

Prologue

Miss Abigail Wilder was not supposed to use her magic in front of the tea ladies. *Never use your magic in front of the ton*, her father had told her. *Once you do, they'll never let you rest – you'll be doing useless magic tricks until you're old and grey.*

Eighteen-year-old Abigail greatly suspected that the tea ladies were exactly the sort of nobility her father had warned her about. Once every month, the tea ladies met in her Aunt Vanessa's sitting room for tea. Ostensibly, the ladies were there at Aunt Vanessa's invitation in order to discuss the charity she intended to set up – but in practice, they rarely did much other than take their tea and gossip about the rest of the *beau monde*. Often, in fact, their conversations turned to the subject of Abigail's father, Lord Elias Wilder – England's court magician, sometimes known as the Lord Sorcier.

“Won't you tell us at least a *little* bit of what your husband is up to, my Lady Sorcière?” Lady Mulgrew asked. She was a thin, pinched-looking woman with a high, reedy voice – Abigail sometimes thought she looked a bit like a horse. Lady Mulgrew had been a tea lady for months now, ever since Aunt Vanessa had started their meetings. As one of the few ladies who had donated any real money so far, Lady Mulgrew carried herself with a certain air of importance, enjoying Vanessa's increased

attentions. She always sat in a spot of honour at tea, just next to Vanessa herself.

Abigail's mother, Lady Theodora Wilder, did not respond immediately to the query. In fact, she continued sipping at her tea for a long while, as though she hadn't heard the question at all. Abigail knew that her mother *had* heard the question, despite her lack of reaction – she was simply thinking through the implications, trying very hard to formulate an appropriate response. Lady Theodora Wilder had only half a soul, which skewed her social acumen somewhat. Long silences never bothered Dora in the way that they bothered most other people – and since Dora's first instincts always suggested that she should be utterly honest and forthright, she often required those long silences in order to engineer a more appropriate, diplomatic reply.

Lady Mulgrew blinked over her tea. "I'm not certain if you heard me, my Lady Sorcière," she observed very slowly, as though she were talking to a deaf woman. "I said—"

"Oh yes, I did hear you," Dora assured Lady Mulgrew. She set her teacup down on the table in front of her, buying herself further time to think. Dora turned her mismatched green and grey eyes upon Lady Mulgrew, considering her gravely. "I know much of my husband's business," Dora said finally, "but I do my best to keep it to myself. It is his duty to protect England from black magic – and from worse sometimes. One never knows when a stray word might have unintended consequences."

This was not, of course, what Lady Mulgrew wished to hear. She leaned forward in her seat of honour. "But surely," she insisted, "nothing terrible could come of sharing some small news of interest with *us*. We are hardly the sort of people from which the Lord Sorcier must protect England!"

Abigail snorted into her teacup. Dora shot her daughter a sideways look – and though Dora rarely showed emotion on her face as other people did, Abigail knew that they were sharing

the same thought: Lord Elias Wilder *often* implied that the aristocracy were worse than any black magicians.

Aunt Vanessa probably had the best of intentions asking Abigail and her mother to tea. Abigail was, herself, the product of Good Charity – as anyone could surely tell. For though Lord Elias Wilder *called* Abigail his daughter, and though he had loaned her his surname, he was truly just fostering her as his ward. And while Lady Theodora Wilder had dressed Abigail in creamy muslin and done up her hair with a green taffeta ribbon, Abigail's skin was still covered in old pockmarks, and her blonde hair was lank and straw-like. Abigail had made half an effort to improve her accent, mostly just to please her old governess – but she had to speak very slowly and with great concentration in order to manage her elocution.

Aunt Vanessa thought that the tea ladies would be more willing to help other children if they saw how much Abigail had benefitted from similar charity. Abigail was . . . less convinced. But Aunt Vanessa had asked with such lovely, naive sincerity that it was difficult to turn her down.

Which all went a very long way to explaining why Abigail Wilder was currently settled in her aunt's sitting room deflecting attempts at gossip, rather than practising magic with her father as she would have preferred.

Dora picked her tea back up – and Abigail realised that her mother didn't intend to respond to Lady Mulgrew's comment. Abigail sipped at her own tea, contemplating a reply. She had found Dora's tea-sipping strategy to be terribly helpful herself – for Abigail often felt tempted to say very *honest* things aloud just to see how people might react. The tea, she found, stifled that impulse somewhat.

What Abigail thought was: *You will spread the slightest bit of gossip all over London regardless of the consequences, and my entire family knows it.*

But Abigail swallowed down the words along with her tea.

What she said aloud was: “Magicians can scry upon people and conversations from a distance. Naturally, everyone here can be trusted . . . but I don’t believe that Aunt Vanessa has any magical protections cast upon her sitting room.”

Abigail worked to keep her vowels crisp and rounded – but she knew from the way the other women shifted in their seats that something was still subtly *wrong* with her diction.

“I have no such protections, of course,” Aunt Vanessa said with a smile. “I have never felt the need to hide my social gatherings from strange magicians.” Vanessa reached up to tug self-consciously at one of her blonde curls, however, and Abigail suspected that her aunt found the topic of conversation a bit discomfiting. Aunt Vanessa was a very proper woman, and she disliked the idea of prying into other people’s business. Lady Mulgrew was the only tea lady to have shown genuine interest in Vanessa’s charitable endeavours so far, though, and so Vanessa’s attempts to deflect Lady Mulgrew’s gossip were often half-hearted.

“You must know much of magic yourself, Miss Wilder?” Miss Esther Fernside piped up. At seventeen years old, she was the youngest lady present. Miss Fernside was a recent addition to the tea ladies. She had only joined them for last month’s tea – and even then, Abigail couldn’t remember her having said a word. She was a young, mousy woman of quiet demeanour and large, dark eyes; her curly brown hair had already mostly escaped its neat bun after only an hour of tea, and her smile was dim and hesitant.

“It would be strange if I didn’t know *anything* about magic, wouldn’t it?” Abigail replied carefully. The last thing Abigail needed was for Miss Fernside to realise that she could do magic – the resulting conversation would probably derail the entire tea.

“Oh yes, I suppose that would be strange,” Miss Fernside admitted sheepishly. She looked so embarrassed by her own question now that Abigail felt a moment of pity.

“I’ve read many of my father’s books,” Abigail elaborated. “We talk about magic an awful lot. There are two kinds, you know – mortal magic and faerie magic. Almost all magic done in England is mortal magic, but faeries work the strangest spells by far.”

This distinction was one of the very first things any magician learned – but it tended to impress people who knew nothing about the subject. Miss Fernside brightened at the discussion, sitting up in her chair once more.

“I knew that!” Miss Fernside assured Abigail. “My mother used to read me faerie tales. She said that faeries are wild and dangerous and wonderful. She said they can do just about *anything* if you pay them the right price.”

Abigail shivered with sudden unease. Miss Fernside had no way of knowing that Abigail herself had been stolen away by a faerie – it wasn’t precisely common knowledge. But the reminder did little to improve Abigail’s already lacklustre enthusiasm for tea.

“Faeries *are* dangerous,” Dora said softly. “And . . . yes, wild and wonderful. Which is why you should hope never to catch their attention.”

Dora, too, had been stolen away to faerie. Abigail could still remember the day they’d met, in the awful halls of Hollowvale’s Charity House. At the time, Abigail had been convinced that they would never leave again. But Dora had assured her that they would escape . . . and then, of all things, Dora had killed their cruel faerie captor.

No one in the sitting room – Aunt Vanessa included – would ever have imagined that mild-mannered Dora was capable of murdering a faerie. But Abigail *did* know . . . and in fact, it was one of the things she loved most about her mother. None of the other women here, Abigail thought, would have dared to do what was necessary to save her from Charity House.

“Faeries are *terribly* dangerous,” Lady Mulgrew interjected, in

an attempt to regain control of the conversation. “Why, I’ve heard other ladies and gentlemen of our acquaintance speculate that the recent deaths in London are to do with a faerie. I assured them that the Lord Sorcier was surely looking into the matter . . . but of course, no one here could possibly confirm such a thing.” Lady Mulgrew smiled specifically at Dora, with only a hint of annoyance.

