



Chapter 1

Daphne and Molly

At dawn the cobwebs were diamond-studded with dew. The tiny drops of water caught the early morning light reflecting it within the hollow of the flowering bluebells that grew wild within the forest glade. All around were similar bejeweled tents, the industries of spiders who had woven their delicate pavilions of gossamer around the boles of trees and clutches of wildflowers. It was here that the faeries had made their camp the previous evening.

Daphne stretched her thin white arms and yawned, sleepily blinking her eyes at the bluebells, which had formed the bedposts of her house for the night. She was a young faerie with blonde hair like a dandelion, which always splayed out like a mop upon her head. Fluttering the dust from her wings, she rubbed her eyes and, feeling around, grasped the toothed leg of a beetle that was her comb and ran it through her hair.

Most of the faeries had arisen long before to greet the dawn, but Daphne was often lazy of a spring morning. Now she slipped from out her tent and bathed herself with the dews gathered in the recess of a budding ladies slipper. Her morning's wash completed, she rose slowly into the air before darting off, quite suddenly, as faeries are wont to do, down the trail toward the lake.

It was all poor Molly could do to keep up with her, which wasn't surprising since Daphne was often careless of such things. The little girl pumped her seven-year-old legs as fast as she could in pursuit of her airy friend, but swiftly lost sight of her in the dense thickets of silver maples and alders.

It was several minutes before the little girl stumbled out of the thicket onto the narrow beach of the lake that shimmered silently in the morning light.

Daphne had joined two other faerie maids around a water lily to watch some pollywogs as they wriggled by. Bleu, a tall (for a faerie) girl with blue skin, glanced over at the little child.

"Your human is here," she said to Daphne (whom she knew was forgetful).

“Don’t make her late for school again!” scolded Neria, a green skinned faerie who was a Friend of Trees.

Daphne was a Friend of Humans, but not just any humans. Daphne was quite particular. Oddly enough, she was generally disdainful of most humans. Molly, of course, was an exception.

“What time is it?” asked Daphne grumpily as she buzzed like a tiny insect around Molly’s head.

“Almost 8:30,” replied Molly worriedly looking at her watch.

“Then we’ll have to dash,” answered the faerie, and shot off in the general direction of Molly’s school.

It was early spring. The Vermont forest was damp with spring pools which brought forth the delicate seasonal flowers that faeries love most of all. The trees which had been bare for months brought forth green leaves and shoots and buds that opened magically to greet the new season. Budding flowers released their seeds onto the wind and they danced and fluttered after the two girls. Molly was quite out of breath when they reached the street.

Molly always hated leaving the forest for the town. Not that it was a bad town, Temperance was a cozy little burg nestled by the New Hampshire border, enclosed by the New England wilderness. Molly couldn’t imagine a better place to live. But as soon as she left the forest for the asphalt street, she left all the magic behind except of course for Daphne who had accompanied her.

The elementary school was just ahead, but it was a minute to nine, and Molly wasn’t sure if she would make it through the door before the bell.

“Ha-ha-ha! Molly-dolly’s going to be la-hate ag-eh-hen!” jeered Kevin, a freckle-faced boy standing on the top of the steps.

Daphne made a contemptuous gesture with her hand, and a sudden spring zephyr from out of nowhere snatched Kevin’s papers which *had* been securely gripped in his hand and sent them scattering pell-mell across the schoolyard.

Molly dashed up the steps and down the tiled hallway to stand in line, quite out of breath, with the rest of her class outside of room 16 just as the school bell rang. She sighed in relief. Daphne settled upon her shoulder behind a wisp of brown hair. Across the hall, Kevin was being scolded for being late and having dirty school papers.

Miss Rosenthal’s second grade class walked into the classroom, single file, hung their spring jackets in the closet, and went to their wooden desks. Molly’s seat was in the fourth row on the side of the room closest the windows. Molly’s friend, Sally Ferris, sat next to her and was surreptitiously chewing gum. Molly made a questioning look with her eyes. Sally nodded her head and reached out to hand Molly a piece, but abruptly dropped the proffered treat with a squeak since the foil wrapper had suddenly grown hot between her fingers.

“No chewing gum in school!” lectured Daphne in Molly’s ear.

“Sally! Pick that up and put it away and spit out the piece you’re chewing,” said Miss Rosenthal with a frown.

Sally complied and returned to her seat.

“Now, class, everyone stand.”

The children all stood by their desks, and facing the American flag, placed their hands over their hearts.

“I pledge allegiance to the flag,” they chorused, “of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

“Now class, take out your readers and open to page forty-three.”

All of the children opened their readers to the page and began reading. In the story, three children were going to wash the family car.

“All... right,’ ... said... Fa-ther...” read Molly out loud when it was her turn. “that... is... e... e-no... e-nu-ga.”

“No, Molly, try again,” coaxed Miss Rosenthal patiently.

“‘GH’ at the end. Top teeth on lower lip,” whispered Daphne encouragingly.

“E-no-ff. E-nough. That... is... e-nough.”

“Very good, Molly,” smiled Miss Rosenthal.

Later the children practiced their cursive writing. Molly did very well, except that Daphne had to remind her to curl the tails on her “a”s.

At recess, Molly played hopscotch with her friends Sally, Veronica, and Debbie. Daphne sat in the Juniper tree and visited with her friend, Tanya, a red skinned faerie who was a Friend of Trees.

“I saw you cause trouble for that little red haired boy this morning,” observed Tanya.

“Kevin. He was being fresh,” explained Daphne.

“Is he a mean boy?”

“He’s only mean to Molly.”

“Why?”

“He likes her.”

Tanya blinked.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Humans are not like your trees, Tanya. They don’t grow in logical directions.”

