

Prologue



Theodora Eloisa Charity Ettings was a very long name for a very small girl. This, her aunt liked to say, was probably why she was such a handful – by the time one had fully shouted the words “Theodora Eloisa Charity Ettings, you get back here this instant!” said ten-year-old girl was almost always long gone.

Today, Theodora Eloisa Charity Ettings – who generally preferred the name Dora – was busily escaping her adult captors, with the goal of making her way to the wild woods behind Lockheed Manor. These woods were full of fantastic trees to climb and fast-flowing muddy creeks with which to dirty her skirt hem, all of which sounded much more interesting than sitting down to learn embroidery with her cousin Vanessa.

Auntie Frances’s shouts faded behind Dora as she darted through the tree line, giggling to herself. Strands of her curly, reddish-gold hair caught among the branches, tugging their way free from her neatly coiffed bun. Dora tripped over her pristine white skirts, catching herself just in time to avoid a fall – but the toe of her slipper ground the fabric of her hem into the dirt, staining both shoe and dress. Later, Dora’s aunt would be furious and her punishment severe . . . but for now, Dora was free, and she had every intention of taking advantage while she could.

There was a particularly good tree for climbing just across the creek, near the blackbird’s nest she’d found last time. Dora

hadn't got very far up the tree before getting stuck, but she'd ruminated on the problem for more than two weeks now, and she was sure she would be able to climb much higher this time if she set her mind to it.

Just as Dora had settled onto the banks of the creek to pull off her slippers, however, an elegant male voice spoke from behind her.

"Oh, little girl," it sighed. "How like your mother you look."

Dora turned her head curiously, wiggling her bare toes in the cold water before her. The man behind her had appeared quite out of nowhere – and surely there had to be magic involved, because his long white coat was unstained by his surroundings, and his eyes were the fairest shade of pale blue that she had ever seen before. Being an imaginative little girl, Dora was not surprised to note that his ears were very gently pointed at the tips, but she *was* very surprised to see that he was wearing at least four jackets of different cut and colour, all layered carelessly atop one another.

"I don't look a thing like my mother, Goodman Elf," Dora informed him matter-of-factly – as though tall, handsome elves addressed her every day of her life. "Auntie Frances says that Mother's hair was lighter than mine, and that she had brown eyes instead of green."

The elfin man gave Dora a kind smile. "You humans always miss the most important details," he said. "It's not your fault, of course. But your mother's soul and yours are of the same bright thread. I spotted the resemblance in an instant."

Dora pursed her lips consideringly. "Oh," she said. "I suppose that makes sense. Well – were you one of Mother's friends, Goodman Elf?"

"Alas," the elf told her, "I was not. Once, she may have called me such – but she later changed her mind in a manner most abrupt." His unnatural blue eyes fixed upon Dora, and she felt a strange shiver go through her. "You have also been very impolite,

firstborn child of Georgina Ettings,” he said. “I am no ‘Goodman Elf’. Indeed, you should address me as ‘Your Lordship’ or ‘Lord Hollowvale’, for I am the marquess of that realm. You can tell that I am important, for I am wearing many expensive jackets.”

Dora narrowed her eyes at the elf. At first, it had been quite a delight to meet a real-life faerie – but she was now beginning to suspect that she would be much happier crossing the creek and climbing her tree. “I had no way of knowing your title,” Dora sniffed. “And I have never heard of Hollowvale, anyway. If it’s a real place, then it is far outside His Majesty’s domain, and therefore of no consequence here.”

Those pale blue eyes blazed with ice. The water at Dora’s feet grew even more chilly than before, and she pulled her toes up out of the creek in a hurry.

“Do you not know what happens to impolite young children who wander in the woods, firstborn child of Georgina Ettings?” Lord Hollowvale asked Dora in a quiet, dangerous voice.

Dora backed her way slowly towards the creek. “You said you weren’t my mother’s friend,” she told the elf warily. “I have no cause to be polite to strange men who sneak up on me, Lord Hollowvale.”

The elf’s pale hand flashed forward like a serpent, grasping Dora by the neck. She let out a strangled cry, reaching up to claw at his hand with her fingernails – but he was much stronger than he appeared, and there was a cold, inhuman fury to his grip.

“Georgina Ettings promised me her firstborn child,” Lord Hollowvale told Dora in his chilly voice. “And I shall take my due. I expect that you shall be much more polite once I have taken your soul, little girl.”

Dora tore at his hand, thrashing and writhing in fear. But as the elf spoke, a strange coldness ran through her body, wiping away the sharpest edges of her terror. Her protests slowed, and her mind began to wander strangely. An elf had snatched her

from the creek, it was true – but the danger that he posed seemed less pressing and more dreamlike than before. Surely this problem would pass, and Dora would soon continue on her way to the tree she was after.

Lord Hollowvale let out a sudden cry of pain, however, and he dropped her to the ground.

Behind him, Dora's golden-haired cousin Vanessa stumbled back, with a pair of bloody iron scissors in her hand and a horrified expression on her pretty features. *Oh dear*, Dora thought to herself distantly. *But Vanessa is so sweet and obedient. How could she stab a marquess with her embroidery scissors?*

"Dora!" Vanessa gasped fearfully. She stumbled across the mud towards her cousin, helping her up from the ground. "Please, Dora, let's run, we *must!*"

Lord Hollowvale staggered to his feet, clutching at the back of his leg. Vanessa had given him a terrible gash along the back of his calf, such that he had to limp towards them. Deep crimson blood stained his fine white coat, and his face twisted with terrible anger. "This girl's soul is mine by right!" he hissed. "You will give her to me this instant!"

Vanessa turned upon the faerie, holding her bloody scissors before her with a stricken expression. "I do not want to hurt you," she said. "But you shall not touch my cousin, not for *any* reason."