“What recent deaths would those be?” Abigail asked worriedly. She fixed her gaze upon Lady Mulgrew, discarding her other thoughts.

Lady Mulgrew raised her eyebrows. “Why, I assumed that you would know, Miss Wilder,” she said. “Such awful business. We have lost several fine ladies in the last few weeks. They pass overnight, in their sleep – with the western window open.”

This last statement should have meant something to Abigail, perhaps. But she didn’t dare admit that it had gone entirely over her head. Abigail glanced at her mother – but Dora’s expression was, as always, blank and serene.

“Is it possible that the Lord Sorcier is *not* investigating these tragedies?” Lady Mulgrew asked Dora archly.

Dora looked down at her empty teacup with vague surprise. “Oh,” she said. “I have finished my tea.”

And then – with absolutely no preamble – Dora stood and smoothed her gown. Abigail hurried to follow suit, just as her mother turned to leave the room.

“We have an appointment,” Abigail lied. It was barely an excuse – but it was something, at least.

Aunt Vanessa smiled ruefully at Abigail. She knew, more than anyone, how different Dora’s social perceptions were. “It was lovely having you both here,” she assured Abigail. “I appreciate that you came.”

The words held more meaning than most of the tea ladies likely appreciated. Aunt Vanessa had almost surely noticed Abigail’s discomfort today.

Abigail curtsied awkwardly, and left to join her mother.

Chapter One

Abigail hurried after Dora, hiking up her skirts over her half-boots. Aunt Vanessa's servants winced and looked away as she sprinted through Crescent Hill's entryway, no doubt scandalised by the sight of Abigail's calves.

"Mum!" Abigail gasped breathlessly. "We have to wait for Hugh!"

Dora paused in the doorway. She turned back towards Abigail with a look of mild recollection. "Oh yes, Hugh," Dora murmured. "I begin to fear that I am very terrible at this mothering business. I am sure that none of the other ladies would forget their own son."

Abigail smiled ruefully. "You can't see him, Mum," she said. "I know you try to remember when he's with us, but it makes sense you'd forget sometimes. Anyway, it's all right. I bet he's down in the kitchens again. I'll go fetch him if you'll wait in the carriage."

Dora smiled distantly back at Abigail. Most mothers probably smiled more broadly at their children – but Abigail wouldn't have traded her awkward mother for all of the brilliant smiles in the world. "Thank you, Abigail," Dora said softly. "I'll wait for you both."

Abigail turned for the green baize door which led down to the kitchens. Servants darted out of her way as she descended,

faintly alarmed . . . but it couldn't be helped. Most people didn't notice Hugh Wilder, which meant that he could wander rather anywhere he pleased. Abigail had no such advantage – though she technically knew of spells to make herself seem less interesting to look at, she was not very good at actually casting them.

Abigail came out into the kitchens, where Mrs Montgomery currently worked to plate more sandwiches. Aunt Vanessa's cook was a short, brown-haired woman with broad shoulders and a military sort of bearing. Mrs Montgomery did not particularly enjoy the idea of ladies entering her kitchen uninvited – but she had always forced a certain politeness towards Abigail regardless, during the few times that she had visited.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Montgomery,” Abigail said carefully, as she slipped through the doorway. “Sorry to trouble you again.”

Mrs Montgomery glanced sharply towards Abigail, but she kept her tone even. “You're no trouble, Miss Wilder,” the cook assured Abigail.

Abigail snorted. “Many people would disagree with you, Mrs Montgomery,” she said. “But I appreciate the sentiment. Mum and I are just headed off, and I was hoping we could take with us one of your lovely . . .”

“Apple tarts,” a young boy's voice cut in very quickly.

“ . . . your lovely apple tarts,” Abigail finished obediently.

Abigail glanced towards the corner of the room, whence the voice had originated. Her younger brother Hugh stood there, staring longingly at a plate of apple tarts which had been set aside on the counter.

Hugh was dressed for the occasion today, though Abigail was probably the only person who would ever see him. He wore a neatly tailored blue waistcoat and trousers, and freshly polished shoes. A black silk kerchief hid Hugh's missing eye; Abigail often told him that the kerchief made him look like a pirate. Hugh looked in most respects like a well-mannered

eight-year-old boy ... but the truth was that he had been eight years old for ages and ages now, ever since the day that he had died.

“Of course, Miss Wilder,” Mrs Montgomery said. “Take as many tarts as you like. And please give your mother my best.”

“Those tarts look so good,” Hugh sighed. “You could take two an’ give one to Mum.”

Abigail dropped into a clumsy curtsy. “Thank you kindly, Mrs Montgomery,” she said. She gathered up two of the apple tarts in her handkerchief. Abigail nearly tried to stow the handkerchief in her pocket – but since she was dressed as a lady today, she didn’t *have* any pockets. As such, she had to hold the handkerchief awkwardly to her chest as she turned to flee the kitchens.

Hugh followed Abigail back up the servants’ stairs. “I haven’t seen those sandwiches before,” Hugh said. “Are they delicious?”

Abigail hid a small smile. “I think they’re cucumber sandwiches,” she said. “Mum likes ’em, but I think they’re squidgy.” Talking to Hugh always lured out Abigail’s normal, lower-class accent. Being dead, Hugh had never needed to polish his elocution.

“Other Mum lets us eat all kinds of things,” Hugh murmured. “But faerie food doesn’t taste the same. Wish I could have *one* real apple tart – just so I know what it’s like.”

The other half of Lady Theodora Wilder’s soul currently lived in faerie with all of the children who *hadn’t* made it back from Hollowvale alive. Hugh and Abigail called the other half of Dora’s soul Other Mum whenever they were in England – but most people who knew of her at all called her Lady Hollowvale.

Abigail heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry, Hugh,” she said. “I haven’t found a way to let you eat food yet. But I’ll keep lookin’, I promise.”

Hugh quickened his steps – it was a bit eerie having him around, since his shoes made no noise upon the stairs. “You

already figured out how to get me out of Hollowvale,” Hugh said. “It’s more’n you should’ve done. I’ll just watch you eat the tarts, if you don’t mind. You can tell me how they are.”

Abigail walked through the green baize door once again, turning to hold it open for Hugh. Her younger brother giggled as he walked past her. “I can walk through doors, you know,” he said. “Walls too.”

Abigail rolled her eyes. “It’s only polite to hold the door,” she said. “An’ I’m well aware you can go wherever you please. You got bored with the tea ladies quick enough. Five minutes in, and you were already gone.”

“They were just tellin’ the same old stories an’ talkin’ about people they don’t like again,” Hugh said with a yawn. “Mrs Montgomery’s more interestin’. I like watchin’ her cook. An’ *she* was talkin’ about dead girls an’ faeries with Mr Notley.”

Abigail had been holding the front door for Hugh . . . but at this observation, she paused. “Dead girls an’ faeries?” she repeated slowly.

Hugh straightened his tiny neck cloth, striding out the door in a comically dignified manner. “Three well-bred young ladies have died this Season, in the very prime of their lives!” he proclaimed, mimicking a more adult tone of voice as he spoke. “Rumours say they were found in their bedrooms the next morning with their western windows open!”

Abigail knit her brow, following after him. “Why *does* everyone keep talkin’ about western windows?” she asked.

Hugh glanced back towards Abigail, waiting at the foot of the carriage. “You don’t know?” he asked. “Oh . . . I guess that makes sense. You spend less time with Other Mum than the rest of us.” He locked his wrists behind his back. “Sluagh use the western window. They’re, you know . . . the *creepy* faeries. They look like ravens most times. If you leave your western window open at night, they might fly through an’ kill you in your sleep.”

Abigail shivered uncomfortably. Hugh had an understandably cavalier way of discussing death, given his current state – but her own heart still beat within her chest, and she found the subject far less comfortable. Worse by far was the suggestion that cruel faeries had once again decided to meddle in London. The idea was very personally horrifying; it came with a surge of fury, fear and righteous indignation.

