

A WORLD APART

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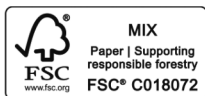
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For Logan,

made of lightning.

Even if I now saw you
only once,
I would long for you
through worlds,
worlds.

Izumi Shikibu
translated by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani

Before

Truth was, not one of them believed it would work.

When they asked the Fae to spare them, they hoped, at most, for a storm. A strong fog or thrash of rain to delay the invaders. Then they could have fought. Or run.

More likely they'd run.

They went to the old witch elm and promised the harvest, the Imbolc milk, the babe still ripening in the belly. *Whatever you ask, my Queen*, they pleaded. The waves of men crashing onto their shore had them thin with desperation.

But they weren't expecting – well, *this*.

When the Faerie Queen appeared, a ribbon of silver, the one whose babe had been sworn shrieked and ran, her arms clasped tight over her belly.

It would have been easier had the Queen wanted a baby.

That would have been a kindness.

"You asked to be saved," the Queen said, her voice the underbelly of a kitten, her skin furred with moss. They looked at her dumbstruck.

It was Wilfrith who finally spoke. "We can no longer defend ourselves," he said. "The men are too many." They couldn't fault Wilfrith for being hasty. For weeks they'd seen the spindles of fire over the hills. Drank down the rumours of what the army had done to the villages nearer the coast. They'd nowhere left to turn.

But how does one converse with a Fae? All the times they'd burned the sage or buried a lock of hair they'd used the words their mothers had taught them, and their mothers before that, and if it all got somewhat muddied through the years, well, you could hardly blame them.

The Fae were golden river song and midnight banquets and goblets refilling dark red and endless.

They were holes in the thatch that let in the rain. What did they know of addressing a Queen?

"We've spent years in your service," he went on. "We've performed all the old rites. Can you not give us this?"

The Queen threw back her head and laughed. To his credit, Wilfrith didn't flinch.

"In my service?" she scoffed. "When was the last time one of you gave yourself to me? When was the last time one of you bled?" She clenched her fist, and a nearby tree cleaved in two. "I hear the missives to your new god. You squander our magic."

"What *magic*?" Wilfrith spat. His sister gripped his arm. Wil had a mouth on him, was the kind of trouble best kept close.

"We've had four raids since the last harvest," he went on. "We're down to bone. My brother died in my arms last winter from hunger, and where have you been?"

“Wil, please!” The boy’s mother wrenched him to her body. He was a little thing despite his years, all sinew and whipping motion.

“He didn’t mean it, my Queen,” his mother offered, her head low.

The Faerie Queen was silent. She reached a finger to Wil’s cheek. He clenched his teeth when she touched him, held her white, endless gaze.

The air went still.

Someone would claim, later, that at that very moment a sparrow fell dead at his feet; another said she heard the sound of a babe laughing, somewhere deep in the wood. They’ve all had time, of course, to spin their own story, but at that moment all they could truly see was the Queen, incandescent with power.

“You want my protection,” she purred.

“We’ll give you whatever you ask,” someone cried out, and then she laughed.

“You humans are always trying to trade. Take my flesh, this child, this basket of turnips. What would I do with a turnip?”

They could have run then; they *should* have run. The earth was warm and fetid beneath their feet, the trees bending to the Queen with what seemed like yearning. They could have taken back their hasty words, returned to their homes, and agreed to the Norman bargain: slavery or death.

Not so different, in the end, from what she offered.

The Queen looked again at Wilfrith, tense against his mother’s grip.

“And why should I save you?”

Wil swallowed. They saw the set of his shoulders. They knew what it meant.

“To prove you can.”

And there it was. Such a simple thing, really, when it comes down to it. A child testing how far he can throw a stone.

The Queen smiled.

Chapter 1

London, 1866

On his very worst days, Kit was certain of two things only: first, that magic was real; and second, that as desperately as he might try, as fervently as he might hope, he would never fully possess it.

It was magic he had pursued today, the rumour of a Moroccan grimoire that had apparently been abandoned somewhere in a ladies' dress shop. Perhaps if he'd stopped to wonder exactly *why* any magician would have misplaced their collection of fourteenth-century blood magic while shopping for petticoats he wouldn't now be in possession of the seven yards of cornflower-blue ribbon he'd purchased to appease the shopkeeper. Foresight, however, had never been his strong suit.