Lord Hollowvale jerked back from the scissors. Fear briefly clouded his face as he glanced down at them – a strange circumstance, since the scissors were only slightly bigger than Vanessa's tiny fist, and their eyes were decorated with cheerful little roses. Vanessa drew Dora slowly around the faerie and back towards the manor, keeping her scissors squarely between herself and the marquess.

"As you wish, niece of Georgina Ettings," the elf spat finally. "I have full half of my payment. May you make good use of the other!"

And then – even as they watched, with their eyes fixed directly upon his form – he disappeared into thin air.

“Oh, Dora,” Vanessa sobbed, as soon as the elf had gone. “Are you all right? Has that awful elf done something to you? I was so afraid. I only meant to scold you back to lessons, but he was right there, and I had my scissors in my apron—”

“Why are you so upset?” Dora asked her curiously. She knit her brow at her cousin. “Why, it’s over and done with now. You can come and climb my tree with me if you like.”

Vanessa looked at her, bewildered. “Are you *not* upset?” she asked fearfully. “He was very terrible, Dora, and all of that *blood . . .*”

Dora smiled pleasantly at her cousin, though she felt as she did that something important was missing from behind the expression – something that had been there only minutes ago. “I suppose I *should* be upset,” she said. “A normal person would be, wouldn’t they? But perhaps I will be upset later, after I have thought on it.”

Vanessa insisted that they return to the manor immediately. Dora went with her, though she still had a fondness for the tree across the creek. As Vanessa wept relating the story to Auntie Frances, it slowly began to dawn on Dora that she was not acting as she normally ought to act. All of her emotions had dulled to a distant sort of fancy – as though she were observing herself in a dream.

Auntie Frances gave them both the most horrified look, as Vanessa recounted the elf’s words. “*Quiet!*” she begged Vanessa. “Quiet, both of you. You mustn’t say a word of this to anyone else, do you understand? Do not even speak of it to your father, Vanessa!”

Vanessa gave Auntie Frances a teary, wide-eyed look. “Why ever not?” she asked. “That elf has *done* something to Dora, I know he has! We must find someone who can fix her!”

Auntie Frances snatched at her daughter’s arm, dragging her

forward. She got down on one knee and lowered her voice fearfully. "Dora is faerie-cursed," Auntie Frances said. "Look at her eyes! One of them has lost its colour! Perhaps the entire rest of this family is cursed with her, if it's true what her foolish mother did. If anyone were to find out, we would be driven off the land!"

Dora's aunt made them both swear not to breathe a word to anyone else. Dora found this perfectly agreeable. In fact, she felt no distress about the situation at all, except for a faint bit of worry, easily ignored. It was rather like a fly, buzzing distantly about in the corner – she knew it was there when she bothered to pay attention to it, but in the greater scheme of things, it really didn't signify at all.

Vanessa promised only with the greatest reluctance. When they went to bed that night, she crawled beneath the covers with Dora and held her tightly.

They slept with the iron pair of scissors just beneath the pillows.

Chapter One



Sir Albus Balfour was nattering on about his family's horses again.

Now, to be clear, Dora *liked* horses. She didn't mind the occasional discussion on the subject of equine family trees. But Sir Albus had the most singular way of draining all normal sustenance from a conversation with his monotonous voice and his insistence on drawing out the first syllable in the word *purebred*. By Dora's admittedly distracted count, in fact, Sir Albus had used the word *purebred* nearly a hundred times since she and Vanessa had first arrived at Lady Walcote's dratted garden party.

Poor Vanessa. She had finally come out into society at eighteen years old – and already she found herself surrounded by suitors of the worst sort. Her luscious golden hair, her fair, unfreckled complexion and her utterly sweet demeanour had so far attracted every scoundrel, gambler and toothless old man within the county. Surely Dora's lovely cousin would be equally attractive to far better suitors . . . but Dora greatly suspected that such men were out in London, if they were to be found anywhere at all.

At nineteen – very nearly pushing twenty! – Dora was on the verge of being considered a spinster, though she had supposedly entered society alongside her cousin. In reality, Dora knew that Vanessa had only put off her own debut for so long in order to

keep her company. No one in the family was under any illusions as to Dora's attractiveness to potential suitors, with her one strange eye and her bizarre demeanour.

"Have you ever wondered what might happen if we bred a horse with a dolphin, Sir Albus?" Dora interrupted distantly.

"I— What?" The older fellow blinked, caught off his stride by the unexpected question. His salt-and-pepper moustache twitched, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened, perplexed. "No, I cannot say that I have, Miss Ettings. The two simply do not mix." He seemed at a loss that he even had to explain the second part. Sir Albus turned his attention instantly back towards Vanessa. "Now, as I was saying, the mare was *purebred*, but she wasn't to be of any use unless we could find an equally impressive stud—"

Vanessa winced imperceptibly at the repetition of the word *purebred*. Aha. So she *had* noticed the awful pattern.

Dora interrupted again.

"—but do you think such a union would produce a dolphin's head and a horse's end, or do you think it would be the other way around?" she asked Sir Albus in a bemused tone.

Sir Albus shot Dora a venomous look. "Now see here," he began.

"Oh, what a fun thought!" Vanessa said, with desperate cheer. "You do always come up with the most wonderful games, Dora!" Vanessa looped her arm through Dora's, squeezing at her elbow a bit more firmly than was necessary, then turned her eyes back towards Sir Albus. "Might we inquire as to your expert opinion, sir?" she asked. "Which would it be, do you think?"

Sir Albus flailed at this, flustered out of his rhythm. He had only one script, Dora observed idly, and absolutely no imagination with which to deviate from it. "I . . . I could not possibly answer such an absurd question!" he managed. "The very idea! It's impossible!"

