

*Professor Bartholomew Grinling,
The Keeper's Lodge,
The Natural History Museum,
London.*

*Mr Emmett Verne,
The Eterna Institute,
London.*

Dear Emmett,

Thank you for visiting the Keeper's Lodge yesterday afternoon. It is always a pleasure to converse with a fellow gentleman of science. However, I must confess that our exchange left me troubled.

I have spent many years studying the habits and customs of our fairy neighbours and I must warn you, in the strongest possible terms, against doing anything to provoke them.

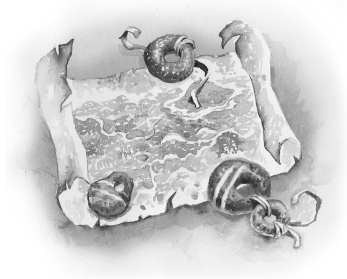
In many ways the fairy temperament is like our own, but it is more volatile, more unpredictable, and prone to bouts of rage. Indeed, a fairy's temper may swing from merriment to fury at the slightest offence. And what is true of Common Fairies – Seelies, Druics, Arboreans and the like – is doubly true of their rulers, the Fae.

The Fae are useful allies, no doubt. But I beg you to remember that they would make very dangerous enemies. Indeed, if we wish for our deal with them to bear fruit, we must tread lightly, and we must never underestimate their power.

I understand that your wife and daughters recently paid a visit to Ditchmoor School and will soon deliver another batch of children to the Knoll. A wise move. This should keep the Fae amused, for a while at least. After all, if there is one thing we know about our fairy friends, it is that they have a terrible fondness for human young.

Think on what I have said, Emmett, and please, tread lightly.

*Yours sincerely,
Bartholomew*



CHAPTER ONE

THE MOTH-WING DOORS

NOBODY KNEW WHAT LAY WITHIN THE KNOLL. Not even the old earth wizard, Perig. Some folks told of a fairy court: generous lords and ladies who turned the seasons, dewed the meadows and ripened the harvests. Others spoke, with a shudder, of shapeless creatures that sucked the life from the forest as a spider shrivels a fly. It all depended upon who you believed. And whose side you were on.

But nothing could have prepared Hazel Quince for what she found at the heart of the Fae's dominion. It was more beautiful than folks had dared imagine. And far more monstrous.

Heart drumming, Hazel followed the other children into the broken hill. Behind them lay Goblyn Wood and the three women who had brought them there. Ahead, was a dazzling blaze of diamond light. As she stepped into the

strange rainbow glare she held on to the black stone of her necklace, given to her by her mother, Erith. It was warm and solid in her fist, steadying her pulse.

The others pressed around her, jiggling and jostling nervously. She thought of her best friend, Pete. Her mind flashed back to the last time she'd seen him – the circle of dead trees, the shrieking shadows that had snatched him away. She gripped her pendant tighter. He was somewhere in the belly of that hill. She could feel it now, right in the marrow of her bones. He was here, and she would find him.

All of a sudden, a tingling breeze over her skin, lifting the hairs on her arms and legs. Then the brightness fragmented into a puzzle of greens, golds and pinks. The colours darkened, the shadows deepened and, like a reflection steadying on a pool, the world around her took form.

Hazel drew a sharp breath, eyes flickering rapidly over the strange scene shimmering into focus. She and the other children were standing in a circular hall, dimly lit by a great stone hearth in which a red fire crackled and bloomed. All around them, pale columns twisted upwards to a high-vaulted ceiling where they branched out and tangled together in a knotted canopy. Straight ahead, set back in the shadows, stood a pair of immense doors, symmetrical as moth wings. To each side, and all around, were richly coloured windows, held together by a lacework of stone, that webbed and fused like bony fingers of coral.