Abigail swallowed these emotions with great effort. She knew that Hugh, of all people, did not deserve for her to vent her anger upon him. “Have you ever met a slugh, Hugh?” she asked carefully. “I don’t remember any of ’em comin’ to visit Hollowvale . . . but you’re more often there than I am.”

Hugh shook his head. “Other Mum won’t let the slugh into Hollowvale,” he said. “She doesn’t like to talk about it much.”

Aunt Vanessa’s carriage driver hopped from his seat to pull down the steps and open the carriage door for Abigail. It was an odd feeling, being waited upon so insistently. Abigail could still remember sleeping three to a bed in the Cleveland Street Workhouse, wearing the same dirty clothes every day.

“Thank you,” Abigail mumbled at the carriage driver. Hugh clambered up the steps ahead of her, and she followed after him, settling into the carriage with her mother.

Hugh had tucked himself in next to Dora, smiling broadly. “– an’ Abigail’s bringin’ you an apple tart!” he was saying. “You have to eat it for me, Mum; them’s the rules!”

Hugh had a habit of talking to the living as though they could hear him. Abigail had always found it a bit painful to watch, but Hugh assured her that it made him feel better about the *being dead* situation. Alas, Dora could not hear Hugh any better than most – though her small talent at scrying meant that she could see his reflection in mirrors if she exercised herself.

“You’ve found Hugh, then?” Dora asked Abigail pleasantly.

Abigail glanced towards Hugh, still leaning against Dora’s side. “I did,” she said. “He was in the kitchens, like I guessed.

He's right next to you, tellin' you how you've got to eat the tart I'm about to give you."

Dora turned a distant smile upon the empty spot next to her. "Oh, my apologies, Hugh," she said. "I didn't see you there. You are *very* good at hiding. Thank you for thinking of me. I do love tarts."

Hugh beamed at Dora's response. "I watched Mrs Montgomery make 'em," he said. "If Abby ever finds a way to let me bake, I'll make some for you myself!"

Abigail passed one of the apple tarts to Dora, who took it obligingly. "Hugh says he'd like to bake some tarts," Abigail repeated dutifully.

Hugh scowled at Abigail as Dora nibbled fondly at the tart. "That's not *exactly* what I said!" he told her, with a pout. "I said—"

Abigail repeated his words again – more precisely this time – and the peeved expression on Hugh's face melted away. It was hard to keep up with Hugh's breathless chatter sometimes, and he was normally understanding when Abigail had to shorten his sentences. But while Dora could not see Hugh, she had still done everything in her power to make him feel loved and included, and the effort had touched him deeply. As a consequence of this, Hugh craved every last scrap of connection he could manage with their mother.

"This *is* delicious," Dora said gravely, addressing Hugh's spot. Somehow, she made the conversation seem utterly natural. "I think it must be spiced with cinnamon."

"I thought so!" Hugh said eagerly. "I kept track of all the ingredients—"

"I don't want to interrupt," Abigail said, in between bites of her own tart, "but Hugh heard somethin' in the kitchens, an' I wanted to ask you about it, Mum."

Hugh frowned. "You mean the bit about the dead girls an' the sluagh?" he asked Abigail.

Abigail nodded. “Can you repeat what you heard, Hugh?” she asked. “I’ll tell it all exactly, I promise.”

Over the next few minutes, Hugh and Abigail related the conversation he’d overheard. Dora gave no indication of her feelings on the matter either way, of course.

“I’m not Lady Mulgrew,” Abigail said finally. “If Dad is lookin’ into the sluagh, he ought to have told me. He *knows* how I feel about faeries hurtin’ people. He said he’d teach me magic so I could help him with things just like this – but I can’t help him if he never *tells* me anything!”

Dora remained silent for a long moment. It was sometimes hard for Abigail to remember that her mother was probably thinking hard and not just ignoring her – but long experience had taught her to be patient.

Finally, Dora said, “Do you know . . . much as I am terrible at reading people, I think I must be the closest thing to an expert at reading Elias. I suspect that he is worried about endangering you, Abigail. I know that does not much improve matters, but it is a place from which to begin.”

Abigail scowled darkly. “How does that make any sense?” she demanded. “Does he really think he’s protectin’ me by keepin’ secrets?”

Dora sighed. “I do not know how it makes sense,” she admitted. “But if I ask him to explain, then I am sure that he will do so. I promise I will speak to him on the matter.”

The carriage slowed to a stop shortly thereafter. The carriage driver opened the door, and the three of them climbed out.

At any given time, England’s court magician was afforded a generous living, which included a set of apartments off Hyde Park. England’s current court magician, of course, was deeply contrary in temperament, which had led at times to a diminishment of his living standards when the Prince Regent became irritated with him. Currently, Lord Elias Wilder had been moved into apartments which were smaller and less opulent

than a man of his stature and achievements ought to deserve – a circumstance which bothered him and his family not one whit. Elias had spent his young life in workhouses and his later life at war across the English Channel; any bed, he had often related, was better than cold mud.

As Elias was not overly fond of titles, they had all taken to referring to the tall, narrow building as “the House.” The previous House had smelled incessantly of flowers due to its place above a perfumery. The new House did not smell quite so lovely, given its place above a butcher’s shop – but the butcher was exceedingly polite, and he always saved them excellent cuts of meat for their supper.

The House came with several servants, which had always seemed a bit of a waste given how little time Elias truly spent there. Eventually, however, Abigail’s interest in magic had required her to take a room in the House, rather than at the private orphanage which their family still sponsored. At this point, Dora had decided to hire a governess. And since a governess for just one child had seemed a terrible sort of waste, *further* children had been moved into the House, until it was difficult to tell the place from yet another orphanage.

The servants had not wanted for work ever since.

As they climbed the stairs to the main floor, just above the butcher, Abigail became aware that there was an odd feeling to the House today. Several of the children had gathered in the dining room. This was not uncommon in and of itself – but they were all very quiet and serious, which *was* uncommon. The governess, Miss Langley, had settled herself at the end of the table – but as the three of them entered, she rose from her seat, hurrying over towards Dora.

“Thank goodness you’re here!” Miss Langley breathed. “I’m certain there’s been a disaster!”

Miss Langley was half a head taller than Dora and several years her senior. Her brown hair had just started fading in

places to grey, and wrinkles had started coming in at the corners of her eyes. She was normally quite calm and composed – but even her stoic demeanour was not enough to hide the tension which currently poured off of her in waves.

Dora frowned dimly. It was a good thing, Abigail thought, that her mother was rather incapable of panic. “Do explain, Miss Langley,” she said. “What has happened, and how can I help?”

Miss Langley glanced back towards the children, all of whom were now pretending very fiercely and very unconvincingly that they were not listening to the conversation. She lowered her voice as far as she dared. “His Lordship went up to the third floor more than an hour ago. He said that I should keep all the children down here, and that none of us should disturb him on *any* account. I did as he asked, and . . . well, there was an *awful* noise, like nothing I’ve ever heard before. It’s all gone silent now, and I’ve started to fear the worst.”

“I see,” Dora said. “I shall go and check on him, of course. Thank you for keeping the children calm, Miss Langley.”

Privately, Abigail thought that it was the *children* keeping Miss Langley calm, and not the other way around. Most of them were well used to dealing with emergencies, given the rampant sickness in the workhouses. Even as Abigail watched, fourteen-year-old Roger limped over to pull a chair out for Miss Langley, who collapsed into it gratefully.

Dora headed for the stairs. Abigail glanced towards Hugh. “We’re goin’ up, of course,” Abigail muttered at him. “What do you want to wager this has somethin’ to do with Dad’s work?”

“I’d wager a tart,” Hugh said, “but I’d only have to give it to you to eat for me anyway.” He shot her a half-grin. “I’ll race you there.”

“That might not be safe—” Abigail began.

But Hugh had already vanished up the stairs after Dora.

Abigail hiked up her skirts once more and scurried to follow him. It was a sign of Miss Langley’s current distress that

Abigail's old governess did not think to rebuke her for it. By the time Abigail reached the door to the third floor, Dora had already opened it and walked through.