"Oh, but I'm sure that the Lord Sorcier would know," Dora

observed to Vanessa. Her thoughts meandered slowly away from the subject, and on to other matters. "I hear the new court magician is quite talented. He defeated Napoleon's Lord Sorcier at Vitoria, you know. He does at least three impossible things before breakfast, the way I hear it told. Certainly, *he* could tell us which end would be which."

Vanessa blinked at that for some reason, as though Dora had revealed a great secret to her instead of a bit of idle gossip. "Well," Vanessa said slowly, "the Lord Sorcier is almost certainly in London, far away from here. And I wonder if he would lower himself to answering such a question, even if it *were* the sort of impossible thing he could accomplish." Vanessa cleared her throat and turned her eyes to the rest of the garden party. "But perhaps there are some here with a less *impossible* grasp of magic who might offer their expert opinion instead?"

Sir Albus's moustache was all but vibrating now, as he failed to suppress his outrage at the conversation's turn away from him and his prized horses. "Young lady!" he sputtered towards Dora. "That is *quite* enough! If you wish to discuss flights of fancy, then please do so somewhere far afield from us. We are having a serious, adult conversation!"

The man's vehemence was such that a drop of spittle hit Dora along the cheek. She blinked at him slowly. Sir Albus was red-faced and shaking with upset, leaning towards her in a vaguely threatening manner. Dimly, Dora knew she *ought* to be afraid of him – any other lady might have cringed back from such a violent outpouring of passion. But whatever impulse normally made ladies wither and faint in the face of frightening things had been lost on its way to her conscious mind for years on end now.

"Sir!" Vanessa managed in a shocked, trembling voice. "You must not address my cousin in such a way. Such behaviour is absolutely beyond the pale!"

Dora glanced towards her cousin, considering the way that

her lip trembled and her hands clutched together. Quietly, she tried to mirror the gestures. Her aunt had begged her to act *normal* at this party, after all.

For a moment, as Dora turned her trembling lip back towards Sir Albus, a chastised look crossed his eyes. "I . . . I do apologise," he said stiffly. But Dora noticed that he addressed the apology to Vanessa, and not to her.

"Apologise for what?" Dora murmured absently. "For impacting your chances with my cousin, or for acting the boor?"

Sir Albus widened his eyes in shocked fury.

Oh, Dora thought with a sigh. *That was not the sort of thing that normal, frightened women say, I suppose.*

"Your apology is accepted!" Vanessa blurted out quickly. She pushed to her feet as she spoke, dragging Dora firmly away by the arm. "But I . . . I'm afraid I must go and regain my composure, sir. We shall have to discuss this further at another time."

Vanessa charged for the house with as much ladylike delicacy as she could muster while hauling her older cousin behind her.

"I've fumbled things again, haven't I?" Dora asked her softly. A distant pang of distress clenched at her heart. Acute problems rarely seemed to trouble Dora the way that they should, but emotions born of longer, wearier issues still hung upon her like a shroud. *Vanessa should be married by now*, Dora thought. *She would be married if not for me.* It was an old idea by now, and it never failed to sadden her.

"Oh no, you haven't at all!" Vanessa reassured her cousin as they slipped inside the house. "You've saved me again, Dora. Perhaps you were a bit pert, but I don't know if I could have stood to listen to him say that word even one more time!"

"What, *purebred*?" Dora asked, with a faint curve of her lips.

Vanessa shuddered. "Oh, please don't," she said. "It's just awful. I'll never be able to listen to anyone talk about horses again without hearing it that way."

Dora smiled gently back at her. Though Dora's soul was

numb and distant, her cousin's presence remained a warm and steady light beside her. Vanessa was like a glowing lantern in the dark, or a comforting fire in the hearth. Dora had no joy of her own – though she knew the sense of contentment, or a kind of pleasant peace. But when Vanessa was happy, Dora sometimes swore she could feel it rubbing off on her, seeping into the holes where her own happiness had once been torn away and lighting a little lantern of her own.

"I don't think you would have enjoyed marrying him anyway," Dora told Vanessa. "Though I'll be sad if I've scared away some other man you would have liked more."

Vanessa sighed heavily. "I don't intend to marry and leave you all alone, Dora," she said quietly. "I really worry that Mother might turn you out entirely if I wasn't there to insist otherwise." Her lips turned down into a troubled frown that was still somehow prettier than any smile had ever looked on Dora's face. "But if I *must* marry, I should hope that it would be a man who didn't mind you coming to live with me."

"That is a very difficult thing to ask," Dora chided Vanessa, though the words touched gently at that warm, ember glow within her. "Few men will wish to share their new wife with some mad cousin who wears embroidery scissors around her neck."

Vanessa's eyes glanced towards the top of Dora's dress. They both knew of the little leather sheath that pressed against her breast, still carrying those iron scissors. It had been Vanessa's idea. *Lord Hollowvale fears those scissors*, she had said, *so you should have them on you always, in case he comes for you and I am not around to stab him in his other leg.*

Vanessa pursed her lips. "Well!" she said. "I suppose I shall have to be difficult, then. For the only way I shall ever be parted from you, Dora, is if you become mad with love and desert me for some wonderful husband of your own." Her eyes brightened at the thought. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we fell in love at

the same time? I could go to your wedding, then, and you could come to mine!”

Dora smiled placidly at her cousin. *No one is ever going to marry me*, she thought. But she didn't say it aloud. The thought was barely a nuisance – rather like that fly in the corner – but Vanessa was always so horrified when Dora said common sense things like that. Dora didn't like upsetting Vanessa, so she kept the thought to herself. “That would be very nice,” she said instead.