Hazel turned to look behind her, to see how they'd



entered. But there were no doors there, no gaping crack or sign of the snowy forest beyond, only a smooth continuation of the high-arched windows that ran round the room. Had the hill closed behind them? Had they walked through stone? Her fingers curled tightly round the straps of her knapsack – no way in, so no way out. Not here, at least.

As her eyes adjusted to the wavering gloom, Hazel recognised several faces from Ditchmoor, her wretched old school, but it was one in particular that made her breath catch. Gazing up at the antlered ceiling, cheeks still flushed from the cold winter air, was her old enemy – Elsie Pocket.

Hazel winced as she recalled how Elsie used to tease her – pulling her too-large ears and brambled hair, or

making fun of the oddly shifting colour of her eyes. But so much had happened since they had last seen each other. So much had changed. As she watched Elsie chewing her thumbnail, gazing up in wide-eyed astonishment, Hazel began to wonder how she could ever have been afraid of her. Nonetheless, she didn't want to be spotted. She tugged the hood of her cape more closely around her face and turned away.

Now that the initial surprise had passed, the children's voices grew louder, rising and bubbling with excitement. There was nobody in the chamber to greet them but, as the fire threw long shadows up the white stone pillars, Hazel's skin prickled with the creeping suspicion that they were not alone – that somebody, or something, was watching.

She glanced warily around her. The crystal windows were glowing in rich jewel-like colours. Peering more closely she saw that dozens of pictures were painted there. She stepped nearer, hoping for a clue as to what lay beyond the moth-wing doors but, to her surprise, the stained crystal did not show images of fairies, only people: a young man hunted a boar; another chipped swirling patterns into a standing stone. In the next window a bare-armed girl paddled a wooden boat, while a young woman in armour brandished a large bronze axe. Hazel let her eye travel over the many portraits twining together in the tracery – dozens of human faces, all young, all glowing with the living fire that flowed through them from the unknown place beyond. She

frowned in puzzlement but, before she could make any sense of what she saw, the room fell silent.

Hazel turned to see a greenish light filtering around the edges of the giant doorway. Then, with a whispering sigh, the doors cracked open.

The children gasped and drew closer together, clustering at the centre of the room. Standing in the narrow gap, silhouetted against a hazy half-light, was a tall, slim figure. Hazel tensed up, every nerve in her body bristling. Her magic was stirring, all the birds and beasts that lived within her suddenly alert. But she sensed that she shouldn't use her slipskin powers. Not yet. She couldn't afford to give herself away.

The figure stepped into the chamber and glided smoothly towards the whispering huddle of children. As the doors closed silently behind, Hazel found herself looking at a white-haired girl in robes of glimmering green.

The girl seemed around fifteen years old, though she could have been much older, or younger, even – it was hard to tell. Berry-black eyes and pointed features were framed by snow-white hair that fell to her waist in wild, twisting locks. Her loose green dress, with its billowing sleeves and long belt, looked as if it had been sewn in a distant century, yet the hems and neckline were inlaid with dozens of small flowers, freshly picked, or perhaps still growing – meadowsweet, violets, oxlip and bluebells – a living embroidery twining into playful patterns and rustling as she moved.

Hazel followed her with narrowed eyes. Was this creature one of the Fae? Her fists closed as she thought of what the Fae had done to her parents, to the Hollows. But although the girl had all the grace of an elfin queen, her skin did not have the flickering glow of a fairy's. Despite her strange and beautiful clothing, she looked human.

The children hushed down, quiet as rabbits. The girl stopped and surveyed the new arrivals. Then a lovely smile spread across her face, revealing a fine set of small, white teeth.

'Be merry!' Her voice rang like a silver bell. It was a soft voice, but it pealed through the chamber, catching the gathered children in a tinkling web of echoes. 'This is where you belong. This is where you are meant to be. Welcome home.' Every child in the room was silent now, watching the girl in green, entranced. For a moment she looked back at them, black eyes darting quickly from one small face to the next. Hazel shaded herself with the hood of her cape and slipped deeper into the group.

