**What the Cat Dragged In**

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Amber looked up from her book. She could hear Charlie scratching at the front door, wanting to be let in. He wasn’t meowing, though, and that usually meant he had something in his mouth.

She looked around, but no one else was in sight; she supposed her parents were both still out, and her brother was off in some other part of the house or yard, out of earshot.

She sighed, then closed the book and got up out of her chair. She’d been all comfortably curled up, with a self-indulgent snack and the newest Xanth novel, and much as she loved him she wouldn’t want to get up just to let Charlie in. If he’d caught something he wasn’t supposed to, though, like a squirrel, it might still be alive and she might be able to make him let it go before it was too badly hurt.

And if it was already dead, or if it was something he was supposed to catch, like a snake or a rat, it would probably still be a good idea to get it away from him before he got bloodstains on the welcome mat. She left the book on the coffee table and hurried to the door, then paused, holding the knob.

Charlie was still scratching, but not very enthusiastically, and she could hear squeaking, and a sort of fluttering noise — had Charlie caught a bird? She hadn’t realized he was fast enough. She felt a guilty pride at the idea that good ol’ Charlie had managed to catch a live bird.

But of course, the bird might have been sick, or it might just be a baby — if it was really a bird at all.

Whatever he’d caught was still alive, and she didn’t want it loose in the house; she knelt by the door, one hand ready to fend Charlie or his unknown prey off, and started to turn the knob with the other.

“Hey, Amber,” Jason said from behind her, “Whatcha doin’?”

Startled, she sat down heavily, and turned her head to glare at her kid brother, who had just come down the stairs to find her crouching in the foyer.

“Charlie’s caught something,” she said. “I want to get it away from him without letting them in the house.”

“Can I help?”

Amber considered that, then nodded.

“I’ll wait here,” she said, arranging herself on her knees, hands held before her ready to ward off Charlie. “You open the door.”

“Got it.” Jason stepped up beside her, turned the knob, and opened the door.

Charlie lunged for the interior in a flash of sleek black fur, but Amber was ready for him; she got both arms around him and picked him up, holding him against her shoulder.

Sure enough, there was something in his mouth, something with wings, something that was squirming frantically, and squeaking like a frightened guinea pig.

It wasn’t a guinea pig, though, and despite the wings it wasn’t a bird, either.

Amber didn’t get a good look at it; she was too busy keeping Charlie still, and his head was up over her left shoulder, his captive dangling down her back.

She saw the fluttering wings as it went by, though — transparent wings. Birds didn’t have wings like that, bugs did. And not the nice bugs like butterflies. A dragonfly, maybe?

It was too big for a bug, though, wasn’t it? Even a dragonfly? And Charlie never bothered bringing bugs into the house, he just ate them out on the lawn.

And bugs didn’t squeal; the thing was still squeaking, whatever it was.

“Jason,” she called, “what’s he got? I can’t see it.”

Jason moved around behind her and stared.

He didn’t answer at once, and she was too busy with the struggling cat to have much patience. “Come on, Jason, what’s Charlie holding?” she demanded.

“Jesus,” Jason said.

Amber turned and looked up at her brother. He wasn’t supposed to talk like that; he was only ten. “What is it?”

“Ol’ Charlie’s caught a fairy,” Jason said.

“What?”

“He’s caught a fairy! With wings an’ everything!”

“Oh, come on, Jase...”

“No, really! I swear! I’ll hold the cat, you look for yourself!” He reached over and grabbed Charlie by the scruff of his neck.

“Not so rough,” Amber said. Charlie couldn’t help being a hunter, that was just in a cat’s nature; it didn’t justify Jason hurting him.

The cat growled angrily, but couldn’t do much more than that. Amber slipped out from under, so that Jason was holding the cat in mid-air; then she turned and looked.

Jason hadn’t been kidding. It was a fairy.

“Wow,” Amber breathed.

Then she snatched Charlie away from her brother and started swatting the cat on the back. “Let go!” she shouted. “Drop it, cat!”