Vanessa chewed at her lower lip, and Dora wondered whether her cousin had somehow guessed her thoughts.

“. . . either way,” Vanessa said finally, “neither of us shall find a proper husband in the country, I think. Mother has been bothering me to go to London for the Season, you know. I believe I want to go, Dora – but only if you swear you will come with me.”

Dora blinked at her cousin slowly. *Auntie Frances will not like that at all*, she thought. But Vanessa, for all of her lovely grace and charm and good behaviour, always did seem to get her way with her stern-eyed mother.

On the one hand, Dora thought, she was quite certain that she would be just as much a hindrance to Vanessa's marriage prospects in London as she was here in the country. But on the other hand, there were bound to be any number of Sir Albus hunting about London's ballrooms as well, just waiting to pounce on her poor, good-natured cousin. And as much of a terror as Vanessa was to faerie gentry, she really was as meek as a mouse when it came to normal human beings.

“I suppose I must come with you, then,” Dora agreed. “If only so you needn't talk of horses ever again.”

Vanessa smiled winsomely at her. “You are my hero, Dora,” she said.

That lantern light within Dora glowed a tiny bit brighter at the words. “But you were mine first,” she replied. “So I must certainly repay the debt.”

Vanessa took her by the arm again – and soon Dora’s thoughts had wandered well away from London, and far afield from things like purebred horses and impossible court magicians.



Auntie Frances was *not* pleased at the idea of Dora accompanying her cousin to London. “She’ll require dresses!” was the woman’s very first protest, as they discussed the matter over tea. “It will be far too expensive to dress two of you! I am sure that Lord Lockheed will not approve the money.”

“She can wear my old dresses,” Vanessa replied cheerfully, as though she’d already thought this through. “You always did like the pink muslin, didn’t you, Dora?” Dora, for her part, merely nodded along obligingly and sipped at her teacup.

“She’ll drive away your suitors!” Auntie Frances sputtered next. “What with her *strangeness*—”

“Mother!” Vanessa protested, with a glance at Dora. “Must you speak so awfully? And right in front of her as well!”

Auntie Frances frowned darkly. “She doesn’t *care*, Vanessa,” she said shortly. “Look at her. Getting that girl to feel anything at all is an exercise in futility. She may as well be a doll you carry around with you for comfort.”

Dora sipped at her tea again, unfazed. The words failed to prick at her in the way that they should have. She wasn’t upset or offended or tempted to weep. There was a small part of her, however – very deep down – that added the comment to a longstanding pile of other, similar comments. That pile gave her a faint sinking feeling which she never could quite shake. Sometimes, she would find herself taking it out and examining it in the middle of the night, for no particular reason she could discern.

Vanessa, however, was quite visibly crushed. Her eyes filled up with tears. “You can’t mean that, Mother,” she said. “Oh,

please take it back! I shan't be able to forgive you if you won't!"

Auntie Frances stiffened her posture at her daughter's obvious misery. A weary resignation flickered across her features. "Yes, *fine*," she sighed, though she didn't look at Dora as she said it. "That comment was somewhat over the line." She pulled out her lace handkerchief and handed it over to her daughter. "Do you really wish to go to London, Dora?" she asked. It was clear from her tone that she expected to hear some vague, noncommittal answer.

"I do," Dora told her serenely. Auntie Frances frowned sharply at that and glanced towards her.

Because Vanessa wants me there, Dora thought. *And I don't want to leave her*. But she thought that this elaboration might complicate the point, and so she kept it to herself.

Auntie Frances said that she would think on the matter. Dora suspected that this was her way of delaying the conversation and hoping that Vanessa would change her mind.

But Vanessa Ettings always did get her way eventually.

Thus it was that they soon took off for London, all three of them. Lord Lockheed, always distant and more consumed with his affairs than with his daughter, did not deign to accompany them – but Auntie Frances had pulled strings through her sister's husband to secure them a place to stay with the Countess of Hayworth, who was possessed of a residence within London and only too pleased to have guests. Since Vanessa had declared her interest so belatedly, they had to wait for the roads to clear of mud – by the time they left Lockheed for London, it was already late March, with only a month or two left in the Season.

After so much fuss, the carriage into London was not at all how Dora might have imagined it. Even in her usual detached state, she couldn't help but notice the stench as they entered the city proper. It was a rude mixture of sweat, urine and other things, all packed together in too close a space. Auntie Frances and Vanessa reacted much more visibly; Auntie Frances pulled

out her handkerchief and pressed it over her mouth, while Vanessa knit her brow and craned her head to look outside the carriage. Dora followed Vanessa's lead, glancing over her cousin's shoulder to see out the window.

There were so very *many* people. It was one thing to be told that London was well-populated, and another thing entirely to see it with one's own eyes. All those people running back and forth in the street got into each other's way, and they all seemed somewhat cross with one another. Often, their driver had to yell at someone crossing in front of their carriage, shaking his fist and threatening to run them down.

The noise would have been startling, if Dora were capable of being startled. It settled into her bones more readily than anything else had ever done, however – the biggest fly yet in the corner of the room. Dora found herself frowning at the chaos.

Thankfully, both the hubbub and the awful scents died down as their carriage crossed further into the city, onto wider, calmer avenues. The jumble of buildings that passed them slowly became more elegant and refined, and the suffocating press of people thinned out. Eventually, their carriage driver stopped them in front of a tall, terraced townhouse and stepped down to open the doors for them.

The front door of the townhouse opened just as Dora was stepping down after her cousin and her aunt. A maid and a footman both exited, followed by a thin, steel-haired woman in a dignified rose and beige gown. The two servants swept past, already helping to unload their things, while the older woman stepped out with a smile and took Auntie Frances's hands in hers.