The third floor of the House was supposed to have been a ballroom – but it had never once been used for that purpose since coming into the Lord Sorcier's possession. In fact, Elias had turned it into a place for his work. As such, Abigail was rather used to seeing the place in disarray ... but today, it seemed, Elias had far outdone himself.

The giant silver chandelier which normally overlooked the old ballroom had crashed to the floor, splintering the wooden floorboards beneath it. Bookshelves had toppled from the walls, spilling their precious contents. Scorch marks and strange gouges marked the walls.

Strewn everywhere across the room were several large black feathers.

Abigail spotted her mother near the open western window – and for an instant, her heart lurched in her chest. Elias was crumpled just beneath the window, leaning heavily against the wall. His white-blond hair was oddly windswept, and his eyes were currently closed. His brown waistcoat was partially undone, and his cravat was barely knotted – though, to be absolutely fair, this was the normal state of affairs when he was not required at some official function. His face was so pale, and his form so still, that Abigail nearly mistook him for dead.

But even as Abigail watched, Elias murmured something to Dora, and her chest unclenched again.

“Abby!” Hugh called. “Come look at this!”

Hugh was standing in the centre of the room, staring down at a set of circular chalk marks on the floor. Abigail gave her father one last glance before she walked over to join Hugh, looking over the markings. The shape and the writing were familiar to her – though far more complex than anything she had ever attempted for herself.

“A summonin’ circle,” Abigail murmured. “A real powerful one. What’s he been summonin’, then?” The black feathers were particularly thick on the ground just next to the circle, and a terrible suspicion started to grow within her mind.

Abigail whirled to stalk towards her father. Dora had helped him up from the floor – Elias leaned heavily upon her, looking ragged and weary. There was a strange dignity to him all the same, which he never quite lost. At the moment, that dignity infuriated Abigail for reasons that she could not quite explain.

“You summoned a sluagh!” Abigail accused him. “All on your own, as well! I know you’re used to doin’ dangerous things, but I still could’ve helped you if you’d asked!”

Elias drew himself up. His golden, ember-like eyes focused upon Abigail – but when he spoke, it was to Dora. “You told Abigail about the sluagh, then?” he asked.

Dora blinked at him. “I did not,” she said. “But I think that perhaps *you* should have done.”

Abigail narrowed her eyes. “I’d have liked to hear it from you instead of from Hugh, who heard it from *Mrs Montgomery*,” she said spitefully.

Elias took a deep, steadying breath. Slowly, he straightened his posture. “Hugh is here, then?” he asked. “I thought he’d gone back to Hollowvale for a time.”

Abigail answered this question by tugging at a chain around her neck. This gesture produced the silver, heart-shaped locket which anchored Hugh to the mortal world and allowed him to wander freely away from Hollowvale. It had taken both Abigail and her Other Mum several months of work to create the locket, which contained a lock of Hugh’s real hair.

Elias rubbed his face. The sight of the locket seemed to distress him. “You shall both have to return to Hollowvale,” he told Abigail. “You *and* Hugh. London isn’t safe for you right now, and I’m no longer certain that I can protect you.”

Abigail let out a loud, frustrated noise. “I don’t need

protection!” she said. “I’ve had years an’ years of magic lessons now so I can protect *myself*.”

Elias closed his eyes, and Abigail knew that he was working to contain his famous temper. “You are still an amateur magician, Abigail,” he said. “I have many years of wartime experience, and even *I* have barely managed to handle the matter. If you are here, then I will continue to worry for your safety. Neither of us can afford that.”

Abigail scoffed and crossed her arms. “Look at all this mess,” she said. “You really think I’m goin’ back to Hollowvale to hide behind Other Mum’s skirts with you in this state? I’m *surely* not leavin’ until you explain what I’m lookin’ at.”

Elias groaned. He opened his eyes to look at Dora appealingly – but Dora had an expression of reasonable expectation upon her own features, such that he soon realised how outnumbered he was. He raked his fingers back through his hair.

“I did not summon a sluagh,” Elias said stiffly. “I summoned the *first* among sluagh. I called Lord Longshadow, and he answered. I had hoped that we might have a reasonable conversation . . . but that did not occur.”

Abigail frowned darkly at the black feathers which still littered the room. “Clearly,” she mumbled. She didn’t know very much at all about Lord Longshadow, she realised – most of her knowledge of faeries came from either her father or else her Other Mum, and neither one had ever mentioned the faerie before. That, Abigail thought, was somewhat strange.

“I asked Lord Longshadow if one of his sluagh had murdered those girls,” Elias continued, “but he would not tell me so, no matter how I pressed him. Faeries, you recall, cannot lie. Instead, he told me that he did not recognise my authority in any way. He said that he would do as he pleased within London, and that the only way I would ever stop him was by force.” Elias’s expression grew very dark at this, and the scattered feathers suddenly took on new meaning. “I took him up

on his invitation. It was a terrible conflict . . . but I believe that I came out the better of the two of us.”

Dora frowned. “Have you killed Lord Longshadow, then?” she asked.

Elias shook his head. “I have not,” he said. “He is far darker and more powerful than even Lord Hollowvale was. If I had known Lord Longshadow’s true name, I could have killed or commanded him – but in the absence of his name, I have used his own feathers against him to bind him with my magic.” So saying, Elias raised one hand – and Abigail saw that he had clenched his fingers around three particularly large black feathers. They had an oily, iridescent shimmer to them which shifted in the light of the open western window. “I have laid three bans upon him. Until the feathers are destroyed, he shall not harm anyone with his magic – nor shall he steal away any unwilling beings, nor speak to his slugh.”

“Those are very powerful bans,” Dora observed carefully. “You have bound your own magic up within them, I expect.” Dora had no magic of her own, other than her tendency towards scrying – but she had learned quite a lot about magic since marrying the Lord Sorcier.

Elias’s grimace suggested that Dora had assessed the situation correctly. “I have leverage over the faerie now,” he said, by way of reply. “He will eventually realise how little fun it is to be so bound. I am sure that he will come back and negotiate for the return of his feathers. Life shall be very boring for him in the meantime.”

Abigail straightened. “If you’re tryin’ to convince me to run away to Hollowvale, then you’re doin’ a poor job,” she said. “I’m hardly leavin’ you to face the lord of the slugh while you’re all alone an’ powerless, even if he *is* under all those bans. You can’t have more’n a thimbleful of your magic left after all of that.”

Elias narrowed his eyes. “This is not up for discussion,” he said. “It is my job and my responsibility to protect England

from black magic – not yours. I rarely ask anything of you at all, Abigail, but I am asking you now to take Hugh back to Hollowvale and to remain there with him until I can resolve this.”

Abigail opened her mouth to protest – but Dora raised her eyebrows, just behind Elias’s shoulder, and shook her head minutely.

Slowly, Abigail closed her mouth again.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll take Hugh back to Hollowvale.”

Elias relaxed his shoulders. He wavered visibly on his feet again, before Dora caught him by the shoulders. “Thank you, Abigail,” he said. His voice was tired and relieved. “I’ll send word as soon as this is sorted. I have hope that it won’t be long.”

Abigail clenched her jaw – but she forced a nod. “Mum,” she said, “can we talk outside for a moment?”

Dora nodded. “Would you find your father a chair first?” she asked. “I think it’s best if he rests for a bit longer.”

Abigail turned to head across the room, towards a desk and chair at the far wall. Hugh followed at her heels, scowling.

“I don’t *want* to go back to Hollowvale,” Hugh said. “I know you don’t either, Abby. Why’d you say yes?”

“We’re not *actually* goin’ back to Hollowvale,” Abigail muttered beneath her breath. “There’s just no use arguin’ with Dad when he’s like this.”

Hugh blinked. “So you lied?” he asked.

Abigail smiled humourlessly. “Dad’s the one who started keepin’ secrets,” she said. “I’m just followin’ his lead.”

There were notes still scattered across the desk. Abigail glanced them over quickly, picking out her father’s slightly messy handwriting. Her eyes caught upon the name *Miss Lucy Kendall*, and she blinked in surprise, filing it away for later.