A real, live fairy was a reason to get rough. With a yowl of protest, Charlie released his prey.

The creature fluttered, trying to fly away, but instead fell to the tile floor.

“Get a box,” Amber ordered Jason. She looked at the fairy, then quickly opened the door, tossed the cat out onto the porch, and then slammed the door shut again.

Jason was back with a shoebox in seconds.

“We need a towel or something, too,” Amber said. “To line the box. Something soft, like cotton or something.”

“You get it,” Jason said.

“Okay, but don’t touch anything!” Amber dashed away, box in hand, and found one of the fluffy white guest towels on the top shelf in the linen closet. That would do.

A moment later the two children knelt on either side of the wounded fairy, staring down at it.

It was shaped exactly like a tiny woman, except for the wings — a very thin woman, but a woman. She wore a sort of over-one-shoulder robe that appeared to be made out of tent-caterpillar tent, but that did little to hide her female figure. Her hair was blonde and incredibly fine, drifting out in a halo about not just her head, but most of her body—Amber judged that if the fairy stood up, her hair would reach to her ankles. From the crown of her head to the tips of her tiny pointed toes she measured no more than three or four inches.

And she had wings. Iridescent, glittering, transparent wings that grew from her back, reaching down to her knees and well above her head, and with a wingspan of perhaps six inches.

Her left wing was broken; Charlie’s fangs had punched neat holes right through it, holes that were leaking thin clear fluid, and there was a fold to the wing that shouldn’t have been there. The almost-invisible veins and ribs that gave the wing its strength had been bent until they broke.

The fairy had stopped squeaking and fluttering; she was lying still and staring up at the children.

Cautiously, moving very slowly, Amber reached down and slid a hand under the fairy’s undamaged right wing, then used her other hand to push the creature’s body onto the fingers. Then she quickly lifted the fairy up and placed it gently in the towel-lined box.

“I’ll get some paper towels,” Jason said, heading for the kitchen.

Amber looked up, startled, then down at the tiles, at the smear of fluid the fairy had left. She made a face. Then she looked down at the fairy again.

The creature was still staring silently up at her.

“Are you okay?” Amber asked.

Hesitantly, the fairy nodded.

That meant she understood English, Amber realized. Somehow, despite all the stories, despite the thing’s almost-human appearance, Amber had been thinking of her as an animal.

“Can you talk?” she asked.

“Yes,” the tiny thing squeaked.

“Oh, wow,” Amber said in a hushed voice.

Jason returned, a wad of paper towels in his hand, and began scrubbing at the smear on the tiles.

“It talks,” Amber told him.

Jason looked up at her, startled.

“Go ahead, ask it,” Amber said.

Jason looked suspiciously at his sister, then at the creature in the shoebox. “Do you talk?” he demanded.

The fairy nodded.

“A nod isn’t talking,” Jason told Amber.

“I can speak,” the fairy said, before Amber could reply. Her voice was high and squeaky, but very clear and somehow rich.

“I’m sorry the cat got you,” Amber said. “And I’m sorry you’re hurt. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Take me home,” the fairy answered.

Amber and Jason glanced at one another, then looked back at the fairy.

“How?” Amber said.

“Where?” Jason asked.

“Down behind the garden,” the fairy told them.

“What, you mean just in the back yard?” Jason asked.

The fairy nodded.

“I thought it’d be, you know, over the hills and far away, or something,” Amber said.

“Behind the garden,” the fairy repeated.

Amber and Jason looked at each other; then Amber picked up the shoebox.

“Come on,” she said.

Together, the two of them went out the front door and around the house, past the sun porch and the patio, down across the wide back lawn where a rusty croquet wicket still stood even though the slope was far too steep to allow a decent game, to the big old garden where their mother maintained a few patchs of herbs and vegetables and a simple floral border while allowing the brick walks and three-fourths of the old beds to be overgrown with weeds.

Charlie meowed at them from under the back porch as they passed, and Amber told him, “Hush up.” She looked down into the box and saw the fairy trembling, and assured her, “Don’t worry, we won’t let him near you.”