When the school bell rang, the children lined up at the door and returned into the building. The whispered flutter of gossamer wings told Molly that Daphne had returned to the spot on her shoulder. She felt the same confidence and warmth that she always felt when Daphne was around. On the other side of the hall, Kevin made a face and stuck his tongue out at Molly.

“Smile very sweetly back at him,” suggested Daphne.

Not understanding why, Molly did as Daphne said. Kevin blushed red and turned away quickly.

Daphne chuckled with satisfaction. Then she spun around to face forward, her wings laid back, her thumbs prickling.

Clack-clack-clack-clack came the sound of hard, high heels on the tiled hallway. A very tall, stark looking woman was striding up to look down upon the line of children standing before room 16.

“Children, this is Miss Gorshwin, our new vice-principal,” said Miss Rosenthal introducing her to the class.

Miss Gorshwin smiled. Her black hair was pulled back tightly in a bun which gave her face a stretched look. She had a lot of teeth.

“Hello, children,” she said looking down at them. Her eyes were dark and large. “I’m looking forward to working with all of you.”

She continued to smile. The children had to crane their necks to look up at her. They looked at her smile. The children smiled because she smiled. Daphne looked into her eyes from behind Molly’s hair. Miss Gorshwin’s eyes were large and black. Daphne’s silver, sparkling eyes narrowed darkly with suspicion.

After school, Molly and Daphne returned to the forest. Daphne was flying ahead, and Molly, as usual, had to run to keep up.

“Daphne!” called a voice.

Peta, a skinny, young male faerie with olive colored hair flew up and sped in circles, smiling the smile he always had for Daphne. Daphne pretended not to notice.

“Daphne, are you coming to the choral out on the lake?”

“I am not,” answered Daphne haughtily, darting forward.

“I’d *love* to hear you!” continued Peta, unabashed. He kept ahead of Daphne quite easily by flying backwards so that he was still facing her.

“I’m with Molly. *She’s* more important.”

“She could come.”

“Human’s cannot fly or hover over water.”

“She could if you gave her a little help.”

“Molly would look ridiculous and unseemly floating over the lake, and if she got her shoes wet, she would get into trouble.”

“All right,” shrugged Peta, darting off. “I’ll see you tonight at the firefly festival.”

Daphne suddenly thought of Miss Gorshwin.

“Peta!”

“What?” asked the faerie flitting back.

“Today I thought I saw a…” she paused.

“A what?”

Daphne frowned and shook her head.

“Probably nothing.”

Shrugging once more, Peta smiled and dashed off toward the lake.

Later in the afternoon, Molly sat on a grassy spot beneath an oak tree working on a cat’s cradle. Daphne was playing with a lady bug, the two of them flying circles around and under some toadstools. Next to them were two very young faeries who had set up a twig across an acorn and were using it as a seesaw. A spring robin perched nearby, checking the ground for worms.

“I like Peta,” said Molly.

“Hmph,” sniffed Daphne.

“I think he likes *you*.”

“Peta is a *boy*,” sniffed Daphne, disdainfully.

“He’s a nice boy.”

“I suppose.”

The two young faeries giggled.

The robin flew off as a fat, lazy looking cat sauntered into the clearing and blinked its eyes.

“That’s Mrs. Tompkins’ cat,” said Molly walking over and patting it. The large cat purred contentedly and rubbed against Molly’s legs. “Mrs. Tompkins lives alone over that way.” Molly smiled mischievously. “The kids at school say she’s a *witch*.”

The two little faeries giggled once more. Daphne stopped and snapped her fingers.

“*Ow-owww!*” cried Molly, rubbing her stinging bottom. Daphne hovered over her with crossed arms. Molly looked up.

“I’m sorry.”

“Mrs. Tompkins is *not* a witch, and *you* should be more charitable.”

“I’m sorry. What’s char-it-able?”

“It means treating others kindly. Just for that, you can take Mrs. Tompkins pussy-cat home for her.”

Molly scooped up the heavy cat and walked in the direction of Mrs. Tompkins’ house.

“Daphne,” said Molly.

“Yes,” answered Daphne, flying beside her.

“Is there any such thing as witches?”

“Yes.”

“Are they wicked and can they do magic?”

“Some are wicked, some are well meaning. They believe they command great power. In actuality, a witch is simply a human with...” she paused searching for the right word, “with attitude.”

“What do you mean?”

“Witches can acquire some artificial magicks, usually through devious means.”

“Huh?”

Daphne smiled. “They don’t understand *true* magic. They’re not connected with nature. The living world is connected with the living God.”

“I don’t understand,” said Molly.

“Do you remember last week when I showed you the robin’s nest with the blue eggs?”

“Yes.”

“And yesterday, when we looked at the same nest and saw the baby robins waiting for their mother to feed them?”

“Yes.”

“You already know more about magic than most witches.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Molly knocked on the door of Mrs. Tompkins’ house.

The door opened on creaking hinges, and Mrs. Tompkins, a very old woman with bleary, almost sightless eyes, opened the door.

“Hello Mrs. Tompkins, I found your kitty in the woods,” said Molly, stooping and setting the cat on the threshold. “I was afraid he might get lost.”

The wrinkles on Mrs. Tompkins' face rearranged themselves as she beamed a smile.

"Oh thank you, dear child. Morris is all I have left. He probably would have found his way home, but still, it was so kind of you to bring him back. What's your name?"

"I'm Molly."

"It's nice to know you Molly. And how nice to see you Miss Daphne."

Molly's eyes flew wide and her mouth dropped open.

"You... you can see Daphne?"