The desk chair was a bit too large and bulky for Abigail to pick it up herself. There was a stool next to one of the toppled bookcases, however, and she picked this up to bring it back

towards the window. Dora helped Elias to sit down, and she nodded at Abigail.

“Let’s speak before you leave, then,” Dora said. “I’ll return shortly, Elias.”

They headed back onto the stairs just outside the ballroom. Once the door had closed behind them, Dora turned towards Abigail.

“You want me to go to Hollowvale too?” Abigail asked her mother sourly.

Dora sighed. “I promised to speak to your father,” she said, “and I will do that. I believe that I can puzzle through whatever is making him act this way. But, in the meantime, it is not the worst idea for you to visit Hollowvale. It has occurred to me that Lady Hollowvale probably knows much more about Lord Longshadow than any of us would know. Perhaps you could ask her if she has any useful information while you are there.”

Abigail pursed her lips. “We could just as easily summon her,” she said. “Other Mum would come, if it was one of us callin’ her.”

“Lady Hollowvale only leaves her realm under the gravest circumstances,” Dora said. “She is very protective of the other children there. The matter does not yet seem that urgent, I think.” She smiled dimly at Abigail. “I will bring your father around, I promise. I think you would be a great help to him, if he would only admit it. You shall only be in Hollowvale for a little bit.”

Abigail heaved a put-upon sigh. It felt worse, she thought, to lie to her mother. Dora was always so painfully sincere, and Abigail knew that it was *easy* to lie to her because she so poorly understood people.

But when Abigail spoke, it was indeed a lie which spilled from her lips.

“I’d best get goin’ to Hollowvale then,” she said.

Chapter Two

Abigail had not particularly liked Miss Lucy Kendall. It was a strange circumstance, therefore, to be investigating the other girl's death.

"Should I feel bad that Lucy's dead?" Abigail asked Hugh, as they stepped out of a hired hackney. "Am I allowed to be relieved she won't be at the next stupid party instead?"

Hugh considered this as he walked behind her. "Wasn't Lucy the one who made fun of your pockmarks an' called you a leper?" he asked.

"That was her," Abigail said grimly. "As if I'd ever forget."

Miss Lucy Kendall was – *had* been – a true beauty, and she had rarely let anyone forget it, even for a moment. Lucy's mother, Lady Pinckney, was a woman of sharp tongue and great social standing, and Lucy had done everything in her power to emulate her. Lucy had technically come out into society several years ago, while she was still quite young – but everyone truly expected her to start selecting a husband this Season, now that she had reached the age of majority.

Abigail hadn't really expected a fanfare when she came out into society herself – after all, she was not truly related to either her mother or her father, and very few of the *bon ton* wanted a workhouse brat at their functions, no matter how well Abigail dressed or spoke. But Aunt Vanessa had decided that Abigail

ought to enjoy at least one Season of parties and gowns, and it was always so difficult to say no to Aunt Vanessa.

For some reason, Aunt Vanessa's enthusiasm had convinced Abigail that the idea might *not* be an unmitigated disaster. But of course, it had been. Much as Abigail liked to consider herself thick-skinned, Lucy Kendall had made her run home crying at least once – and the older adults at those parties had at times been even worse.

Only the possibility that Elias might be blamed had prevented Abigail from cursing the awful girl with warts. It had been a terribly close thing, however.

Now here Abigail was, standing in front of Lord Pinckney's townhouse with a black mourning ribbon on her bonnet, intent on learning more about his daughter's murder.

"I think you're allowed to be relieved," Hugh said solemnly. "If Lucy wanted you to miss her, she could've treated you more nicely." He paused. "An' it's not like *you* killed her."

Abigail sighed. "No one would've missed *me* if I'd died in the workhouses," she said. "Well – Mum an' Dad would've missed me, even then. I want to miss anyone who dies, I guess, just on principle. But it's harder'n I thought it would be."

"I think Lucy's got plenty of people to miss her," Hugh said. "But none of *those* people can figure out why the slough killed her an' stop 'em from doin' it again – so you can do that instead of missin' her."

Abigail grimaced. "You'll have to talk to Lucy for me if her ghost is hangin' around," she warned Hugh. "I can only see *you* because I've got your locket."

Hugh twisted up his mouth as though he'd eaten a lemon. "If I have to," he said. "It's better'n goin' back to Hollowvale, I guess."

A flutter of black at the edge of Abigail's vision distracted her, drawing her eyes. She turned and saw two large ravens settled upon the overhang of an opposite townhouse. Both of

the birds were watching her far too intently. Abigail narrowed her eyes at them.

“If you’re normal birds,” she called over to them, “you’d best get gone! An’ if you’re *not* normal birds . . . well, same thing!”

The two ravens continued staring at her, unblinking.

“You think they’re slugh?” Hugh asked Abigail worriedly.

“I think it’d be an awful coincidence if they *weren’t* slugh,” Abigail replied darkly. “Either they’re watchin’ the scene of their crime, or else . . .” She trailed off as a nasty thought occurred to her.

“Or else?” Hugh prompted carefully.

“Or else they’re followin’ *me*,” Abigail said. “Lord Longshadow can’t talk to his slugh, but they might still have figured out it was Dad who bound him. Maybe they think I’ll lead ’em to Lord Longshadow’s feathers.”

Hugh shifted on his feet. “You think you could handle a pair of slugh?” he asked Abigail warily.

Abigail straightened her back. “Let’s find out,” she said.

Technically speaking, Abigail had learned mortal magic from her father and faerie magic from her Other Mum. Most normal people shouldn’t have been able to use faerie magic at all – but ever since Abigail had returned from Hollowvale the first time, she’d exhibited a talent for both magics at once.

Of the two, mortal magic *should* have been more difficult; it required strange props, careful study and sometimes very specific incantations. But Abigail had always found faerie magic to be far more trying. *Faerie* magic, Other Mum had told her, required only that you utterly believe that what you were trying to accomplish would happen. Faeries, she’d said, were experts at believing in ridiculous things.

Abigail was *not* very good at believing in ridiculous things. For much of her early life, she’d been incapable of changing the world around her, no matter how hard she tried. When Abigail’s first mother had grown ill, she’d tried very hard to

nurse her back to health – but obviously, that had not worked very well, and her mother had died instead. At the Cleveland Street Workhouse, the workhouse master had controlled every aspect of Abigail's life, from the moment she woke and ate her miserly breakfast to the moment she finished picking oakum and staggered her way to bed.

The first time Abigail had truly managed to change anything had been that moment in Hollowvale when she'd lied to her faerie captor and helped to hide Dora from him. She hadn't expected *that* to change much of anything either . . . but thankfully, it had.

It now seemed insulting to Abigail that she was so terrible at believing in things. And so she often ended up *trying* to use faerie magic, even when it wasn't terribly advisable.

Abigail dug down into her soul for the cold seed of power which Hollowvale had planted within her. Hollowvale's power numbed her fingers and tickled at her insides, searching eagerly for an outlet. Abigail concentrated hard, doing her best to *give* it that outlet.

She stared down the two ravens and tried to imagine them being blown away by a stiff wind. That was plausible, she thought, and therefore easier to believe.

Hollowvale's power lurched within her, clumsy and uncertain. The magic tried to shape itself to Abigail's imagination – but her belief in that stiff wind was nearly as squidgy as the cucumber sandwiches from that morning. Abigail scowled and swayed on her feet, shoving the faerie magic hastily back down inside herself.

Silence settled in upon the street. One of the two ravens cocked its head at her curiously. For a second, Abigail thought she could feel a tiny breeze . . . but perhaps that was just nature's way of trying to make her feel better.

"Fine," Abigail snapped frustratedly. "We'll do it the other way."

Abigail still wore her very proper pocketless muslin – but she had brought with her the largest reticule she could find, full of her most important magician’s tools. From this reticule, she extracted a small bundle of straw and a ball of twine. She tied off bits of straw with the string until she’d formed a clumsy human figure.

Hugh watched with interest. “Is that supposed to be a doll?” he asked. “Looks a bit funny.”