"My dear Lady Lockheed!" the older woman declared. "What a pleasure it is to host you and your daughter. It has been an age since my last daughter was married off, you know, and I've had little excuse to make the rounds since then. I cannot wait to show you all around London!"

Auntie Frances smiled back with unexpected warmth, though there was a hint of nervousness behind the expression. “The pleasure is all ours, of course, Lady Hayworth,” she said. “It’s ever so gracious of you to allow us your time and attention.” Auntie Frances turned back towards Vanessa, who had already dropped into a polite curtsy – this, despite the fact that they were all certainly stiff and miserable from the journey. “This is my daughter, Vanessa.”

“It’s so delightful to meet you, Lady Hayworth,” Vanessa said, with the utmost sincerity in her tone. It was one of Vanessa’s charms, Dora thought, that she was always able to find *something* to be truly delighted about.

“Oh, how lovely you are, my dear!” the countess cried. “You remind me already of my youngest. You can be sure we shall be fighting off more suitors than we can handle in no time!” Lady Hayworth’s eyes swept briefly over Dora, but then continued past her. Dora was wearing a dark, sturdy dress which must have made her appear as a very fine lady’s maid, rather than as a member of the family. Lady Hayworth turned back towards the townhouse, beckoning them forward. “You must be awfully tired from the road,” she said. “Please come inside, and we shall set a table—”

“This is my cousin, Theodora!” Vanessa blurted out. She reached out to grab Dora’s arm, as though to make sure no one could mistake the subject of her introduction. The countess turned with a slight frown. Her gaze settled back upon Dora – and then upon her eyes. Lady Hayworth’s warm manner cooled to a faint wariness as she took in the mismatched colours there.

“I see,” the countess said. “My apologies. Lady Lockheed did mention that you might be bringing another cousin, but I fear that I quite forgot.”

Dora suspected that Auntie Frances might have downplayed the possibility, in the hopes that Vanessa might change her mind

before they left. But Lady Hayworth was quick to adjust, even if she didn't quite pause to finish the formal introduction.

Still, Lady Hayworth led them into a comfortable sitting room, where a maid brought them biscuits and hot tea while they waited for supper to finish being prepared. The countess and Auntie Frances talked for quite some time, gossiping about upcoming parties and the eligible bachelors who were known to be attending them. Dora found herself distracted by the sight of a tiny ladybird crawling across the knee of her gown. She was just thinking that she ought to sneak it outside before one of the maids noticed it, when Vanessa spoke and broke her out of her musings.

"And which parties will the Lord Sorcier be attending?" Dora's cousin asked the countess.

Lady Hayworth blinked, caught off-guard by the inquiry. "The Lord Sorcier?" she asked, as though she wasn't certain she'd heard Vanessa correctly. When Vanessa nodded emphatically, the countess frowned. "I admit, I do not know offhand," she said. "But whatever romantic notions you may have taken up about him, I fear that he will not be a suitable match for you, my dear."

"Why ever not?" Vanessa asked innocently over her tea. "He's quite young for the position of court magician, I hear, and very handsome as well. And is he not a hero of the war?" Dora heard a subtle, misleading note in her cousin's voice, however, and she studied Vanessa's face carefully, trying to pick apart what she was up to.

"That much is true," Lady Hayworth admitted. "But Lord Elias Wilder is really *barely* a lord. The Prince Regent insisted on giving him the French courtesy title, of course, with all those silly privileges that the French give their own court magicians. Technically, the Lord Sorcier may even sit in on the House of Lords. But his blood is common, and his manners are exceptionally uncouth. I have had the misfortune of encountering

him on several occasions now. He has the face of an angel, and the tongue of some foul . . . *dockworker*.”

Dora found it amusing that the countess apparently considered dockworkers to be an appropriate foil for angels. She was briefly distracted by the notion that hell might be full of legions and legions of dockworkers, rather than devils.

“He does sound terribly unsuitable,” Vanessa said reluctantly, regaining Dora’s attention. “But please, if you don’t mind – I would love to meet the Lord Sorcier at least once. I’ve heard such stories about him, and I would be crushed to leave London without even seeing him.”

The countess tutted mildly. “I suppose we shall see,” she said. “But for the very first thing, I have a wish to see you at Lady Carroway’s ball. She has *many* fine and suitable sons, and you could do worse than entering London society at one of her parties . . .”

The subject meandered once again, until they were brought into dinner. They met Lord Hayworth that evening in passing, though he seemed quite busy with his own affairs, and less than interested in his wife’s social doings. Once or twice, Dora thought to ask Vanessa about her interest in the Lord Sorcier, but her cousin kept demurring and changing the subject of conversation, and she eventually decided it was best to drop the matter while within current company.

Dora next thought that she would wait to ask until they were off to bed . . . but directly after dinner, she was swept away by a maid and given a hot bath, then bundled into a very lovely feather-down bed a few rooms down from her cousin.

Tomorrow, Dora thought distantly, while she stared at the foreign ceiling with interest. *I am sure we’ll speak tomorrow.*

Quietly, she pulled the iron scissors from the sheath around her neck and tucked them beneath her pillow. As she drifted off to sleep, she dreamed of angels on the London docks, filing up and down the pier and hustling crates of tea onto ships.

Chapter Two



For many days, Dora had no opportunity at all to speak to her cousin.

In fact, when she woke in her room the next day, she had to search out a maid to be told that Lady Hayworth and Auntie Frances had gone out shopping for accessories with Vanessa. Partway through the day, someone sent word that they would be unaccountably delayed, as they had been invited to dinner at the residence of one of Lady Hayworth's friends. After a day of ambling uncertainly about the townhouse, Dora finally went back to bed early, hoping that the next day might offer more fortuitous circumstances.