"Of course, she's perched right there on your shoulder. My eyes are a bit weak, but I'm not blind you know. And one can hardly miss a faerie."

"But..."

"It's nearly suppertime. You should probably head home so your parents don't worry, but do come to see me again. Come on a Sunday. I usually make cookies on Sundays."

And with that, Mrs. Tompkins picked up her cat and went into her house.



Chapter 2

Two Trolls

In a clearing in the forest were the remains of a campfire. Sooty black charred logs covered with gray ash sat within a crudely laid circle of rocks. Two larger stones had been placed before it for seats. Littered about were empty tin cans of beans and soup as well as dirty newspapers and other rubbish. Peta sniffed contemptuously at the mess.

“You see, I told you,” said his friend Dory, a male faerie with dark brown skin and black hair. “They were camped here for two days, *two trolls!*”

“There are no more trolls, at least not around here.” Peta indicated a pile of cigarette butts next to the fire ring. “Are you sure they weren’t just big, ugly humans?”

“One was big, the other was smaller. They were both pretty ugly. I don’t know. There was something very *troll like* about them.”

* * *

Suzy Cunningham was a little girl in the third grade. She was walking home from Sunday school and decided to take the short-cut down the forest path to visit her grandmother. She picked some wildflowers along the way and was twisting them into a bouquet for her grandmamma. Suzy was a pretty little girl with black hair in pigtails. She was wearing a white church dress with new shoes.

Suzy did not see the two figures that crept up behind her, one tall, the other shorter. The tall one held a long rope. The shorter one had an old sock filled with rocks that he began to twirl around. Both had sinister smiles as they came up behind the child, and the sock came down suddenly upon the back of her head.

* * *

It was Sunday, and Molly was at church and then going to a friend’s birthday party. Daphne was flitting through the forest inspecting the flowers in the spring pools, gathering herbs and pollens within the little pouch she carried over one shoulder. She raced a hummingbird before darting through a clover patch and rounding the bole of a giant willow tree that was banked on a woodland pond, where she stopped short.

Sitting in the clearing before the pond were two trolls smoking cigarettes. A few yards away lay a little girl, unconscious and tied up with a rope. Daphne recognized Suzy from Molly’s school. She appeared to be breathing and relatively unharmed, but there was a nasty lump on the back of her head.

Daphne rose slowly into the air, her silver, sparkling eyes turning fiery red. Everyone knows that trolls eat children, and it was obvious that Suzy was to be these trolls next victim. Daphne’s left arm bent, her fist clenched. She raised her right hand palm out, fingers splayed. She would just have to apologize to Tanya and Neria later, because in a few seconds every tree within a quarter of a mile was going to be scorched and decorated with pieces of troll.

Then she paused and reconsidered. No, no need for such a vulgar and unnecessary demonstration of power. She scratched her chin and her eyes returned to their normal color as she pondered what to do. Freeing Suzy would be easy enough, but what to do with these trolls? Then a slow smile played across Daphne's face. This was going to be *marvelous* sport.

The two "trolls" paced about, smoking nervously, completely clueless to the fact that they had just come within a hair's breadth of annihilation. Their names were Beanie and Sniggers, and they were drifters and general nuisances. They were nervous however, because snatching a child was a little beyond the scope of their usual areas of graft, but the payoff promised had been too tempting to turn down.

"Ere, Beanie," said Sniggers, the shorter of the two, who had been raised in the streets of Liverpool, England, "when do we drop off the merchandise with that buyer?"

"I told ya, at 1:00," answered Beanie, the taller fellow who was from Brooklyn, New York. He looked nervously at his watch.

"I still don' like it, I don', snatchin' a kiddie. If the bobbies nick us, they'll put us away 'till the twelfth of never, they will."

"Stop talking about 'the bobbies.' By the time anyone even figures out this kid is missing, we'll have passed her off."

"*Uh-huh... ow... uh-huh!*" cried Suzy. She was coming out of a painful unconsciousness.

"Shhhh," whispered Daphne soothingly, patting the little girl's cheek. Instantly, Suzy dropped into a deep, blissful sleep filled with wonderful dreams. Behind her, out of sight of her captors, four mice chewed industriously on her bonds. In an hour she would awaken to find herself nestled against a tree in her grandmother's front yard.

"Wot if the nipper wakes up and sees our faces?" Sniggers was asking.

"Don't worry about her; she's out like a light," Beanie assured him.

Daphne glided across the face of the pond, sprinkling a magical mixture of dust guaranteed to lure snapping turtles and water snakes.

"An' I don' like this whole set up, I don'," Sniggers was saying. "Wot's this 'client' we never even seen? Calls herself 'the Black Queen.' Wot's she, a bloody chess piece?"

"What's it matta, long as she pays up?" answered Beanie.

"Wot's she want a little tyke for, eh? Ya think she's gonna hurt 'er?"

"Not our problem," answered Beanie, not looking at the little girl.

"No," smiled Daphne from her vantage point on Beanie's shoulder. "You'll soon have enough problems of your own." Then she hummed a faerie tune, guaranteed to draw fleas.

"You're hungry," whispered Daphne into Beanie's ear.

"I'll tell ya what," said Beanie fidgeting. "When we complete this business, the first thing I'm gonna spend our swag on is a giant cheeseburger with the works."

Daphne smiled. Like most trolls, they were very open to suggestion.

"Yeah, sounds good," replied Sniggers, who also fidgeted. He began to slap and scratch at his ankles and calves which had suddenly begun itching.

"Too many bugs in this place!" snapped Beanie, scratching and slapping at his legs.

Daphne had seen the two satchels that sat by the water and flitted over to inspect them. She soon found the things she wanted and tossed them easily into the pond. She then flew up to perch on Snigger's shoulder.