Nor, apparently, was punctuality.

And so it was that the Honourable Christopher Edward William Finchley, wayward second son of the Earl of Lincolnshire, one and twenty years of age and still waiting for

something, *anything* of consequence to happen to him, arrived at dinner petulant, dusty and inexcusably late.

The Finchleys' formal dining table was golden in the candlelight, orange flowers spilling from porcelain vases. A footman was clearing a stack of bone-white bowls, in which Kit spotted the remnants of something green – *leek soup*, he thought distractedly. He'd only missed the first course, then.

Could be worse.

"You're late," his father said flatly. Lord Finchley looked displeased, but then, when did he not?

"I... yes," Kit answered slowly. He considered the distance to the door. He could make a run for it, but then he noticed Theodora raise a warning brow. Escaping would mean courting his sister's wrath in addition to his father's, and that was a far more terrifying prospect.

"And just where," his father continued, "have you been?"

Excellent question.

He peered up at a crack in the plasterwork, sorting in vain through his litany of recently employed excuses. *Hunting? The club? Developing an interest in any variety of wind instruments?*

"Well," Kit started, then paused. One of the footmen coughed politely. "I..." he began again, glancing about the room for inspiration. His eyes lit upon an old family portrait, a woman with a pinched face and red ribbon tied at her neck. Kit recalled being frightened as a child, imagining the ribbon to be blood, as though that would explain why she looked so sour.

"Ribbon!" Kit said, pulling the blue silk from his waistcoat triumphantly.

From the table, August offered up an encouraging (if baffled) smile. While not technically family, August was Kit's closest friend and had been so since infancy; he was also an attempt to make the dinner more respectable by association, as surely the presence of the Duke of Ashford-Cumberland would indicate the rumours about the state of the Finchley fortune (dwindling, dire) were entirely unfounded.

"Ribbon?" his mother asked curiously. Lady Finchley looked well, Kit thought, the rose muslin of her gown and the candlelight softening the lines around her eyes. "You required... *ribbon*?"

"Dare I ask *why*?" His father narrowed his eyes.

"Hmmm. Indeed. Well." Kit turned to his sister. "For Theodora, of course."

Over the years, he and Teddy had honed a rich, private vocabulary, one that could communicate more in a glance than others could in a treatise.

Please, he entreated his sister.

Teddy held his gaze for a taut moment before rolling her eyes.

"Of course," Teddy said, drawing out the syllables extravagantly. "That's precisely what I envisaged." She took the proffered ribbon and looped it around her neck, and Kit had to admit it looked oddly lovely against her pale skin and auburn hair. "I simply cannot thank you enough, dear brother."

She gave him a wicked smile that stated quite clearly: *You owe me*.

"Is it not a becoming shade, sir?" Teddy asked, fluttering her eyelashes at the older gentleman seated across from her, a Sir Something-or-Other with a not-insignificant parcel of land somewhere in the Americas.

Teddy's bald flirtation had the desired effect of distracting their parents, and Kit was able to hurry to the empty seat across from Teddy and next to August.

"Ribbon?" August murmured, amused.

"Don't ask," Kit replied quietly. "What did I miss?"

"Your sister is set to eat this one alive," Augie replied.

As if on cue, Kit's sister fixed her gaze on their guest. "Tell me, Sir Carson, what are your feelings on the state of ribbons in England?"

"Ribbons, yes," the man sputtered, pausing to wipe soup from his waistcoat. "I confess that not being in London this past season has left me much in the dark about... ribbons."

"You spend most of your time abroad, then?" Teddy asked with a hopeful note. Her preferred husband would be both phenomenally wealthy and frequently absent.

"Indeed," Carson said, forming the words with some difficulty around an oyster patty. "I hope to return more often, though. The food of the Americas doesn't agree."

"How monstrous for you," Teddy nodded in faux sympathy. She fluttered her eyes at Carson, who seemed momentarily dumbstruck by her attention.

"Yes, it runs right through me."

Kit felt August tense with the effort of hiding his laughter.

"Does it!" Teddy nodded, as their mother coughed delicately into her napkin. "Please, go on."

"You know," Carson said, seeming genuinely delighted to have hit on a subject for which he had something to contribute, "you'd be surprised by how much waste the human body can produce."