When Dora next woke, she was advised that Vanessa was getting her gown adjusted at the last moment, on Lady Hayworth's recommendation. This being the second day in a growing pattern, Dora did not waste any more time sitting at windows drinking tea. Instead, she asked where she might find something to read. She was directed towards a single bookcase within a small library, where were the sorts of books that ladies ought to read. Here she found a tattered, type-printed novel tucked away in the corner – perhaps a guilty pleasure for one of Lady Hayworth's absent daughters – and spent a few hours reading. The subject matter would have been quite shocking, if she had been the sort to shock, but it was an entertaining novel all the same.

The third day, Dora decided that it was time she went outside – and so she did. She put on her most reasonable dress and walked right out the front door and into the street. If the servants thought there was something odd about her walking out alone, they must have been convinced that there were some mitigating circumstances to which they were not privy, because no one tried to stop her. Then again, since Dora had no sense of fear, she was quite good at projecting a mild, distracted sort of confidence.

There were a few servants coming and going along the street. Dora picked out a distracted-looking maid who was currently carrying freshly laundered sheets. She sped up her pace and plucked at the woman's sleeve.

"Excuse me," Dora said. "There are iced desserts in London, aren't there?"

The maid turned towards her with a blink. "Er," she said. "Yes." She frowned at Dora's attire, clearly attempting to suss out whether she was someone to be respected. The maid must have decided to err on the side of caution, because she added, "The ladies like to eat fruit ices at Gunter's, on Berkeley Square."

Dora smiled at her. "Thank you very kindly," she said. "Could you tell me which way it is to Berkeley Square?"

Many streets and many strange conversations later, Dora found herself wandering a more mercantile part of London, with shops on every side. She meandered through a few of them, appreciating the sheer spectacle of so many fine goods in one place. More than once, she lost track of her original intent and had to ask directions again. By the time she made it to Berkeley Square, however, a dangerous rumble had started up in the sky, and cold raindrops had begun to pitter-patter against her skin.

Dora spent a few extra moments looking up at the clouds, shielding her eyes from the rain. Those clouds were dark and roiling, and she found herself staring at them with an awed fascination.

Nearby, a young lady squealed beneath her bonnet, rushing

through the rain for the nearest overhang. Dora looked after her and remembered belatedly that she was trying to act as normal as possible while in London, in order to help Vanessa's chances of finding a suitor.

Slowly, Dora backed her way beneath the closest overhang, and through the door of a nearby shop.

A bell rang softly as the door opened, announcing her presence. Dora glanced around curiously, taking in her surroundings. The shop was small but prestigious – many bookshelves lined the walls, filled to the brim with expensive-looking leather tomes. All of the books had the look of something handwritten, rather than cheaply printed. A wood and glass counter showed a handful of illuminated scrolls on display. An ancient silvered mirror hung behind that counter. In it, Dora saw a beautiful ballroom alight with hundreds of candles. The distant sound of violins played in her ears, and she leaned across the counter to take a closer look.

There was a Dora in the mirror as well – but this Dora was wearing the pink muslin gown that Vanessa had given her, and her hair was coiled up into a rusted red bun. There was a string of very fine pearls wound about her neck that she didn't immediately recognise. An ominous crimson stain had spread across the front of the gown, beneath the pearls. As Dora lifted her hand to her own chest, she saw dark red dripping down the tips of her fingers.

As she watched, a tall man stepped up behind her. His messy, white-blond hair and pale skin flickered in the unearthly candlelight; his eyes were a peculiar molten reddish-gold that danced along with the flames. He was dressed in full evening attire: a fine white jacket and a silver waistcoat. His neck cloth was subtly loosened, however, and the smile on his handsome face held a faintly devilish edge to it.

"Don't drip on the books, dear," he said in her ear. His voice was soft and low. He drawled his words with the slightest bit of

a northern accent, so that they curled down faintly at the end. Dora found herself so entranced by the sight and sound of him that it took her a spare moment to process his words.

The mirror Dora wasn't the only one dripping everywhere. As Dora glanced down, she saw that she was soaked in very real water from the rain outside.

"Oh my," she said, turning around to face him. "I *haven't* dripped on any books, have I?"

The man behind her was not wearing evening attire – he was wearing a casually buttoned brown jacket and a white neck cloth in a simple knot – but in all other respects, he looked quite like the man in the mirror. His eyes were even stranger and more arresting up close, so that Dora ended up staring up into them, appreciating the way that they danced with some faint inner light.

He blinked very slowly and languidly as she looked up at him. "I don't believe you have," he said. If Dora wasn't mistaken, in fact, he was briefly put out by the fact that she hadn't jumped into the air and screamed when he'd sneaked up on her.

Dora glanced back towards the mirror – but the image of the ballroom was gone. The surface had gone dull and black now, and it reflected absolutely nothing.

"Did you see something of interest in there?" asked the man next to her.

"I suppose I did, now that I think on it," Dora mused. The sight of the ballroom hadn't struck her as particularly unusual at the time, but now that she'd been asked to consider it directly, she could see where it wasn't the sort of thing one normally saw in mirrors.

Presently, however, Dora became aware that there was another patron behind one of the freestanding bookshelves, watching them intently. Brown-haired and slightly shorter than the man in front of her, he would have been quite handsome in a more normal manner, were it not for the speckling of scars along his

right cheek. Still, he was neatly dressed for the day in a stiff coat and sturdy Hessians, and he had a smile that seemed to make those scars disappear beneath its warmth.

“Now where did this young lady appear from?” the brown-haired man chuckled. “You didn’t summon her, did you, Elias?”