'Some of you,' the girl continued, 'won't believe what you have been told about this place, or even what you are seeing now, with your own two eyes.' She fanned out long fingers, tapering to pointed nails. 'Some of you might think that you are dreaming, and some of you might even be afraid. And who could blame you? You have all lived in the human world for too long, and your heads have been filled with its fables and falsehoods.' Her voice crackled like fire, then cooled

again. 'But soon you will know that this is not a dream; that you are more awake now than you have ever been. And that there is nothing to fear.' Her voice was low and sweet, carrying her listeners along like willow leaves on a river.

'My name is Avery,' said the girl. 'I came here, like all of you, many years ago. Like you, I was born and lived in the human world. For fifteen years, I walked in their clumsy shoes and ate their lumpen bread. My elders sought to tame me, and shape me, and school me – as human grown-ups do.' Some of the older children nodded at this, while the younger ones gazed up at her, open-mouthed. 'Then, one evening, when I was out riding in the forest, my good horse Purslane – who always knew what was best – threw me, and left me at the foot of this great hill.' She paused a moment, scanning her silent audience. 'At first, I was frightened, afraid of losing my way in the woods. I called out for Purslane, waited for him to return and carry me back to a world that I hated, but was the only home I knew. But my good horse did not return. Just as night fell, the hill cracked open and the fair folk took me in.'

'Fairies!' shouted a small, thin-faced boy, hopping up and down.

Avery laughed, hand over her heart. 'Yes, fairies,' she replied gently. 'All the children who come here are looked after by the fairies, or fair ones, or good neighbours, or whatever you prefer to call them.' Her eyes flashed with mischief. 'But don't say "little folk"! she whispered theatrically. 'They hate it!'

A nervous laughter thrilled through the crowd.

'I was one of the lucky ones,' said Avery. 'My brothers and sisters stayed on the other side. Over time, their senses blunted, their wits dulled. They grew old. They dug themselves deeper and deeper into their graves, till their eyes dimmed and their hearts wore out. But the fairies rescued me. And now they have rescued you.' As Avery spoke, Hazel caught sight of Elsie. She appeared to be hanging on Avery's every word, hands clasped tightly to her chest.

'The human world has no love or respect for children and their fairy souls,' said Avery, brow creasing, 'and I know how you have suffered. But the fair folk were watching. Ever since you were born, they have been stooped around your bedside, waiting for you to ripen. And now they have brought you to them.' As she listened to Avery's melodious voice, Hazel felt caught by it, pulled along by it, in spite of herself. She felt for the stone of her mother's necklace beneath her tunic and gripped it in her hand.

The thin-faced boy spoke up again.

'Where are they?' he asked. 'Can we see them?' The others looked to Avery, keen. Hazel held her breath.

'Of course!' Avery said with a laugh. 'You shall meet them. But the time and place must be right.' She gave the boy a sly wink. 'Fairies are very particular about that sort of thing.'

The boy nodded earnestly. The other children began to whisper, then babble.

‘Your fairy hosts shall welcome you,’ said Avery, ‘when the sky is favourable.’ As she spoke, Hazel heard the sound of wind rising somewhere beyond the chamber. ‘But for now,’ Avery smiled, ‘you must play. And be merry!’ The wind grew louder. Then, like the unfolding of giant wings, the great doors gusted open.

Hazel shielded her eyes. As she stood, braced in the rushing air, the scent of flowers breezed around her: rose, foxglove, nightshade and honeysuckle, all mingled to a melody by the airy fingers of the wind. Only minutes before, she had been trudging through a snow-covered forest. But now her nose twitched with the smells of a summer evening, and the air stirred warmly round her feet.

As the wind blew itself out, she peered through her fingers. The children around her were flocking quickly towards the doors – the ones at the back hopping and craning their necks to see what lay on the other side. Cautiously, she approached the threshold, and gasped.