"Oh, Sniggers," she whispered. "You've done a bad, bad thing, snatching a little girl. When 'the bobbies' find out, you're going to get in *trouble*."

Sniggers fidgeted and slapped at his legs and scratched and fidgeted.

"This was a mistake. We should-na nicked a kiddie. This was a mistake."

"Don't lose your nerve!" snarled Beanie, itching and scratching. "Ya just hungry like me. Ya just need ta eat sumpin'."

"No, Sniggers," whispered Daphne. "It's just your nerves. You need a cigarette. You need a cigarette *now!*"

"I need a smoke!" cried Sniggers desperately, tossing his spent cigarette butt away. He dashed over to the satchels, ruttled around desperately in one and then in the other.

"Our smokes! Ya took all our smokes!" he cried, his eyes flashing with rage.

"What-da-ya talkin' about, we had over half a carton left," answered Beanie.

"They're gone! Ya took 'em all, ya greedy snoot!"

Beanie turned his back in disgust.

“Never mind. Once we collect on this kid, ya can buy all the... OWWW!”

A small rock had caught Beanie squarely behind the ear. He spun around furiously.

“What are ya chunkin’ rocks at me for, ya crazy limy!”

“I ain’t chunked no rocks at you,” answered Sniggers, still rutting around in the sacks desperately for cigarettes.

Rubbing his head, Beanie’s eyes narrowed as they looked down and took in the sock filled with rocks. Snatching it up, he walked over to Sniggers and yanked him to his feet.

“Ya think ya can blackjack me like that little kid. What-da-ya think ya gonna do, take all the money for yourself?”

“I di’nt touch you, you stinkin’ thief. But I will if ya don’ han’ over the cigarettes!”

“Oh, yeah?” Beanie raised the weighted sock up to strike a blow, but Sniggers tackled him and the two fell upon the ground rolling and swatting at each other. Beanie would howl with rage every time Sniggers got in a good blow, and Sniggers used colorful curse words whose meanings no one besides he probably knew.

“Blatzen cratch bag oinker!”

Daphne fairly rolled next to them laughing. She was so pleased that she had stayed her hand from pulverizing these two. This was far more entertaining than she had expected. Also, from their conversation, she was beginning to doubt whether they actually *were* trolls, and blowing humans to kingdom come was *generally* frowned upon in the faerie world.

The two rolled and tossed and finally pulled apart and got to their feet, glaring at each other.

“Have ya had enough?” asked Beanie shaking his fists.

Sniggers glared back, then paused and looked around suspiciously.

“There’s sumthin’ funny goin’ on aroun’ ‘ere, der is.”

Daphne’s eyes widened and her grin went ear to ear as she suddenly realized something about Sniggers.

Beanie turned his back in disgust. Sniggers did the same. Immediately, both were struck by a clod of dirt in the back of the head.

“Why you...” cried both men in unison as they charged one another and grappled again. This time as they struggled, they stumbled closer and closer to the grassy edge of the pond.

By this time Peta and Dory, who had been tracking the trolls, arrived on the scene. They immediately positioned themselves to watch the fun.

“Cronky milly goater!” snarled Sniggers as they fought. Each one thought that the other was kicking at his feet, when suddenly both lost their balance and fell into the pond.

“Snakes!” cried Beanie pulling a black water snake out of his shirt.

“Snappers!” cried Sniggers pulling off a snapping turtle that had fastened itself to his hawk’s nose.

Beanie gained the shore first, two snapping turtles clamped onto his arms. He pulled them off and tossed them back into the water.

“Enough of this! Get outta the water, Sniggers. We’re gonna take this kid to the Black Queen and get our money.”

But when Beanie turned around, Suzy was nowhere to be seen. All that was left was a pile of chewed through rope.

“Sniggers! Help me find the kid!” screamed Beanie. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” Reaching down his pants, he pulled forth another snapping turtle.

Sniggers came stumbling out of the water, slapping away two water snakes that had squirmed into his clothing. He started to run, then tripped on something unseen and fell flat on his face. Rolling over, he started to rise and found himself face to face with tiny Daphne.

“*Who* is the Black Queen?” she demanded.

Sniggers’ eyes went wide with mortal terror.

“*Pixies!*” he screamed. “This wood gots *pixies*, it does!”

Crab walking backward, Sniggers stumbled to his feet and began to run.

“Sniggers, come back! We gotta find the kid!” shouted Beanie.

“Walk ‘er! I’m out!” cried Sniggers, taking to his heels.

Beanie stared after him for a moment. Then another rock and another dirt clod struck him in the back of the head. Whirling around, he looked about. One of the trees swayed back and forth, although there was no wind.

“Ahhhhhhhh-Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” came a mournful wail from across the air. A bush rustled as *something* moved through it.

It was the last poor Beanie’s nerves could stand. With a scream he ran off after Sniggers in a blind panic.

The bush continued to rustle, until Mrs. Tompkins’ cat stepped out of it and blinked its eyes curiously.

“Come on, we can catch up to them!” laughed Peta, flying up to Daphne.

Daphne smiled and shook her head. “They’ve had enough for one day.” Then she frowned. “Besides, I don’t think they have the information I’m looking for.”

“Do you think they were really trolls?”

Daphne shrugged. “I don’t know. There was something very *troll like* about them.”



Chapter 3

A Game of Periwinkle

Daphne contemplated a long twig, then tossed it aside and hefted another.

“What are we looking for again?” asked Molly.

“An acorn bat, this should do,” replied Daphne deciding upon a stout twig from an oak tree.

“Are we going to play baseball?”

“No, Periwinkle. There’s going to be a tournament today in the high wood. Come along and I’ll explain the rules.”

