* perfumes, I think. Have you another one on hand?"

Clarimonde picked up her pace between the two men, trying to ignore the agonised screams still echoing in her ears. "I will find you something equally impressive," she told Lord Foxglove breathlessly. "I dare say you have earned it."

CHAPTER 2



There was indeed a carriage waiting in the mews behind the perfume shop. The sight of it made Clarimonde instinctively drag her feet.

Swathed entirely in black, the carriage was far too long and thin—though it looked as though it could still seat several people comfortably. Dark curtains fell across its oblong windows, obscuring everything inside. A strange and terrible foreboding emanated from the vehicle, touching Clarimonde’s heart with dread.

“Is that a *hearse*?” she demanded.

“Oh, technically yes,” Lord Foxglove said casually, continuing to tug her forwards. “I won it in a wager with a sluagh, several years ago. She hasn’t yet forgiven me.”

Mr Beagle released Clarimonde’s arm, stepping back from her in order to adjust his spectacles. “It hasn’t any horses,” he observed.

Clarimonde glanced at the front of the hearse. Indeed, there were no horses currently attached to it—nor even a visible method of attaching one.

"Of course there are no horses," Lord Foxglove retorted. "Why would there be horses? This is a faerie carriage; it makes its own decisions. Horses would merely get in the way." He finally let Clarimonde go in order to pull out a set of stairs at the back of the hearse. As he reached for them, the carriage shifted; the stairs snapped closed again, and Foxglove snatched his hand back, watching the hearse with sudden wariness. The strange feeling of existential dread surrounding it increased.

"I don't think your hearse wants us as passengers," Clarimonde said faintly.

Lord Foxglove straightened himself with annoyance. "Of course it doesn't," he said. "Would *you* enjoy dragging several heavy people about?" The faerie reached out carefully to place his palm against the side of the hearse. "Darling," he said, in a soothing tone, "I know you've had a hard day. London is so wretchedly loud and dirty, isn't it?"

The carriage shifted and settled beneath his hand, as though silently grumbling. Black curtains twitched, however, which suggested that it was listening.

"I would *love* for you to take us all away from here, as fast as you can manage," Lord Foxglove coaxed the hearse. "I know you'd like that too. Why—we can take off the very *moment* that we are all inside, and leave this city far behind us."

Gradually, the sense of dread began to ease. The carriage steps descended slowly, and Foxglove patted the hearse approvingly. "I knew you would come through for me," he said.

Clarimonde took a step towards the hearse—but when she noticed that Mr Beagle had not moved, she turned to face him urgently.

"You must come with us, Mr Beagle," she told him. "What if you are arrested for helping me escape?"

Mr Beagle shook his head mildly. "I will handle my own affairs, Miss Betony," he replied. "I can hail a carriage of my own. It is an excellent time, I think, to go on holiday."

Lord Foxglove cleared his throat pointedly, still lingering next to the carriage steps. "Not that I would ever dictate a lady's business," he said, "but that wretched hound will recover himself eventually. It would be best if we have left before he does."

It was clear from the way that Foxglove spoke the word 'hound' that he had chosen it for a reason. But Clarimonde did not immediately ask him to elaborate upon it. She was far too consumed with Mr Beagle, who had set his features into a familiar, slightly pinched expression which meant that he was already irritated with the length of their conversation.

Clarimonde shot her employer one last helpless look. Finally, she reached out to squeeze his hand. "Thank you," she said softly. "For everything. I am terribly sad that I might not see you again, Mr Beagle."

Mr Beagle did not smile—but Clarimonde thought, perhaps, that he had squeezed her hand a little in return. "You are not a terribly effective salesgirl, Miss Betony," he informed her. "But you are an *excellent* chemist. Wherever you are going, I do hope that you continue your work."

Mr Beagle released her hand. And then, with a severe, long-suffering expression, he shooed her towards the hearse, where Lord Foxglove offered out his hand to help her up the steps.