Before her, below her, and all around was a twilight world of stone, crystal, water, and fern. As the earth wizard, Perig, had told her, space was higher and vaster there. The hill at the surface of the earth was no more than the peak of a hollow underground mountain within which a dusky fairy land had grown. At her feet was a flight of white stone steps that wound downwards to where gardens blossomed and pools shone. At the centre of the gardens, rising up from amongst the pools, stood a giant castle of glistening limestone. The

castle was formed from huge stalagmites piled one on top of the other, fanning and frilling like toadstools. There were towers and turrets, arches and bridges but – like the circular chamber – these did not seem to have been built so much as to have grown there over time. Hazel lifted her eyes to the cavernous ceiling. No sunlight entered, not even a chink, but the underground sky was covered in a fine lattice of glowing crystals that bathed the whole landscape in a gauzy, changeable light.

The other children were already streaming down the zigzagging steps through a haze of purple harebells. Anxious to blend into the crowd, Hazel followed them, feet padding lightly over the cool stone.

As they neared the bottom of the stairs, a cry rang out.

Hazel froze to the spot, scanning the gardens below. The others stopped too – waiting, watching. A rose bush quivered, then a small figure appeared from behind it and dashed towards them. It was a boy – a human boy. He was wearing blue velvet trousers and an unbuttoned jacket with silver brocade. As he threaded, barefoot, through the bushes, Hazel saw that he was grinning, and waving. Others followed after – girls and boys, dropping from fruit trees and popping up from behind boulders, all racing towards the new arrivals, calling out greetings. Many of them were dressed up, as pirates, queens, soldiers or harlequins. Others wore bathing suits and were shaking off water from the pools.

‘Ali!’ called a girl in a daffodil-yellow dress, throwing her arms around her newly arrived friend. ‘You made it!’

The friend blushed happily.

‘And look!’ said the girl. ‘There’s Ivan! Oh, we’re all together again!’

Everywhere, children were greeting and mingling together, dancing and flickering like butterflies. Hazel glanced from one merry face to another. Suddenly, a wild hope began to take shape. From her position halfway up the steps, she scanned the crowd for a tell-tale flash of bright red hair.

And then she saw him.

For a moment she didn’t believe it. She rubbed her eyes, certain that this must be more trickery, another illusion spun by the Fae. But her eyelids were still cool with her mother’s charm and she knew that everything she saw was real.

He was standing on his own, hands in the pockets of his plain brown trousers. He hadn’t seen her yet, but was searching the crowd, biting his bottom lip.

She bounced up on her toes and waved her arms. ‘Pete!’ she shouted.

He startled and looked around him.

‘Pete!’ she shouted louder, jumping up and down on the step. Then he saw her, and his face lit up.

‘Oh!’ he gasped. ‘Hazel!’

She rushed down the remaining steps and pushed through the throng towards him.

‘Pete! Pete!’ she cried, breathless. They wrapped each other in a tight, rocking hug.

‘Hazel!’ he exclaimed. ‘Oh, I knew you’d get here! I knew you’d come!’

Hazel’s eyes were squeezed shut, but that didn’t stop the tears streaming down her cheeks. She clung to her best friend, so solid and warm. For a wonderful moment, she felt as though they were back in their comfortable old belfry – their secret hideaway on the roof of Ditchmoor School. She remembered its smell of owl feathers, its squashed cushions and stolen pears. Her heart leaped with joy.

‘Are you all right?’ they both said at once.

‘Better now you’re here,’ Pete replied with a smile.

‘Same,’ said Hazel, eyes shining. They stepped back to look at one another and blinked in astonishment. It was like a dream, but it wasn’t. They were really there. Together. She took his hands and squeezed them.

‘We’re going home,’ she said. ‘I’ve come to take you home.’

But Pete stared back at her, uncomprehending.

‘What home?’ he laughed. ‘*This* is my home. And it’s yours too. It’s *ours*, Hazel. Forever.’