“We’re going to search for an enchanted periwinkle. There are several teams of three. The first team to find the periwinkle wins, but it’s not easy. As I’ve said, the periwinkle is enchanted, and so it moves about capriciously.”

“Then how do you know where it is?”

“That’s where the acorns come in. They’re also enchanted and in tune with the periwinkle. When you hit them, they’ll go *generally* in the direction of the periwinkle, but along different paths. Occasionally, our paths will cross those of other teams. When that happens, there has to be a match. The team that wins the match gets to bat first, and will therefore be ahead of the other team.”

“Can I play too?”

“It’s a faerie game, but you can come along with my team.”

The two friends arrived in the clearing in the high wood. It was filled with faeries, all getting ready for the tournament. Several tiny colorful flags were set up along one edge of the clearing. A dais made from a large orange mushroom cup supported upon a stand of cattail stocks stood in the center of the clearing. Tiny banners made of flower petals swung and fluttered from the trees. Peta was there, surrounded by several male faeries who were sitting on small logs laughing uproariously over a story he was telling.

“Okay, okay, okay,” laughed Peta, trying to catch his breath. “So then he says, so then he says, ‘*Pixies!* This wood gets *pixies*, it does!’”

Several of the listeners fell off of their seats with laughter. Daphne couldn’t help but smile.

Bleu and Neria, Daphne’s teammates, were standing ready, holding their acorn bats. Neria was taking a few practice swings.

“You’re bringing your human along?” asked Bleu, doubtfully.

“Molly can keep up,” Daphne assured them.

An older, rather roly-poly looking male faerie, climbed up upon the dais and raised a honeysuckle trumpet to his lips. He blasted a few notes, and then raised his hands for attention.

“Players, take your marks!” he cried with a cheery smile.

Daphne, Bleu, and Neria walked over to a red flag. Beside them, Peta stood before a yellow flag with his teammates, Dory and Nicodemus, a yellow skinned, male faerie who was a Friend of Water. Before each other flag stood other various faeries in teams of three.

“Acorns at the ready!” cried the announcer, and blew another blast on his trumpet.

Daphne was the strongest of the three, but Neria, being a Friend of Trees, had a better chance of gaining distance, so she had been elected to bat first. Daphne and Bleu tossed the acorn up and it hovered magically in front of Neria as she poised with the bat.

“Annnnnnd... *Go!*” cried the announcer.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! went the sound of a dozen small bats striking acorns. The acorns buzzed off in various directions, each with a trio of faeries flying right behind.

Perhaps Daphne expected too much from little Molly, for the little girl had quite some time keeping up with the darting faeries. Still, it was a cool spring day, just fine for running, and Molly had a wonderful time nonetheless leaping over ditches, dodging bushes and weaving among the trees of the forest in pursuit of the three flying figures. She finally came to a stop, breathless and happy, in a tiny clearing where the acorn sat, glowing softly.

“Take a deep breath, Molly,” instructed Daphne as Bleu and Neria tossed the magical acorn up into the air, “because this one’s going to put us in the lead!” And with that, the little faerie swung with all her might and sent the acorn hurtling once more off into space.

This time it went soaring down the woodland path and then curved off and did a loop over a stream. It then soared over to a small pond where it knocked against a second glowing acorn like a croquet ball.

The four girls tore after it. Molly skidded to a stop in front of the stream. She looked at the fast rushing water with trepidation. Daphne spun around her three times and then tapped her shoulder. Molly gasped as she slowly levitated up, and soared over the water to alight safe and dry on the other side. The two girls then hurried onward to catch up to their teammates.

Neria and Bleu were standing in front of the two acorns with crossed arms looking over at Peta and his team. Peta smiled wide when Daphne and Molly showed up.

“Looks like we have to have a match,” he laughed. “What will it be, a test of strength?”

“No!” snapped Dory quickly. His arm and pride were both still sore from the last test of strength he had lost against Daphne.

“A dragonfly race?” offered Peta, smiling directly at Daphne.

“I don’t see any dragonflies around here, and we’re not going to waste time hunting any up,” Daphne retorted.

“We have a pond here, why not a log roll?” offered Nicodemus, slyly.

The girls’ eyes narrowed. Nicodemus was a Friend of Water, so that would surely give him an advantage. Still, Bleu was tall, which might give her an upper hand.

“I don’t know...” said Daphne.

“We’re losing time!” cried Dory.

“Log roll it is!” Bleu exclaimed decisively, eyeing Nicodemus scornfully.

A small, short stick about two inches long and a half an inch in diameter was selected. Bleu and Nicodemus both balanced upon it grasping their acorn bats like quarter staffs, facing one another. Flying was not permitted.

“Match!” cried Peta.

Both faeries began to strike their quarter staffs together, each in an attempt to knock the other one off. Nicodemus was fast, but Bleu parried his blows, and struck down, using her superior height to advantage. At one point, she swept at his feet, but Nicodemus leaped into the air and slapped his staff against Bleu’s shoulder, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to upset her balance. Bleu barely kept from falling off, but somehow regained her footing and struck a hard counter blow to Nicodemus’ staff.

Molly and the other faeries cheered and cried encouragements to their teammates.

Bleu appeared to be winning. She had Nicodemus on the defensive and pressed him hard, but the tiny Friend of Water had superior balance in his element and could predict and play the tiny ripples to greater effect. At last he saw an opening and parrying a downward swat from Bleu, caught her with his counterthrust under her ankle. Bleu hopped on one foot, tried to regain her balance and then fell off with a tiny splash.

“Match!” cried Peta’s team triumphantly.