Clarimonde took the faerie's hand and clambered up the stairs. Lord Foxglove's grip was unnervingly light, such that she could not help the feeling that his support might evapo-

rate at any moment. Nevertheless, she slid herself into the hearse, which had been outfitted with long, black velvet seats—at which point she discovered that someone else was already seated across from her.

The woman in question was dressed as though she'd come directly from a funeral. Her dull black hair had been tightly pinned atop her head, though wisps of it escaped in places to frame her face. Dramatic widow's weeds spilled across the seats on her side of the carriage, drowning her entire form in black crepe. Despite this grim spectacle, her expression was bountifully cheerful.

Clarimonde blinked at her in surprise. "Bellamira?" she said. "What are *you* doing here?"

"A good morning to you too, Clarimonde!" Bellamira enthused. "Oh, isn't this exciting? I do believe that we are going on an adventure." Clarimonde's youngest adoptive sister waved a black silk handkerchief in one hand as she spoke, gesturing with it emphatically. "And as to what has happened—"

One of Bellamira's dramatic flourishes nearly caught Lord Foxglove across the face as he joined them in the carriage. The faerie jerked back from her flailing hand with an alarmed twitch of his narrow nose. "Madam," he sighed. "*Please*. I have already been attacked once today."

Bellamira offered him a winning smile. "Ah, our hero!" she greeted him. "Do join us, Mr Fox! I was about to explain the situation."

Lord Foxglove's nose twitched again—perhaps even more violently—at the suggestion of this ill-distinguished nickname. But he smoothed his features into a generally friendly expression as he settled into the seat beside Clarimonde and

pulled the carriage door closed. A moment later, the vehicle shuddered oddly and began to move.

“As I was saying before,” Bellamira continued blithely, “dear old Winnie has sent another letter. It came first to Mrs Lowe, who brought it then to Hugh, who passed it on to *me*. It is so very full of dangerous things that I wouldn’t know where to begin! I was just about to die for a little bit so I could ask Winifred a few more questions, in fact... but Mr Fox arrived first in his very fine carriage and said that he was here to spirit us both away to Witchwood Manor.”

Clarimonde glanced sharply at Lord Foxglove, who had leaned back heavily into the seat to rub at his ribs. Sympathy flickered through her as she remembered the way that Mr Brand had caught the snowy fox with his foot. She leaned down to open up her leather valise and started searching through its contents. “Winnie sent you to retrieve us, then,” Clairmonde observed quietly. “You should have simply told me that.”

She pulled another vial from the valise—a small, squat bottle with a brass-coloured cap—and offered it out to the faerie. “This is mainly blue violet, with a few other additives. It should help with the pain. You’ll only need a little bit; you may keep the rest, if it suits you. I did promise you a magical perfume.”

Lord Foxglove accepted the vial with a slight inclination of his head. He loosened the cap in order to give the perfume a tentative sniff. A surprised and deeply mollified expression followed. “Lovely,” said the faerie. “I thought it might be stronger, like the formula you used before. But this is wonderfully delicate.”

His tone had warmed with obvious approval—in fact, it was the same tone he had used to mollify the hearse. Though

Clarimonde knew better, she could not help being reluctantly affected by the praise. Her skill with perfumes was a point of pride; though she had worked endlessly to perfect it, she so rarely had a chance to put it on display.

“All scents should be tailored for their use,” said Clarimonde. “Asafoetida is an assault on the senses, which is why I used it on Mr Brand. But easing someone’s pain ought to be gentle and comforting.” She studied Foxglove’s narrow features more intently. “Besides... I have an inkling that strong smells would overwhelm you. You are a puca, are you not? You could be any sort of shapeshifter, I suppose—but you are very fond of animal forms.”

Lord Foxglove had just dabbed a hint of the perfume onto the inside of his wrist. At this, however, he offered Clarimonde another smile of surprise. “I am a puca,” he confirmed. “How very clever you are, Miss Betony. But that is common in your family, of course.”