The fair-haired man, Elias, shot the other man the sort of withering look that only good friends could manage without risking a duel. “If I were going to bother with a summoning, Albert,” he said, “I’m quite sure I could think of better things to call upon than some half-drenched maid.”

The brown-haired man, Albert, only gave him another rueful smile. “If you were a gentleman, Elias,” he said, “you would offer her your coat. I’m sure the lady must be quite chilled.”

Elias glanced away from both Dora and his friend, his inquiry about the mirror suddenly forgotten. “You are perhaps the only man who might accuse me of being a gentleman without being turned into a frog,” he told Albert acidly. “Take back that awful insult, before I think of an alternative animal.”

Albert ignored Elias and shrugged off his own coat, offering it out to Dora. “On my friend’s behalf,” he told her politely. “Since he is grumpy today.”

Dora took the coat from Albert, more out of automatic politeness than anything else. But as she did, her eyes caught on his hand. What she had at first taken for some sort of glove on his right hand was in fact nothing of the sort. It was instead a hand made entirely of *silver*, which moved with all the fluidity of a normal human appendage. A momentary glance was enough to assure her that Albert’s left hand was quite normal by comparison. Dora returned her gaze to the silver right hand with an openly curious look, forgetting about the coat that she still clutched.

Albert looked down at his hand and shot her a half-smile. “The Lord Sorcier’s work,” he explained. “I lost my real hand, and much of my arm, to shrapnel, I’m afraid. But this one is quite something, isn’t it?”

The Lord Sorcier, Dora thought. *Elias Wilder*. She flicked her eyes back towards the fair-haired man. If she wasn't mistaken, he seemed mildly embarrassed by the subject of conversation, though he quickly hid the emotion behind a bored affectation.

"I'm quite sure it's impolite to stare at cripples," Elias told Dora in a droll tone.

"I don't mind," Albert said cheerfully. "Besides which, I'm quite sure it's even worse to *call* a man a cripple, Elias."

The Lord Sorcier scoffed at this, but soon fell silent. A moment later, a short, wiry man bustled out from the back room, carrying a full stack of books. "Just as you asked!" said the shorter man, as he set the books down on the counter. "Everything I could find on the various humours. Some of these were *quite* difficult to track down."

The Lord Sorcier reached out to open the front cover of the book on top of the stack. Inside, Dora saw a set of diagrams marked up with scribbled, handwritten notes. She leaned curiously around the man's elbow, conscious not to let her hair drip onto the pages. The notes, she saw, were all in some very formal sort of French which she couldn't immediately puzzle out. Given time, she was certain she could put together a translation—

"You know," Elias said conversationally, "the last woman to come so close to me caught her hair on fire. It was a dreadful mess. I'm quite sure she still has a scar."

Dora glanced up at him. Elias was watching her with an arched eyebrow, which confused her. His tone suggested that he was trying to be friendly, but if she wasn't mistaken, his expression was one of faint disgust – *oh*.

I'm acting strangely again, Dora thought. She backed away from him quickly.

"My apologies," Dora said. "I was very curious about your book."

"You were very curious?" Elias repeated in that low, sonorous voice. He added a soft laugh, which *also* seemed friendly, but

now Dora wasn't quite sure whether she ought to take it as such. "Well then. That makes it all better. Was there anything else you were curious about, while we're at it? Shall I take off my trousers and let you take my measure?"

Dora knit her brow. "Take your measure?" she asked. "What ought I to be measuring, sir?"

Albert sighed heavily and reached out to snatch the jacket that still dangled from Dora's fingers. He tucked it around her shoulders. "Do ignore him," he said. "I always do, when he gets this way."

The man behind the counter groaned, and Dora saw that his face had gone red. "Oh, please don't do this in my shop, Lord Sorcier," he begged Elias. "Perhaps *your* reputation can't possibly get any worse, but you know I have a business to run!"

Dora considered the fair-haired man next to her more closely, exerting herself so that she might focus on him. This was indeed the Lord Sorcier, then? The man she'd heard so much about? The one that Dora had accidentally inspired Vanessa to go chasing after for a fleeting glimpse?

He was indeed quite handsome, she had to admit. Even in half dress, the Lord Sorcier was resplendently wild, with his wind-tossed hair and his arresting golden eyes. Only once before had Dora seen such an ethereal visage – and that had belonged to a cruel and noble faerie.

It was a shame, she thought, that so many beautiful things were also so ugly on the inside.

The Lord Sorcier straightened, looking down upon Dora with an expression that she *did* know very well. It was the same one her aunt had used on her many times before – the one that said she was too foolish even to understand when she was being insulted. "It's quite all right, John," Elias addressed the man behind the counter. "The little chit is nearly as dull as a Sunday morning service. You can come and find me if she ever realises what I meant."

“*Elias*,” Albert warned his friend reprovingly.

Dora tilted her head at Elias, considering. “I’m not certain what I did to insult you, my lord,” she said. “Have I offended you somehow, or am I simply conveniently placed while you are otherwise upset?”

Her even, curious tone made the Lord Sorcier frown. Dora was certain that she had reacted incorrectly this time, but she didn’t care. She had little effort to spare for making unpleasant men more comfortable.

“. . . women who don’t understand personal boundaries always offend me,” Elias said finally. “Dim-witted people offend me even further.”

“Oh dear,” Dora said mildly. “That must be very difficult indeed.”

Already, the fair-haired man had begun to turn away from her – but he glanced back at that. “Pardon?” he asked. “What must be difficult, exactly?”

Dora smiled at him politely. “Being offended at yourself so very often,” she said. “That seems a sad way to live, my lord.”

Albert guffawed. “Oh,” he said. “She’s got you there, hasn’t she?”