Daphne and Neria looked at the victors with narrowed eyes. Bleu sputtered up onto the shore. "Sorry guys," she offered, whirring her wings to dry them. "It's all right Bleu," said Daphne. "*Next* time!" The second comment was directed at the grinning boys.

Dory, the youngest boy, stuck his tongue out at Daphne. Peta, the eldest, socked him, not too hard, on the arm.

"Be polite!"

"See you at the finish!" laughed Nicodemus as he struck their acorn a good crack across the pond.

"Count on it!" answered Daphne as the boys flew off.

"All right, Bleu, let her rip!" cried Daphne encouragingly as she and Neria tossed up their acorn.

Crack!

Channeling her frustration at having lost the match, Bleu struck a terrific blow that sent the girls' acorn speeding across the pond and out of sight. Whooping triumphantly, the three girl faeries rose up and sped off after it.

Molly did her best to keep up.

Three hits of the acorn later, the girls ran into another team. This was also a team of boy faeries. Their leader was an overly confident boy who foolishly accepted Daphne's challenge to a test of strength, arm wrestling over a toadstool. Within a moment his arm and pride were as sore as Dory's had been, and the girls sped on their way.

It was toward noon. Molly was getting tired and hot and wondering when lunch would be, when the acorn bounced and rolled onto the bank of a small woodland lake. The girls arrived and looked around.

"Look!" cried Neria, and pointed out onto the water.

Wafting lightly like a butterfly, a large, glimmering periwinkle flower danced somnolently over the surface of the lake.

"That's it!"

"Look!" cried Molly pointing.

Two dozen yards away, along the bank of the lake, Peta's team had just arrived. There was a pause of barely a second, and then Daphne and Peta took off.

Both faeries sped across the surface of the lake, converging halfway to the periwinkle. They raced, shoulder to shoulder closer and closer to the elusive flower. Peta half considered letting Daphne win, but did not for two reasons. First, she would know it. Second, she would never forgive him for it. Both of them reached their hands out at full arm's length. Peta's arm was a smidge longer, but Daphne was a bit more than half a smidge ahead. The two of them closed upon the flower, and it was anyone's race.

Then from above came a streak of coral-colored flashing wings. Clarissa, a peach colored faerie who was very pretty, very popular, and known for her marvelous speed, snatched the flower a mere inch from their outstretched hands and with a cry of triumph, bore it back to her cheering team on the shore.

Daphne and Peta stopped. Daphne's eyes narrowed as she fumed; Peta smiled and shrugged.

"Oh, well," he said, "better luck next time."

The two faeries flew slowly back toward the shore. Daphne was slightly ahead. Peta's face took on a sly grin.

"I suppose Clarissa deserves to win," he offered. "After all, she sure is pretty."

Daphne spun upon him, her eyes flashing red.

"You think *she's* pretty?" she snapped.

Peta's grin went ear to ear.

"Pretty...*fast* is what I was *going* to say."

Daphne's face dropped as she realized what she'd just done. Her eyes returned to normal, but her face went beet red with embarrassment. She darted off toward the shore.

Peta laughed good-naturedly and called for her to wait up. Then Molly and all the faeries went back to the clearing in the high wood where a banquet lunch awaited to honor the winning team.



Chapter 4

A Close Call

In the schoolyard one day at recess, Sally was bragging to Molly, and anyone else who would listen, about her trip to New York last summer. Like all children, Sally could sometimes get carried away and be mean. She acted as if she had seen and done far more than anyone else she knew.

“So?” said Molly eventually, growing annoyed. “My daddy says he’ll take me to New York or Hawaii or Disneyland any time I ask him.” She then gave a little yelp, forgetting that Daphne pinched her whenever she told a lie.

Later, before lunch, Molly was reminded to wash her hands before eating.

During math practice, when Molly got tired of practicing addition and started doodling on the side of her paper, she was reminded to focus and try harder.

It’s not always fun having a faerie on your shoulder.

In the afternoon, Miss Gorshwin came into the class. The children looked up at her, a little intimidated. She was a very tall woman with an imperious air. Her black hair was tied back tightly in a bun, and she smiled her large, toothy smile. Behind Molly’s hair, Daphne raised an eyebrow and scrutinized the vice principal coolly.

“Class,” said Miss Rosenthal, “you remember Miss Gorshwin. She’s come in today to get to know you all better.”

“Hello, children!” cried Miss Gorshwin, smiling her frozen smile, her eyes darting about as if evaluating each of them in some way. “I thought it would be nice if I read you a story today. Our library is full of storybooks. What kind of story should we read?”

Several of the children’s hands went up enthusiastically.

“Let’s take some suggestions. Give us a suggestion as I point to you,” instructed Miss Gorshwin. She began pointing to students with raised hands.

“Can you read us a baseball story?” asked Stephan.

“I love baseball!” answered Miss Gorshwin and pointed again.

“Can you read us a story about princesses?” asked Veronica.

“Can you read us a story about animals?” asked Bobby.

“I adore animals!” answered Miss Gorshwin and pointed again.

“Can you read us a story about space people?” asked Edgar.

“Can you read us a story about vampires or werewolves or monsters?” asked Tony.

“Excellent choice!” exclaimed Miss Gorshwin.