It was odd, Clarimonde thought, how easily Lord Foxglove charmed her, even as she noted tiny signs of insincerity in his manner. There was a method to his flattery; he had already recognised that she preferred to be complimented on her mind, and that her sisters were important to her. This, she thought, must be his own particular well-honed skill. The overall effect was irresistibly pleasant—rather like a properly mixed perfume.

She did her best to let the words pass through her, refocussing herself on the situation at hand.

“Winnie awaits us at Witchwood Manor, then,” Clarimonde observed. “But will we truly be safe there?”

Lord Foxglove tilted his head at her, and Clarimonde realised that she had changed the subject rather bluntly. Nevertheless, the faerie followed her lead. “I doubt that

anywhere is truly *safe* from the Lord Sorcier and his hound," he said. "But Miss Winifred has made powerful alliances which might extend to you—and that is something, I suppose."

Though Lord Foxglove's manner was still easy and approachable, something subtle in his phrasing made Clarimonde frown. "You don't approve of those alliances?" she asked him slowly.

Lord Foxglove blinked once. "Oh, my opinion seems irrelevant," he said. "Miss Winifred has always done as she sees fit. Do you know, I knew her when she was a child? I often visited Hollowvale, where her sleeping spirit dreamed. She really has not changed a bit—though she is taller now, I must admit."

Clarimonde's frown deepened at the attempted deflection. "Mr Fox," she addressed him, with a deliberate edge of frostiness, "I am becoming increasingly cross with your insistence on dancing around the truth—"

The hearse swerved abruptly, knocking all of them askew. Clarimonde struggled to sit up again, spitting out a bit of black crepe from Bellamira's voluminous skirts.

"Oh dear," said Bellamira. "We are being hunted."

Lord Foxglove knitted his brow at her as he pushed himself back up in his seat. "We needn't leap to conclusions," he said. "The hearse is somewhat jumpy today."

Bellamira shook her head, pressing her lips together. Her hands twisted in her skirts. "I heard a dog howling on the breeze," she said. "It was signalling its master. The sound is plain as day to me—but I suppose it is not pitched for living ears."

Clarimonde drew in a soft breath. Bellamira had always been a sickly child in the workhouses; even now, her heart

was weak and prone to wavering, such that their brother Hugh had kept her under careful medication. Bellamira's resulting nearness to death had granted her an unusual sense for the spirit world that very few people shared.

Lord Foxglove studied Bellamira intently, measuring the sincerity in her manner. "The hound pursues us, then," he said reluctantly. His icy blue eyes flickered over to Clarimonde, beside him. "He caught you briefly, Miss Betony—I remember it. He must have stolen a strand of your hair and given it to his black dog."

Clarimonde let out a frustrated sound. "I take it his black dog can chase us anywhere?" she guessed.

"Anywhere at all," Lord Foxglove said grimly. "In this world or in faerie... as long as the object of its search is with us." His gaze sharpened on Clarimonde—and suddenly, she had the impression that he was considering whether he might get away with tossing her out of the carriage entirely.

Clarimonde lifted her eyes to his in a direct challenge, reaching for her bag. Perhaps Foxglove was beyond her power, as a lord of faerie—but he was not currently within his realm, whatever it was, and she was certain that she could make him badly regret the decision currently solidifying behind his eyes.

"I know very little about black dogs," Bellamira said, clearly unaware of the sudden tension in the air. "But I know much of magic, and of Mr Brand himself. We have crossed paths many times. I believe that I can handle this."

Her confident declaration interrupted the silent pressure brewing between Clarimonde and Foxglove. The faerie reached up to adjust his neckcloth. "And what do you propose, exactly?" he asked.

Bellamira did not answer him directly. Instead, she shifted

forwards with an awkward rustle of skirts, as though to switch places with Lord Foxglove. "Take down your hair, Clarimonde," she said. "Quickly, please. I'll need to braid it."