At the entrance to the garden, where a white picket gate had once hung but had eventually rotted out and been removed, Amber stopped.

“Now where?” she said. She leaned down to hear the fairy’s answer over the buzzing of insects and the rustling of leaves.

“Past the summerhouse,” the fairy said.

Jason looked around, puzzled. “You mean the gazebo?” he asked.

The fairy nodded.

Jason and Amber looked at each other. The gazebo at the back of the garden, like the gate, had long since rotted, and two years before their father had finally torn it down and hauled away the wreckage.

“There’s as much fungus and bugs here as wood,” he’d said as he loaded the fragments into heavy-duty trash bags. Amber and Jason had watched him work, and helped where they could, and neither of them had ever glimpsed any fairies.

Amber shrugged. “Come on,” she said.

Together, the pair walked down through the garden, pushing aside weeds that overhung the path. A seedpod burst and Jason sneezed as powdery fluff reached his nose; a thorn scratched Amber’s leg and snagged on her sock. At last, though, they reached the site where the gazebo had stood, a wide patch of rich black dirt now thick with green vines and weeds.

They had never played back here much; they hadn’t been allowed in the gazebo, as their parents had said it wasn’t safe, and there were plenty of other places that weren’t so overgrown. It was a very big yard—too big for their parents to maintain properly, especially since it had been left to run wild for years before the family bought the old house at auction.

“Now where?” Amber asked again.

The fairy hauled herself up to peer over the side of the shoebox.

“Straight ahead three steps,” she said, “then turn full circle.”

Amber blinked. That didn’t make any sense. She glanced at Jason, who shrugged.

Together, they walked forward, Amber counting the steps aloud.

Three steps brought them right up against the towering, untrimmed hedge across the back of the garden. Amber could see nothing but hedge.

Feeling foolish, she spun around on her toes—and found herself facing a gap in the hedge.

Astonished, she turned and looked back, and saw the rest of the world unchanged—the half-wild garden, their familiar old house at the top of the slope, Charlie watching from under the back porch.

But there was a gap in the hedge that hadn’t been there a moment before.

Jason had turned around, as well, and was just as surprised, but trying not to show it. “Come on,” he said, stepping into the opening.

Amber followed, the shoebox in her hand, and found herself in a sort of leafy green dome, surrounded on all sides by hedge, sunlight trickling through in drops and speckles. The earth beneath her feet was hard-packed bare black dirt, as if trampled—but who could have trampled it, here in her own back yard?

“Put me down,” the fairy said.

Uneasily, Amber lowered the shoebox to the ground.

A breeze rustled the leaves of the hedge, and Amber had a sudden sensation of being watched, as if a thousand tiny eyes were staring at her; she looked quickly around, and thought she saw shapes flitting through the hedge.

Leaves turning in the wind? Sunlight scattered by the leaves?

Or other fairies?

“Thank you,” the fairy said. “You saved my life. I owe you a boon.”

“You’re welcome,” Amber said automatically. “Listen, you don’t owe us anything; we just want you to be safe. Will you be all right here? I mean...”

“What is this place?” Jason demanded.

“This is our home,” the fairy answered.

“There are others?” Amber asked.

“Oh, yes,” the fairy replied. “We’ve been here all along, ever since the garden was first laid out.”

“Why don’t they show themselves?”

“They don’t know you.”

“I’d like to see them,” Amber said.

“Is that the boon you would ask?”

“Boon?” Amber had to think what the strange word meant; she’d seen it in stories, never heard it spoken before this. “You mean, like a reward? Three wishes, or something?”

She would never have believed in wishes ordinarily, but she was talking to a fairy, for heaven’s sake.

“Our power’s not enough in these sad days to grant wishes,” the fairy said, “but if you’d have a reward, come to this place at midnight, and we will celebrate, and give you what reward we can.” Her voice seemed stronger and more confident, Amber noticed—either she was recovering quickly from her wounds, or this place, whatever it was, gave her courage.