“Can you read us a mystery story?” asked Sally
“Can you read us a story about kittens?” asked Lucy.
“Can you read us a story about faeries?” asked Molly.
“*UGH!*” cried Miss Gorshwin. Miss Rosenthal jumped at her violent reaction.
“*Fairies? Fairies! Fairies are horrid creatures!*”
Behind Molly’s hair, Daphne raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms. A slow smile of confirmed suspicion played across her face.
“They’re *vile* and *filthy!*” Miss Gorshwin spat. She had come to her feet in the passion of her rage.
“Miss Gorshwin, please,” interceded Miss Rosenthal. “She’s only teasing, children. There are no such things as fairies.”
“Mischievous, despicable things...” continued Miss Gorshwin.
“That’s not true!” cried Molly, jumping to her feet. “Faeries are beautiful people, and they play lovely games and help people...”
“Molly...” cautioned Daphne gently.
“*Someone* has been filling your head with lies, little one,” said Miss Gorshwin acidly. “Fairies are dangerous, and they tell lies!”
“That’s not true!” Molly stamped her foot. “Daphne never...”
“Molly!” cried Daphne.
Molly stopped, closed her mouth, and looked down.
The room seemed to grow darker as Miss Gorshwin’s eyes narrowed and she walked over slowly to tower over Molly, who still stood trembling, partly in fear, partly in rage. Miss Gorshwin glared down at her. The rest of the children cowered. Lucy began to cry.
“And...*who...is...Daphne?*” Miss Gorshwin’s voice was slow and menacing.
Daphne’s eyes went red and she raised her hand. This was no place for a conflict, not with Molly and the other children.
Molly stammered under the dark woman’s gaze.
“Daphne’s my frie... my... cousin. She tells me stories about faeries,” she lied, but Daphne did not pinch her.
Miss Rosenthal came to the rescue.
“Miss Gorshwin, what are you going on about? You’re frightening these children.”
Miss Gorshwin shook herself, then looked about self-consciously. She swallowed, her mind working rapidly.
“Forgive me. I’m so sorry. It’s just that... I... I had a very mean uncle once who told stories about fairies to frighten me. I always had nightmares. There, there, dear,” she said, patting Molly’s head. “I’m terribly sorry. Have any of you ever heard stories or seen programs or movies that frightened you?”
Several hands went up.
“Well, then!” The large smile returned. “Let’s read a *nice* story and all feel better. “Lucy mentioned a story about kittens. We have some lovely stories about kittens in our library. I’ll go fetch one now.”



Chapter 5

An Interview

Miss Gorshwin stood in the darkened clearing before the flat stone. The blood and entrails of an unfortunate stray cat and its kittens had been arranged in a pentagram upon the face of the stone, and Miss Gorshwin uttered the incantations that she had practiced. Black, foul smelling smoke rose from the bloody sacrifice and encircled the young woman. She breathed in deeply, and the surrounding trees seemed to shudder.

Miss Gorshwin's dark eyes seemed to grow a little darker. The pointed black stick, like a band leader's baton, quivered. This was her wand, a gift from the dark orders she served, and it was absorbing power, just as she was.

When the ritual was complete, Miss Gorshwin collected her wand and walked back toward the street. Wild animals would clean up the mess shortly enough. Besides, no one else came to this portion of the woods.

Henrietta Gorshwin was a young woman in her mid thirties. She had been born in a very poor town in Alabama, and had had to care for her father and three older brothers. It had been a miserable life, with a childhood filled with deprivation. She had once seen the movie *Gone with the Wind* and had been riveted when Scarlett O'Hara had made her vow that she would never be hungry again. Henrietta had decided then, as a very little girl, just Molly's age, that she too would overcome all of the obstacles the wretched world had thrust upon her.

She worked hard and studied. She outstripped all of her classmates at school, and even most of her teachers. She was not a popular girl, tall and awkward, her nose always buried in a book. At the age of fifteen she ran away. The poor local school and the poor town had nothing left to offer her, and she had come to despise her family who had grown more and more incompetent and low within her view.

Henrietta traveled the world always searching for more knowledge, for knowledge she had decided was power, and power was what she craved most of all. Money was never an issue. She had learned how to find secrets, and secrets brought money enough from those who feared to have them revealed. She made few friends, for she found that people were more useful as tools. She learned much of investments and finance and the manipulation of assets, for this would bring wealth, and great wealth was also power. Then she met Endora.

Endora was one of the few friends Henrietta made in life, for the two of them were of a like mind. Endora also craved power, but she introduced Henrietta to a new path to its end. Money, Henrietta learned, was only yet another tool. True power was from another source.

Endora initiated Henrietta into the Black Arts. Séances allowed them to communicate with dark spirits from other worlds and darker spirits that exist on the fringe of this world. The spirits offered that which Henrietta had always hungered for, the power to work her will upon the world. But it came at a price.

The darker orders demanded sacrifices for the powers they granted, and the powers they granted were like a drug. The more she received, the more she craved. She had transcended a great deal over the years, from simple levitations and tricks to casting curses and even controlling the minds and souls of weaker subjects.

Changes took place in Henrietta over this time, changes she only barely acknowledged or admitted to herself. Her eyes had grown darker and darker. Her face and manner had taken on a harsher more severe tone. She had never been much for smiling, but the smile she had now was not even really a smile, more of a flashing of her teeth, which seemed to have grown longer. Her laughter no longer sounded genuine. It had become a grotesque cackle the sound of which even disturbed her in a subtle way she did not like to admit to herself.

Still, power was worth some minor sacrifices, even sacrifices of the soul. She was rewarded by the dark powers she now worshiped as her gods. She was given the black wand which heightened, augmented, and directed her power, giving her access to the shadow realm and other dark regions, and the broomstick, not only a source of rapid and cloaked transportation, but also possessed of a malevolent spirit that could move and assist and hunt and kill. It had been the broomstick that had provided the stray cat and kittens earlier in the evening.

Now, back in town, Miss Gorshwin walked the dark streets toward her home. She stopped at the newspaper stand and picked up a paper, leafing through it aimlessly, until a certain article caught her attention.