"The quail?" Lady Finchley squawked, nearly knocking over

her glass of claret as she gestured wildly at the footman. She sent horrified daggers at her children as Sir Carson, recovering from his momentary lapse, speared an overlarge forkful of pale meat and began a deadening dialogue with their father about the price of lumber.

Poor Lady Finchley had long since abandoned attempting to instil the values of purity and decorum in her daughter; Teddy simply didn't believe in them. Teddy believed in nothing so much as trouble, would lick trouble toe to tip just to get a shiver.

"Do you think anyone would notice were I to strangle myself with this ribbon?" she asked now, in a low voice.

"That's a no to Carson, then?" Kit asked quietly.

"Here's hoping the dysentery catches up with him before he has a chance to propose," Teddy said, raising her crystal coupe.

"I'll drink to that," Augie responded.

"You'll drink to anything," Teddy murmured, quickly downing her champagne before motioning for a refill.

At the other end of the long table, Lord Finchley spared them a grimace. It was the look of a man confronting the disappointment of his two youngest children. Teddy and Kit's elder brother, Percy, was already wed with two children and another on the way; the estates and title would fall to him. Kit and Teddy were, in Ted's words, pleasant enough to look at but not structurally vital.

For Kit, this was a blessing. He knew men who went breathless with jealousy over what might have been theirs but for a trick of birth, but Kit had no interest in managing estates or a title or anything at all, really. He had no interest in anything but magic:

where it was hiding, what it might do, how it felt when sparking through his body.

Kit knew it was more complicated for Teddy. His sister's evident beauty meant her parents put great stock in their hopes for a good marriage – coffers dwindling, dowry shrinking, surely Ted could at least do her part. But her looks were cut with an intelligence that made most men squirm. She'd happily take the leverage afforded by lands and titles in her teeth, if she could. And now she was now four and twenty, "withering on the vine," as she put it; still beautiful, but this marriage season was long over and she was no closer to a bride than she'd been since she entered society six years ago. Carson was a late-season desperate measure by their father, and the dinner had a festive but panicked edge to it, the last meal on a sinking ship.

"Tell me, dear brother, which young lady do I have to thank for this generous gift?" Teddy murmured, fingering the ribbon. "Did you leave some poor marchioness wandering around Mayfair with a loose bodice?"

"I've seen our Kitten attempt to untie a stay, and I can promise you it's a rather inelegant affair," August said. He had caught Kit last season in a moonlit garden, drunkenly fumbling a corset whose occupant looked, August said, nothing so much as bored by Kit's efforts.

"Yes, well, some of us have to use more than merely charm, Augie," Kit answered. The young Duke Ashford-Cumberland was a door cracked wide to warmth on the coldest day of the year, cheeks perpetually flushed, dark eyes sparkling. Locks of his black hair hung round the necks of several heartsick London girls. (Kit had warned him to stop giving away his

hair – in the wrong hands, it could become quite a powerful familiar.)

“And I’ll have you know I purchased that ribbon fair and square,” Kit went on, “as a token of love for my darling sister.” Ted stuck out her tongue at that, and their mother made a strangled sound in response.

The conversation at the table had turned stultifying, a discussion of holiday plans and the continuing debate over the Reform Bill. When the dinner finally limped to its end, Kit swore he could feel the whole house exhaling.

How many more nights like this could Kit sit through? Nights dull with familiarity, worn to a nub, nights when he could have been thrilling through his city with a spell on his lips and magic at his heels?

What might he do, if allowed off the lead?

“Right,” Teddy said, once their mother had taken her leave and Sir Carson had accompanied Lord Finchley to their gentlemen’s club. “Brandy and cigars in the library?”

The library, thankfully, belonged to Kit and Kit alone. The room was at the back of the house, overlooking the gated back garden and its riot of saucer-sized magnolias in the spring. It was where Kit concealed his small yet precious collection of magical texts inside an emerald-bound set of Dryer’s *History of the Ancient Worlds*; and, behind a false panel in the sideboard, where Teddy hid her own much more robust collection of the family’s best spirits.

His sister threw herself into a high-backed armchair, reaching up to yank the ribbon from around her neck as she did so. August shrugged out of his navy evening coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves. Kit watched them both, amazed at how easily they

seemed to shake off the evening. He always felt it took him days to slip free of the ill-fitting skin his parents' company required him to don.

"Now, truth," Teddy drilled, taking a jewelled fruit pastille from the jar on the side table. "Why the ribbon, Kitten?"