“Hush, you,” Abigail muttered. “It’ll do in a pinch.” So saying, she spat once upon the straw doll and set it down on the ground in front of her feet. Abigail paused as she looked at it. “Curses,” she said. “I have to name him now. Anything you want to walk around on its own really *ought* to have a name.”

Hugh grinned. “You could call him Mr Hayes,” he said.

Abigail groaned softly at the pun. But since her mind had yet to offer up a better name, she shook her head in resignation. “Doll!” she declared. “I name you Mr Hayes! Go forth an’ scare the birds, as you were made to do!”

This time, Abigail called the magic from all around her instead of from inside herself. It beaded invisibly upon her skin like dew collecting on grass, trickling into her consciousness and shaping itself into a form that centuries of English farmers found so very familiar. Finally, as she became convinced that she had collected enough power, she forced the image of the scarecrow upon the doll just in front of her.

At first, Abigail worried that even this bit of mortal magic had failed. But a second later, the little straw doll wiggled itself onto its feet. It did not have a head, so much as a short stub of straw – but she still had the impression that it was looking up at her.

Mr Hayes lifted one clumsy arm of straw and saluted her.

The tiny doll turned around and marched across the street towards the curious ravens on the other side.

Mr Hayes was far from the most terrifying creature in the

world – but that didn't much matter. Many thousands of people *believed* that scarecrows did indeed scare crows – and ravens were close enough as made no difference. As the doll marched closer and closer to the foot of the building where the birds perched, they began to shuffle in alarm.

Mr Hayes paused beneath the awning with the birds, staring up at them with his head made of hay. Then – very seriously – he began to dance from foot to foot in what was surely meant to be a threatening manner.

The ravens croaked with terror. One of them took off instantly, bolting into the air. The other one inched backwards, cowering from the sight of the doll.

“Good job, Mr Hayes!” Hugh called out – though it was unlikely that the doll could hear him. “Go get those sluagh!”

The doll continued its strange dance; now, it waved its arms like fronds. The raven that still lingered croaked pitifully, and fled.

Mr Hayes watched the two ravens go with mute satisfaction. Eventually, he marched back towards Abigail and then settled in front of her, as though awaiting orders.

“Stay out here an' guard against more birds,” Abigail ordered him. “They might try to come back.”

Mr Hayes saluted once more – and Abigail turned back towards Lord Pinckney's townhouse.

Slowly, she headed up the steps in front of the building, pausing in front of its bright red door. Abigail eyed the wrought-iron door knocker there with distaste – for though her time in Hollowvale had granted her some measure of faerie magic, she had also found that iron now burned her in the same way that it burned faeries. She rapped her knuckles against the thick wooden door, avoiding the door knocker entirely.

A little while later, the butler opened the door. His clothing was sharp and neat, but Abigail was unsurprised to see dark circles under his eyes. “May I help you, miss?” he asked politely.

“Would you please let Lady Pinckney know that Miss Abigail Wilder has come to call?” Abigail asked. “I am here to offer my condolences, among other things.” She fished out a calling card and passed it over. Abigail hadn’t expected ever to require her own calling cards, but thankfully Aunt Vanessa had insisted on having them made for her when she’d turned eighteen. Sometimes, Abigail thought, her aunt was a bit more foresighted than she liked to admit.

The butler nodded and took the calling card. “I will inform Lady Pinckney of your visit,” he said. “If you could please wait here?”

He framed this as a question – but of course, Abigail was not interested in waiting awkwardly on the doorstep. She nodded and followed him into the entryway, where she sat down on a stool to wait.

It took only five minutes before Hugh began to squirm. “How long d’you think we’re goin’ to wait?” he asked Abigail anxiously.

“Probably quite a while,” Abigail mumbled quietly. “Lady Pinckney hates our whole family, I hear. Lucy got it from somewhere.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “She can’t have even *met* our whole family,” he said. “Mum an’ Dad barely socialise at all.”

“Yes,” Abigail said ironically. “We all make very fine fodder for gossip that way.”

Hugh groaned. “I’m tired of waitin’,” he said. “I’m goin’ to take a look around for ghosts.”

Abigail bit her lip. Hugh’s ability to wander *was* very useful, and she’d begun to worry that Lady Pinckney wouldn’t allow her to investigate matters at all. “As you like,” she said softly. “Just let me know if you find anything.”

Hugh grinned. “If I find Lucy’s ghost,” he said, “you’re goin’ to get a *whole* earful, I promise.” So saying, he waltzed for the far end of the entryway and disappeared deeper into the townhouse.

After about a half-hour more of waiting in the entryway,

Abigail knew for certain that she was unwelcome. But she was far too stubborn to leave – and eventually, the lady of the house must have become at least mildly curious, because the butler finally returned.

“The lady is just finishing her morning meditations,” he advised Abigail, “but she has agreed to see you.” There was a faint superiority to his voice now, and Abigail knew that Lady Pinckney had expressed to him her personal dislike of Abigail’s family. Nevertheless, she rose to her feet and followed him into the drawing room.

Lady Pinckney was in every way an older version of her late daughter: her porcelain skin had only a few aged wrinkles, and her fine blonde hair was neatly swept atop her head. She wore a full black mourning gown and a shawl – and, just as with the butler, she had large black circles beneath her eyes, which she had not bothered to hide in any way.

Currently, the lady sat in a chair at the table, reading her Bible. She did not look up as Abigail entered the room, though there was at least a fresh pot of tea on the table along with two teacups. The only other available seat was a hard-backed wooden chair, which faced the wall and not the windows. A maid stood silently to one side, just behind the lady’s table.

Abigail inclined her head. “Thank you for seeing me, Lady Pinckney,” she said. “You have my condolences with regard to recent events.” Abigail spoke very slowly, trying for a crisp, elevated accent.

Lady Pinckney did not set aside her Bible. Nor did she look directly at Abigail. “Thank you for your sentiments,” she said. Her tone was flat and cold. “Will that be all, Miss Wilder?”

Abigail responded by taking the hard wooden seat which had been provided. “I won’t take too much of your time,” she said. “I was told that strange circumstances were involved. With your leave, I would like to search for any clues that might help stop this from happening again.”

Lady Pinckney's lips curled with obvious distaste. "Was it not enough that the Lord Sorcier must tramp about my home casting spells?" she asked. "He has already come and gone, with or without my permission. Lord Pinckney said that it was a matter of the Crown, and that we had no standing to send him away." She narrowed her eyes at her Bible. "You are *not* the Lord Sorcier, and I will not allow you to play at court magician in my home. You may leave."

Abigail clenched her jaw. The harsh superiority in the lady's tone jangled at her nerves, tempting her to lash out. But Abigail had known that this conversation would not be easy – and so, rather than respond immediately, she reached for the teacup and took a long, lingering sip. It was a soothing lime-flower tea, and it calmed the raw edges of her emotions.

I am not here for my own well-being, Abigail reminded herself.

Faeries are hurting people again, and I was the one who decided to try and stop them, she thought next.

Lady Pinckney is never pleasant to me, she thought finally, *but she is grieving right now, and I must be the better person.*

Abigail set the teacup down.

"My father is often very brusque," she said. "I am sorry if he caused you further grief. But I am not here to play at court magician, Lady Pinckney. I want to help make sure this doesn't happen again. I swear that is my only intention."

"You despised Lucy," Lady Pinckney said simply. "I do not want you looking through her things."

Abigail clenched her fingers on the teacup. What she wanted to say was, *Lucy despised me first, and I never gave her reason to do so.*

But she took another swallow of tea instead.

"I will not pretend that Lucy and I were good friends," Abigail said, "but she did not deserve this." She summoned up her breath. "You may believe that we are very different, and that I cannot possibly understand what you are feeling. But I lost

my first mother, Lady Pinckney – and while I love my current mother dearly, there is no such thing as a replacement. I will have an awful hollow spot in my chest where she once was until the day that I die. And I am compelled to do any little bit that I might do in order to prevent other people from knowing that feeling. I believe that you would do the same.”

Lady Pinckney stared at her Bible. The cold, hard expression on her face fractured – and for a moment, Abigail caught sight of the unspeakable misery beneath. Tears threatened at the older woman’s eyes, and she hid her face more fully behind her book.