Mutilated Remains of a Child found in West Virginia Woods

Two hunters in the back woods of West Virginia came upon a grisly sight yesterday afternoon. The remains of a little boy, aged six or seven, who is believed to be one of the missing children from a local orphanage was found upon a flat rock within a clearing. The body had been there several days and had been ravaged by wild animals making the exact cause of death difficult to determine. But investigators suspect that violence and foul play may have, for reasons yet unknown...

Miss Gorshwin smiled wryly. So, Endora had secured her sacrifice and was now a cardinal witch. Miss Gorshwin then crumpled the paper in a sudden rage and threw it down.

“Hey, what are you doing?” asked the man behind the counter at the newspaper stand.

Miss Gorshwin looked up sharply, then stopped, collecting herself.

“Sorry... It’s just... that story... it was disturbing... that anyone could do something so terrible to a child.”

“The world can be an awful place these days,” the man agreed, shaking his head sadly.

Miss Gorshwin paid for the newspaper and continued on her way home, fuming within. Endora had received the baptism of blood from a child and become a cardinal witch. And what of she, Henrietta? Still sopping up the pittance of stray cats, birds, or whatever other wild things her broomstick could secure for her. Those two idiots, Beanie and Sniggers! She should have known better than to have hired such incompetents. She had half a mind to sacrifice *them*. Who would miss a couple of drifters and ne’er-do-wells?” But no, they may yet prove useful.

She would just have to do the job herself. The town of Temperance was small and secluded. She had done well to position herself in the local elementary school. She had already sized up several possible candidates for the ritual. But she would have to be cautious. She must not allow her frustration and anticipation to get the better of her or give her away. The slip at the newspaper stand, for instance, showed poor self-control. And then there was the incident at the school today. She had momentarily lost control, and that was a dangerous thing. But there had been something in that room, something about that one little girl, Molly, a certain smell or feeling that had set her on edge, distracted her self-possession. The mere memory of it seemed to disturb and infuriate her.

Reaching her house, Miss Gorshwin opened the door and walked into the front parlor. She turned on the lamp, and felt a vague uneasiness. It was as if the memory of the feeling from the incident at the school had followed her home. She sniffed the air and looked around and then stopped dead, her eyes riveted to the center table.

Standing in the middle of the table was a large chess piece, a black queen.

Miss Gorshwin looked around, her eyes narrowing.

"I can smell you, *fairy*. And if you come out of hiding, I can see you."

"I can see you too, *witch*," answered Daphne from her position on top of the dresser.

Miss Gorshwin spun around to face Daphne. She stepped forward and her face split into a wicked smile.

"*Daphne*, I presume."

Daphne's lips curled in a half smile.

"*Clever* girl."

"What do you want, little fairy?"

"For starters, I want to know why you sent those two trolls after little Suzy."

"It was nothing personal, little fairy. I needed a child. She wouldn't have been harmed."

"You shouldn't lie; you don't do it very well."

Miss Gorshwin's eyes narrowed. "What have you to do with me, little fairy?"

"Simply this. You will stop furthering your power. You will stay away from any of the children. You will cease to pursue wickedness."

"Wicked? Me, wicked? You misjudge me, little fairy. I am simply a woman who is expanding herself and her knowledge. There is no wickedness in that."

"There is when it involves acts of evil."

"Ends justify means. I will do whatever it requires to enhance my strength and my power. Do you know how much service I could render humanity when I reach the height of my abilities?"

"Maybe that's what you thought in the beginning, but there's not much human left in you. Don't you even see what you have become?"

Miss Gorshwin scowled, but a small bit of her confidence seemed to dissipate if only for a moment.

"Brave words, little fairy," she said. "But I will do what needs be done to accomplish my ends. And I will brook no interference."

"You've been warned, Miss Gorshwin. My Order demands that I extend warning before taking formal action, but believe me, if you dare attempt to harm any person or child under my observation..."

Miss Gorshwin laughed her cackling laugh.

"Foolish little fairy. I am a person *not* to be trifled with."

Miss Gorshwin raised her wand and the room started to grow darker. Shadows converged upon the tiny faerie like living, hungry things.

"You should not have come here, little fairy."

The door to the room closed by itself, and there was a clicking sound as the lock struck home. The shadows began to jabber obscenely as they closed upon their tiny intended victim. There was a scratching sound as of the fibers of a broom scrawling across the floor.

"You should not have come here. I have great powers!" snarled Miss Gorshwin, her face alight with an unholy illumination.

Daphne raised an eyebrow and smiled a sardonic smile.

"Great powers?" she said slowly. "What? Broomsticks? Magic wands? Shadows? Have a care, *little witch*. Do not be so foolish as to trust your demon granted hocus-pocus against *me!*"

There was a blinding flash of light and the shadows screamed. The door burst open and hung half off of its hinges. Miss Gorshwin was blown back upon the floor, the breath knocked completely out of her. It was several moments before the spots went away from before her eyes.

Miss Gorshwin picked herself up gingerly, wincing. She was bleeding from her nose and ears. The wand in her hand, that precious gift from the dark powers that she had ministered to and gathered power to store in for so long, was broken in half. She smelled something burning and had to stamp out the flames that came from the end of her stricken broom. Daphne was nowhere in sight.

Miss Gorshwin coughed. Her eyes were alight with rage, but also fear. Staggering over to the dresser where the faerie had stood, she looked down upon the scorched surface and the message burned into the wood.

“STAY AWAY.”

Miss Gorshwin had spent her life seeking knowledge and learning. She had spent years building her witchcraft. Today she had suffered a terrible setback, but she had also learned a very valuable and important lesson for the survival of any witch.

She had learned that to challenge a faerie was a very, *very* dangerous thing to do.