"I told you, I—"

"Absolutely not," Teddy interjected. "If I must be imprisoned here all day murdering the piano forte, you had best be occupying yourself with something far more interesting than *ribbons*."

August crossed the library holding a cut crystal decanter, gracefully filling the cup Teddy was waving in the air and managing not to spill a drop.

"Agreed," August said. "Where have you been keeping? I've not seen you in nearly a fortnight."

Had it been that long? Kit *had* been slipping away more often, he supposed. It was the season, the arrival of Samhain, the thinning of the veil and all that. There were some mornings he swore he could smell it, under the wet wool and smoke of London: magic, its summer-storm scent, portentous and clarion sharp. Lady Mansfield, his mentor, had told him the scent of magic is individual to each magician. "*Violet soap and offal*," she'd said. "*Unmistakable*."

More and more these last few weeks he'd found himself simply following his nose through the city, through the damp air and into shadows. Nothing but blisters to show for his efforts. Magic, teasing, two steps ahead as always.

"I've been... researching," Kit said slowly.

"Not this again," Teddy groaned.

Besides Lady Mansfield, Teddy and Augie were the only ones who knew of Kit's devotion to magic, though they thought of

it less as a vocation and more as a childish folly. It had taken him years to realize that whatever it was he perceived between the seams of the world, his sister and August were entirely blind to it. The turn of London society towards spiritualism had done nothing to endear magic to Teddy; the simpering women waving their handkerchiefs as a medium rapped messages on a drawing room table were an insult to the inherent rationality of her sex, she said. And while August was never less than sweetly encouraging, he, too, had begun to regard Kit with a weary sort of affection whenever he mentioned one of his latest discoveries.

Even when Kit had finally mastered a charm, waved the bit of magic triumphantly in front of August and Teddy, their eyes had skimmed across it like a stone on the surface of a pond. He had felt so apart, then, and foolish: yes, he knew belief demanded a leap of faith, but what didn't, these days?

No, August and Teddy perceived the world as nearly everyone else did: solid. Immutable. Exactly as they'd left it.

Whereas Kit – and he couldn't be sure whether this was a blessing or a curse – saw the world as it truly was.

Awash in magic, if only you had the willingness to seize it.

"What was it today?" Teddy went on. "An elf trapped in a chamber pot?"

"A raven selling fortunes in Vauxhall?"

"A gnome after the Queen's jewels?"

"That's not... you *know* what Lady Mansfield and I do is very different. It is scholarship," Kit protested weakly.

"Poor thing," August said. "Let's not torture Kitten any further, Ted. That dinner was agonizing enough."

"It *was* harrowing, wasn't it?" Teddy mused, looking pleased with herself. "Perhaps I'll come round to the idea of Carson. He

is awfully rich, and I don't think I'd mind being the wife of a fur trader. Can't you see me draped in a bear skin?"

"His money is in cotton, not fur," Kit interjected.

"Really?" Teddy looked thoughtful. "I suppose I should get that straight before the wedding."

"Yes, dysentery and slavery, quite the winning combination," said August.

"You're welcome to come along, Augie. You'd look rather fetching in beaver."

"Don't abandon me now, Ted," August went on. "Remember, we are already wed to life's pleasures." He raised his glass, and Teddy met it with her own in a loud clink.

"To the unmarriedable and unmanageable!"

Kit pushed himself out of his chair, leaving the two of them laughing by the fire as he crossed to the large French doors overlooking the garden.

Outside, the bare trees scratched at the windows. The November moon was high and copper-bright, just visible through London's perpetual cloud of smog. He knew he was being sullen and childish, but he'd been so hopeful this morning. The intelligence had been good, he'd examined the sources Lady Mansfield had provided, and yet he'd known as soon as he cracked the window and tumbled into the shop basement that it was useless.

"*It is a lonely life,*" Lady Mansfield had told him when he'd asked her whether she truly felt it was worth it: the pursuit of magic, its risks and desolation. "*But can you think of another one worth living?*"

And no. Try as he might, he couldn't.

Kit pressed his forehead against the cold window and closed

his eyes. Distantly, he heard a bell chime eleven, echoed moments later by the clock in the hall. August and Teddy laughed at something he hadn't caught, and the dinner felt heavy in his gut. There was a world, he was certain, where *something* was happening.

It just wasn't this one.