“You are no magician,” Lady Pinckney said in a hoarse tone. “What could you possibly find which the Lord Sorcier did not?”

Abigail bit her lip. Her father’s warnings about magic echoed in her ears . . . but she did not grudge Lady Pinckney the question. Abigail knew very well that she had made a tall request.

I shall have to be known as a magician someday, after all, Abigail thought.

Abigail sipped once more at her tea, letting the lime flower rest upon her tongue. It made sense, of course, that Lady Pinckney would drink lime-flower tea at a time like this; the flavour was known to soothe one’s nerves.

Slowly, Abigail collected up the magic around her again, focusing on the sweet scent and taste of the lime flower. She rose from her chair and reached out to touch the teapot on the table, letting that magic trickle through her fingers like water. A soft golden glow lit the teapot from within, casting ripples of sunlight across the table.

“Have another cup of tea,” Abigail told Lady Pinckney gravely. “It won’t dispel your grief – but it will soften the edges for a while, and maybe let you rest.”

Lady Pinckney let her Bible fall from her face. She stared at the teapot for a long moment. Slowly – with a sideways glance at Abigail – the lady reached out to place her hand hesitantly upon the pot.

Some of the tension drained from her body. She closed her eyes and sighed in weary relief.

Abigail's heart twinged at the sight. Though she held no love for Lady Pinckney or her daughter, she knew that she had lessened an awful pain for just a little bit. That, Abigail thought, was worthwhile – and it was not the sort of magic that her father ever would have thought to perform.

Lady Pinckney opened her eyes and very gingerly poured herself another cup of tea. The potion glimmered with soft, reassuring light. The glow lit up Lady Pinckney's features as she sipped at her cup, softening her harsh expression.

They sat in silence for another minute. This time, it was an oddly comfortable, contemplative silence.

"I will have Mr Swinton show you to Lucy's bedroom," Lady Pinckney said. She hesitated uncomfortably. "You ... won't disturb anything?"

Abigail shook her head. "I may need to open the window," she said, "but I will do my best to leave everything exactly as I find it."

Lady Pinckney glanced behind her at the maid. "Please find Mr Swinton and bring him here," she said. "Make certain that he has his keys."

Chapter Three

Mr Swinton was surprised and suspicious as he showed Abigail into Lucy's bedroom – but he was far too upstanding to voice any of his possible concerns aloud.

The bedroom was neat and spacious; the servants had clearly been keeping it clean in spite of its owner's absence. The western window was firmly closed – but Mr Swinton went to open it for Abigail in order to let in more light.

Hugh was sitting on top of the bed, waiting for Abigail. He glanced at her as she entered.

“No ghost,” Hugh said. “It's really strange, Abby. I feel as though Lucy *should* still be here, but she isn't. I don't know why.”

Abigail gave the butler a sideways look. She suspected he would not be very understanding if she started talking to thin air. “Thank you for the help,” she said politely. “I will let you know if I have any questions.”

Mr Swinton frowned at that. Abigail knew that he was weighing up whether he ought to protest the clear dismissal . . . but he must have erred on the side of caution, for he nodded stiffly and stepped outside of the bedroom.

“What do you mean, Lucy *should* be here?” Abigail asked Hugh softly.

Hugh hopped off the bed, frowning. “I don't know,” he admitted. “It feels like . . . like she left a lot of herself behind.”

She was attached enough to stay, but I don't see her anywhere around."

Abigail shook her head. "I don't like that," she said warily. "Not many things can affect ghosts." Worry gnawed at her. "Maybe Dad was right. Maybe you *should* go back to Hollowvale for a bit, Hugh."

Hugh narrowed his eyes at her. "I am *not* goin' back to Hollowvale," he stated. "If you're stayin' in London, then I'm stayin' in London." Abigail hesitated at that, and Hugh added, "Don't be like Dad, Abby. I want to stay, just like you."

Abigail sighed. For just a second, she sympathised with her father. The idea of letting Hugh walk into danger with her was suddenly terrifying. But Hugh hadn't just been abducted by a faerie – Lord Hollowvale had really killed him. It only made sense that Hugh would want to stop the slugh from doing the same to other people like him.

"You're right," Abigail murmured. "You have the right to stay an' help. But . . . will you please be more careful from now on, Hugh? If there's somethin' around that can bother ghosts, that means we've got to stick together."

Hugh nodded reluctantly. "I'll stay close by," he promised. He turned his gaze back to the rest of the bedroom. "There's somethin' wrong here. You think you can dig around some?"

Abigail considered the room. "I don't know quite what I'm lookin' for," she admitted. "But I'll start with the obvious, I suppose, an' see if the room is hidin' anything."

Hugh bounced on his feet with excitement. "I know this one!" he said. "I've seen Dad do it before. You'll need tobacco smoke, won't you?"

Abigail scowled. "*Dad* can call fire on command," she said. "I haven't got any way of lightin' tobacco, even if I had it. Anyway, there's other ways of seein' hidden things, you know. I've got a little bit of eyebright tea, an' it works just as well."

Abigail dug into her reticule once more, producing a little

silver flask. She unscrewed the top only with a *bit* of reluctance. Eyebright tea was normally light and sweet – but Abigail had brewed this particular batch with exceptional strength in order to be sure that its magic would work, and the taste was bitterly overwhelming. Still, she screwed up her face and took a long swallow from the flask.

Slowly, the image of the bedroom grew bright and strong – as though the sun were shining in from every corner at once. Abigail cast her gaze around the room, searching for anything out of place.

Something was indeed out of place.

A black shape fled from Abigail's sight, darting away beneath the large four-poster bed. At first, she thought it must have been a raven – but a moment later, she realised that it was far too *big* to be a raven.

“Hugh,” Abigail said softly, “get behind me, won't you?”

Hugh frowned – but he shuffled carefully behind Abigail, glancing around the room with curiosity.

Abigail slowly closed the silver flask and put it back into the reticule, setting the bag down onto a side table. She kept her eyes ahead of her as she reached blindly into the reticule again, searching around inside until she came out with a tiny pouch of salt – one of the best mortal remedies she had against evil spirits.

“I know you're there,” Abigail announced to the bed. “You may as well come out.”

The bed remained silent.

“I can *force* you out,” Abigail added. “Neither of us would like that very much, I think.”

Another second passed. Then a voice underneath the bed said, “You could just leave, an' pretend you never saw me.”

Abigail knit her brow. The voice which had spoken was a young woman's voice. Whoever the woman was, she had an accent very similar to Abigail's – which surely meant that she had little business being in a dead noblewoman's bedroom.

“Would you *please* come out?” Abigail repeated. Her tone was a little less hostile now, and a little more curious.

The bed sighed.

Slowly, a young woman wriggled out from underneath it. Her mid-length black hair had fallen free from her simple white cap. Her face was drawn and pale – and as she clambered to her feet, Abigail saw that she had a small frame which suggested she had missed several meals over the course of her life. She wore a patched old apron over the top of a faded green frock.

The young woman was not a ghost. Rather, she was alive and well, and exactly the sort of young woman who *didn't* belong underneath a lady's four-poster bed.

“Who are you, an' what are you doin' beneath Miss Kendall's bed?” Abigail asked. She meant to use a stern tone befitting a professional magician – but the words came out less serious and more perplexed. Whatever magic had been hiding the woman before seemed gone now, though the pungent taste of eyebright still lingered on Abigail's tongue.

The young woman grimaced, wiping her hands on her apron. Abigail caught a whiff of lye mixed with some sweeter smell which she could not quite identify. Probably, she thought, she was looking at a laundress. But that fact did not feel very enlightening – rather, it only added to her existing confusion.

“I don't know that I ought to give you my name,” the woman said warily. “I heard you talkin' – you're a magician, an' a *necromancer*.” She narrowed her eyes at Hugh, and Abigail blinked.

Hugh lit up with delight. “You can see me?” he asked. “No one but Abby's ever seen me before!”

The small woman frowned at Hugh. “Have you been trapped here?” she asked him seriously. “If you tell me how she's done it, I could try an' help you.”