Lord Foxglove held up his hand. "I am quite capable with braids," he assured Bellamira. "I can handle the task." He tilted his head in order to display his long white-blond tail of hair. Bellamira settled back into her seat with a mollified nod of her head.

Clarimonde did not bother arguing with her sister. Instead, she began removing the pins that kept her updo in place. A moment later, Foxglove joined her in the work, flicking hairpins free with admirable facility. His long fingers were so exacting, in fact, that she barely felt them at all. His touch ghosted past her skin like a lazy breeze; where it passed, hair seemed to tumble free of its own accord. For some reason, Clarimonde's breath hitched at the sensation with irritating awareness.

That awareness only sharpened further as Foxglove gathered up her hair in his hands. It was, Clarimonde realised, a bizarrely intimate feeling, having a man touch her hair—even for such exigent reasons. Faeries had such strange standards of conduct, though, that Lord Foxglove probably felt nothing odd about it. Had she done something so banal as to ask his full name, however, she might have mortally insulted him.

"Oh, just a *small* braid," Bellamira interjected, as Foxglove began to weave Clarimonde's hair together. "I'll be cutting it off, after all." Clarimonde's sister had begun to pull down her rough black hair as well, sticking pins between her lips.

Foxglove swiftly backtracked his progress, taking a much smaller band of Clarimonde's hair between his fingers. "Split ends," he sighed as he worked. "I take it you don't oil your hair?"

Clarimonde bristled beneath his touch. "My hair has never been my first priority," she said tightly.

"I meant no insult," the faerie told her mildly. "I simply wondered if you knew it was an option. Your hair is dry, but just a bit of oil would do wonders. It would tangle less, as well."

The practical advice left Clarimonde feeling oddly off-balance. "I have... other things to worry about," she mumbled self-consciously. "My ongoing presence in this carriage, for instance."

Lord Foxglove did not answer—but Clarimonde thought she felt him stiffen for just an instant, as she voiced the observation aloud.

"I always end up putting on too *much* oil," Bellamira sighed, still comfortably oblivious to the tension between the other two people in the carriage. "I have given up entirely on my hair, unless I am dressing up for a seance." Clarimonde's sister finished off her own tiny braid, before tugging at a silver chain around her neck. This produced a small knife from within her corsetry, which she used to snip the braid away from her scalp. Bellamira knotted the hair at both ends and offered it out to Clarimonde, along with her little knife.

Clarimonde took Bellamira's braid uneasily. "What am I to do with this?" she asked her sister. Foxglove reached past her to pluck the knife from Bellamira—and just a moment later, Clarimonde felt a shiver of air against her neck, where her own braid had been cut away.

"Well, you are going to pin my hair against your own, of course," Bellamira told her matter-of-factly. "And I will wear *your* braid, Clarimonde. With just a bit of magic, I can make the black dog think that you are me and I am you. I will lead it on a merry chase."

Clarimonde sat up straighter in her seat. "Absolutely not!" she burst out sharply. "Mr Brand will catch you, Bellamira. I shudder to think what he might do to you. You are a black magician too, as far as the Lord Sorcier is concerned."

Bellamira waved a hand, as though this very reasonable concern was actually quite silly. "I told you earlier," she said. "I have crossed paths with Mr Brand before. I have no doubt that he would harm you if he caught you, Clarimonde... but he will never lay a hand on *me*. He has had ample opportunity to do so, many times already."

She snatched Clarimonde's dark brown braid from Lord Foxglove's hand and started winding it through her hair, slowly replacing her pins as she went.

Clarimonde did not share her sister's casual optimism on the matter. "And what if you are wrong, Bellamira?" she demanded. "Mr Brand is not a human being; he is something far more terrible, if *asafoetida* affects him as it does."