Both of the Lord Sorcier’s eyebrows rose at Dora this time. For a moment, she wondered whether she had angered the man so much that he might turn *her* into a frog. But as the moment passed, he merely shook his head in irritation and turned to Albert.

“This first book is in some sort of confounding French,” Elias said to his friend. “You’ll have to read it for me.”

Albert stepped forward to glance at the book. “Medieval French, it seems,” he said. “It’s not all *that* different, Elias. Your French is just abominable.”

“Yes, well,” Elias muttered. “We weren’t all raised in a household with highbrow French tutors, Albert. My French expertise

remains limited to asking after a warm meal or a whorehouse. I suppose my profanities are still quite sharp as well.”

Albert gave Elias another reproving look, but it was clear that the Lord Sorcier had no intention of censoring himself in front of Dora. Similarly, it was probably becoming clear that Dora was not prone to having vapours over the conversation. “Is this why you really brought me today?” Albert asked. “I have offered more than once to *teach* you better French, Elias. One might realistically expect the Lord Sorcier to know the language of alchemy and *sorcery*.”

Elias waved his hand dismissively. “I haven’t the time to learn,” he said. “Besides which, I have *you*.”

Albert shook his head but said no more on the subject. He glanced towards Dora. “I’ve just realised,” he said. “I quite forgot our introductions, on top of everything else. I am Mr Albert Lowe. This is Lord Elias Wilder. He’s charmed to meet you, I assure you.”

Dora smiled at Albert. “I am Theodora Ettings,” she said. “But you may call me Dora if you like, Mr Lowe. If we are being politely dishonest with one another, then you may assure the Lord Sorcier that I am charmed to meet him too. But in all truth, I *am* charmed to make *your* acquaintance.”

“You see, Albert?” Elias said. “That is exactly the problem. Now you have charmed the young lady, and you shall not be rid of her. You even gave her your jacket. Once her mama finds out, you’ll be before an altar before the week is through.”

“That is quite impossible,” Dora told Elias offhandedly. “My mama is dead. My father as well.” She said it only because she expected it might take him aback, and she was pleased to see that it did. “My aunt might perhaps pursue the poor gentleman, but only on my cousin’s behalf.” Dora smiled back towards Albert. “My cousin *is* quite pretty. But I shall only introduce her to you if it pleases you.”

Albert blinked at that. Perhaps, Dora thought, she was not

supposed to be quite so direct about attempting to find her cousin a suitor? But he seemed very kind, and he *was* a mister at the very least.

"I shall . . . take it into consideration," Albert said finally, with a humorous glint in his eyes. "My mother, Lady Carroway, will be hosting a birthday ball for my older brother. I would be pleased to have her send you and your cousin an invitation. I have insisted that Elias attend, you see, and I cannot think of any other woman who might converse with him at length without fleeing the premises."

"I am not coming," Elias interjected crossly – but Albert ignored him.

Aha, Dora thought, dimly pleased by this development. Albert must have been one of Lady Carroway's quite suitable sons. This meant that the countess would approve of him, which only made the whole idea even better.

"I believe that my cousin will be coming to Lady Carroway's ball already," Dora said. "But if I am to be frank, you may need to ensure I have an invitation as well. Our hostess has been quite determined to forget me." Albert raised his eyebrows at that, and Dora frowned. "Perhaps I should not have said that aloud," she admitted. "You will be kind enough not to repeat it, Mr Lowe? I would hate to cause a scandal, for the sake of my cousin."

Albert pressed his silver hand to his chest. "I do so swear it," he said solemnly. "And I shall insist that Mother send you your very own invitation, Dora."

"I am not coming, Albert," Elias repeated emphatically. "You shall be stuck entertaining the two ladies on your own, I warn you."

When Albert ignored him again, he let out a sharp breath and snapped his fingers in the air. The books on the counter floated up next to him.

"You may put the books on the Treasury's account," Elias

informed the shopkeeper, who had been politely trying to ignore their conversation so far, “as they are necessary to my duties.”

The shopkeeper nodded with only the slightest wince. The Prince Regent was not particularly well-known for paying his bills on time.

Elias turned for the shop’s exit, and the floating books trailed along behind him as he left. Rain parted neatly around him and his books, as though it had run into the surface of a perfectly invisible parasol.

Albert shot Dora a rueful glance. “I expect that is meant to be my cue to leave,” he said. “I suppose I must go translate another magical book, for the sake of king and country.” He frowned at the jacket around her shoulders. “You may keep that until the ball if you like. I would hate for you to catch a chill.”

Dora shook her head and slid the jacket off her shoulders, offering it back out to Albert. She had a hunch that it would cause her trouble to go home with it. “Thank you for the offer,” she said, “but please do take it back. I barely feel the cold, in any case.”

Albert took the jacket back reluctantly and gave her a bow. “Until the ball then,” he said. “It was a pleasure.”

Dora watched after Albert as he headed out to rejoin the Lord Sorcier. *I do hope Vanessa doesn’t intend to try and marry the Lord Sorcier*, she thought. *Albert seems much kinder. I shall have to dissuade her as soon as I am able.*

“You have my deepest apologies, miss,” the man behind the counter said with a sigh, interrupting her thoughts. “A man in my business really cannot turn away the Lord Sorcier, you understand, however abhorrent his behaviour.”

“Oh yes,” Dora said distractedly. “Of course, I understand.”

“Please, allow me to help you,” he said, by way of changing the subject. “Was there something in particular for which you were looking?”

Dora turned back towards him, pursing her lips. *I do believe*

this is a magic shop, she thought. *How fortunate.* “Perhaps there is,” she said. “I’m afraid I only have a bit of pin money. But if you happened to have a book of faerie peerage on your shelves, I would be most obliged.”