“I'm standin' right here, you know!” Abigail said hotly. “An' I'm *not* a necromancer!” She paused, and thought for a moment. “Well. I suppose I *technically* did some necromancy. But that's

not the same as doin' necromancy all the time, is it? It's not like I've made a profession of it."

Hugh grinned. "I *asked* Abby to bring me to England," he said. "I'd been stuck in Hollowvale for years an' years. It's not awful there, but it does get boring after a while—"

Abigail threw up her hands. "Oh, just tell her everything then!" she said sourly. "We can surely trust strange washer-women hidin' underneath beds, can't we?"

The dark-haired woman blinked at Hugh. "You . . . *wanted* her to bind you?" she asked. "But don't you want to finish your business an' move on to what's next?"

Hugh furrowed his brow. "I don't know what business I'd have to finish," he said, "but if I'd wanted to move on, I'd have done it." He stepped forward to offer his hand. "I'm Hugh, by the way, an' this is Abby. You can tell *me* your name – I'm not a magician."

To Abigail's unending surprise, the other woman took Hugh's hand and shook it. "Oh, fine then," she said. "My name's Mercy. I think magicians could still use a name they've *heard*, but only my first name shouldn't hurt too much."

Hugh stared down at the hand that currently gripped his. His eyes were very wide. "You can touch me too," he breathed. "No one's *ever* done that, 'less I was in Hollowvale. How do you do that? Could you teach Abby?"

Mercy cocked her head at Hugh. "Well . . . I've always just *done* it, I suppose," she said. "I've had a way with ghosts ever since I can remember."

Abigail scowled. "Step away from her, Hugh," she said. "There ought to be a ghost here, remember? Awful convenient that *she* happens to be here an' Lucy's ghost happens to be gone."

Mercy glanced at Abigail sharply – and as she did, Abigail saw that the dark irises of Mercy's eyes were tinged with shifting pink and blue hues, like windows into a twilight sky. The sight arrested Abigail so much at first that she nearly forgot that they were in the middle of an argument.

“Awful convenient there happens to be a *necromancer* here an’ no ghost,” Mercy challenged Abigail back. “I thought for sure I felt a ghost tied to this house, an’ instead I found *you*.”

Hugh dropped Mercy’s hand, looking between the two girls uncertainly. “I don’t think there’s any need to fight,” he said. “I can promise, Abby wouldn’t bind a ghost who didn’t want it. An’, Abby, I figure whoever got rid of Lucy’s ghost probably did it a while back – otherwise Dad would’ve noticed Lucy an’ talked to her while he was here.”

Abigail made a sour sort of face. “Probably so,” she said grudgingly. “That doesn’t mean we ought to trust her, though.” She was still feeling irritable over being called a necromancer.

Mercy crossed her arms. “I didn’t ask you to trust me,” she huffed. “I can find a missin’ ghost all on my own, thank you very much.”

“But why are you lookin’ for a missin’ ghost at all?” Abigail pressed her.

“I’ve got a question,” Mercy shot back at Abigail. “Why are you so *nosy*?”

“An’ why *should* you go lookin’ for a missin’ ghost all on your own?” Hugh asked plaintively. He turned a pleading expression to Abigail. “We could use the help, Abby, couldn’t we?”

“You just want her around because she can touch you,” Abigail grumbled. She eyed Mercy suspiciously. “Oh, I think you *should* come with us,” she added. “I’d rather have my eyes on you instead of wonderin’ if you’re followin’ behind me. You sneaked into this house with magic – I’d have seen you without the eyebright, otherwise.”

Mercy lifted her chin. “Maybe I don’t want to come with you,” she challenged Abigail. “I don’t like bein’ ordered around by stuck-up magicians who think they’re better’n me.”

Abigail’s mouth dropped open. It was bad enough being called a necromancer – but it stung even worse to be told she was *stuck-up*.

“I am *not* a stuck-up magician!” Abigail said hotly. “I just think you’re suspicious!”

Mercy rolled her eyes. “An’ you’ve got the right to declare who’s suspicious an’ who’s not,” she snipped. “I think *you’re* suspicious, but I’m not orderin’ you to follow me around.” She brushed the last of the dust from her apron. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Miss Magician – I’ve got a ghost to find.”

And then – even as Abigail watched – the shadows in the corner of the bedroom closed around Mercy like a broad yawn.

And she was gone.

Hugh looked back at Abigail with wide eyes. “Did you see that?” he asked in an awe-filled voice. “That was faerie magic, Abby. There’s no way it was anything else! An’ she did it so quick, too! You’d never be able to do somethin’ like that—”

“Oh, would you be quiet, Hugh?” Abigail snapped. She didn’t mean to be brusque with him – but a small part of her was feeling terribly hurt and betrayed. It wasn’t enough that Hugh had found a strange woman to admire; apparently, he had to rub Abigail’s face in her own lack of imagination, too.

For just a second, Hugh looked distressed – but his expression soon hardened into resentment. “Is that a *command*, Miss Magician?” he asked. “You could use that locket to make me be quiet if you wanted.”

Abigail clenched her fingers into her palms. “Don’t you be pert with me!” she said. “I’ve never made you do anything you didn’t want to do, an’ you know it. I’m sorry if I can’t shake your hand or disappear into shadows. I only spent months makin’ sure you could leave Hollowvale, an’ I guess that isn’t impressive enough.”

Hugh opened his mouth to respond . . . but a strange look came over his face, and he closed it again.

Seconds ticked by. Finally, Hugh said, “We’re both bein’ very silly, aren’t we?”

Abigail shifted on her feet uncomfortably. “I know *you’re*

bein' silly," she grumbled. But the observation had cut through her anger somewhat, and she sighed. "I'm sorry for bein' bossy," she said. "You know how hard I keep tryin' to get the hang of faerie magic. It's just not fair seein' someone else imagine impossible things so easily."

Hugh looked down at his shoes. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad," he said. "I know how hard you worked to get me out of Hollowvale. All I meant to say was . . . if *you're* good at mortal magic, an' Mercy's good at faerie magic, then you'd be able to do a lot between the two of you."

Abigail grimaced. "I *do* think Mercy's hidin' something," she said darkly. "Imagine her showin' up with faerie magic right as we're scarin' off faeries. I meant what I said about keepin' her close. I'd chase her down if I thought I could catch her . . . but I'm not all that sure if I *could* right this second."

Hugh straightened. "I bet I can convince her to stick with us, if we manage to find her again," he said.

Abigail pursed her lips. "I'll leave that to you, then," she said, "*if* we manage to find her again." She turned back towards the bedroom. "But I doubt Lady Pinckney's goin' to let us in here again – so we'd best make the most of it while we're here first."



Abigail spent another half an hour performing spells and searching over the bedroom with a few more sips of eyebright tea. She found very little of magical note, unfortunately – but just as she was about to give up, she discovered something exceptionally peculiar beneath Lucy's dresser, right next to the western window.

"It's a little flower," Abigail said, as she pushed back up to her feet. "Look at this, though – I think it's oleander! I've only ever seen it grow in Blackthorn, in faerie. It's as poisonous as anything. I got a rash last time I touched one." Abigail offered

her gloved hand out towards Hugh, with the tiny white flower at the centre of her palm.

Hugh peered at the flower. "I'm fairly sure Lord Blackthorn wouldn't poison anyone," he said. "He doesn't tend to climb through windows, neither."

Abigail frowned at her hand. "I don't think this flower's from faerie at all," she said. "Faerie stuff is always *off*, just like the tarts in Hollowvale. This is a real oleander."

Hugh crossed his arms. "Well, what's that supposed to tell us?" he asked. Hugh was far more interested in tarts than he was in flowers.

Abigail rolled her eyes at him. "None of Lucy's beaus would've given her a poisonous flower," she said. "An' she wouldn't be wearin' one, neither. I think that the sluagh that came through the window must've shed this on its way in."

Hugh cocked his head curiously. "But you just said you've never seen an oleander outside faerie," he said. "Where would you find a flower like that in London?"

Abigail smiled triumphantly. "You'd only find it somewhere like an orangery," she said. "An' I bet I know *which* orangery."