Bellamira paused, partway through sticking a hairpin into her updo. She lifted her dark eyes to Clarimonde's face with a serene, familiar calm upon her features. "If I am wrong," she said, "then I will die. But I am due for that, regardless. I feel it coming, Clarimonde. Hugh has done his best—but my heart has only so much strength remaining. If Mr Brand attempts to terrify or torment me, he will only kill me sooner. I think somehow he knows that. It is why he has not bothered to pursue me; I am a problem that will solve itself."

Horrible silence settled into the carriage at this revelation. Clarimonde felt the words sink into her chest, sick and terribly suffocating. She opened her mouth to speak—but realised belatedly that she did not know what she intended to say. Instead, her throat closed up, and the silence deepened further.

Bellamira offered her sister an oddly sympathetic look. It was clear that the idea of her death bothered her far less than the effects that it might have on her family. "I have lived far longer than I should have done," she told Clarimonde gently. "I am grateful for that, Clarimonde. I value my own life; I do not rush off to my death with eagerness. But I have only so much time left—and this is how I choose to spend it."

Clarimonde fought back a surge of panicked grief, as hot tears stung at her eyes. For so long, she had known that Bellamira was dying—it was her natural state. But Hugh had made such strides in her care, improving her ability to flit about as though nothing was the matter at all. Somehow, Clarimonde had managed to convince herself that Bellamira would not *really* die.

"I don't want to lose you," Clarimonde rasped. It was the only thing that she could think to say. It was the deepest truth she had to offer, in the moment.

Bellamira smiled. "I know," she said softly. "So long ago, I asked you what you wished to do with the time that *you* have been given... and you chose to spend it with me. I cannot express how happy that made me." She reached out to close her hand around Clarimonde's, threading their fingers together gently. "You gave me your time, Clarimonde—and now, I will give you mine. I love you so very dearly... and Winnie, too. Please tell her that."

Lord Foxglove closed his hand on Clarimonde's shoulder. A jolt of alarm leapt through her, as she remembered that she was on guard against being tossed out of the hearse—but the faerie only tightened his grip briefly, as though to offer comfort.

"You should take the train to Wellington," Bellamira

addressed Lord Foxglove briskly. "I will take the hearse, if you don't mind. I can lead Mr Brand on a longer chase that way."

Lord Foxglove retracted his hand from Clarimonde's shoulder. "The carriage might not *listen* to you," he pointed out. "And I would hate to see anything happen to it."

Bellamira stroked the velvet next to her affectionately. "We are already friends," she told him. "I met this carriage long ago, when Black Catastrophe was its owner. I always wondered where it had gone off to." She offered him a reassuring expression. "I will not let anything happen to your hearse. Once I am caught, it will know its way home."

Clarimonde drew in a shuddering breath, trying to stabilise herself. Emotions still whirled within her, insisting that there had to be a different way—one that somehow fixed her sister's heart and kept them all together. "Don't be silly, Bellamira," she said. "We must find a better solution. In any case, what will the two of us do without a carriage of our own?"

Bellamira raised her eyebrows at Lord Foxglove, with a mischievous sparkle in her dark eyes. "Goodness," she said. "I thought the answer to *that* was perfectly obvious."

Lord Foxglove stiffened in his seat. "Absolutely not," he declared.

The hearse swerved again. This time, it elicited panicked shouts as Marylebone's morning visitors leapt out of its way.

Bellamira offered Lord Foxglove a mild look as she pulled herself up from the floor of the hearse. "I am open to alternative suggestions," she said.

Lord Foxglove did not answer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivia Atwater writes whimsical historical fantasy with a hint of satire. She lives in Montreal, Quebec with her fantastic, prose-inspiring husband and her two cats. When she told her second-grade history teacher that she wanted to work with history someday, she is fairly certain this isn't what either party had in mind. She has been, at various times, a historical re-enactor, a professional witch at a metaphysical supply store, a web developer, and a vending machine repairperson.



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