“I don’t need any reward,” Amber said. “We just wanted to help you.” She hesitated. “But I would like to see the others, you know, just to be sure you’ll be safe here.”

“Return at midnight, and you may see them.”

“But I meant... can’t I see them now?”

“No. Go now,” the fairy ordered. “Return at midnight, if you wish.”

Uneasily, Amber backed out of the clearing in the hedge; reluctantly, Jason followed.

Charlie meowed at them from the porch; Amber turned to look at him, and when she turned back the opening in the hedge was gone.

She and Jason spent the better part of an hour exploring, walking up and down the hedge on either side, but they found no sign of an opening, nowhere that the hedge looked wide enough, front to back, to have contained the dome-like clearing she remembered. They turned up nothing on the site of the gazebo but pillbugs. Turning, whirling, pacing, and jumping about did not cause the gap in the hedge to reappear.

Eventually they gave up and returned to the house, but Amber couldn’t bring herself to pick up her abandoned book; instead she let Charlie in and sat in the window seat on the stairway landing with the cat on her lap, petting him as she stared out across the back lawn at the garden and hedge.

“I love you, Charlie,” she said, looking down at him, “but don’t catch any more fairies, okay?”

The cat looked up at her with half-closed eyes and purred.

At supper neither Amber nor Jason mentioned anything of the day’s events to their parents; they ate quietly, listening to chat about cars and jobs.

At bedtime that evening, as Amber let Charlie out for the night, Jason asked her, “So, you goin’?”

Amber nodded. “If I can stay awake,” she said. “You?”

“Sure,” Jason replied.

Amber lay in her bed with the lights out, thinking about the day.

She had always thought that their big old house looked like something out of a storybook, and that the semi-abandoned garden was especially spooky, but fairies? It seemed incredible.

She wasn’t sure whether to be grateful that Charlie had caught the fairy, or worried. Charlie was a lovely cat, all sleek and black, and very friendly, but sometimes he could be so stubborn...

She didn’t realize she had dozed off until Jason shook her awake. She sat up, startled.

“Come on!” he whispered. “It’s only about five minutes till midnight!”

“Oh!” She jumped out of bed and shooed Jason out of the room so she could get dressed.

It was a good thing their parents hadn’t stayed up late that night, Amber thought as she crept down the stairs.

Together, she and Jason stumbled down the sloping yard to the garden, tripping over things in the dark. Everything seemed bigger, somehow—the hundred feet of lawn seemed like a thousand. At last, though, they arrived at the brick pillars that had held the garden gate, posts that ordinarily barely reached Amber’s waist—and they were over her head.

“Jason?” she said, looking up at the posts, the red brick black in the moonlight.

“We’re shrinking,” Jason said. “Down to fairy size, I guess—so we can celebrate with them.”

Amber nodded.

“Come on,” she said.

They made their way cautiously through the garden itself, and that walk was even worse, with the uneven bricks and the trailing vines and the tangled weeds and pricking thorns, all of them seemingly growing larger and larger as they proceeded, until by the time they reached the soft ground where the gazebo had stood it was a veritable jungle.

The hedge loomed over them, black in the darkness—black, solid, and impossibly tall.

“Now what?” Jason asked, staring at it.

“Now we take three steps and turn around,” Amber said. “And if it doesn’t work, we go back to bed, and I sure hope we grow back to normal size.”

“I wish we’d taken a picture of the thing before we let it go,” Jason muttered.

“A bit late to think of that,” Amber retorted as she took her first step.

Then the second, the third, turn around...

And the hedge was alight with tiny glowing specks, like miniature candle flames, and the opening into the clearing had reappeared, a gigantic leafy archway outlined in flickering golden light.

“’Tis the mortal children!” a voice called. “Make ready the feast! Those who saved Maurienne from the Beast are come!”

And then the fairies appeared on either side, long lines of them, almost as tall now as Amber and Jason, all of them inhumanly beautiful, with gleaming iridescent wings and radiant heart-shaped faces, long hair flowing down their backs. Their clothes were woven of spider-silk and milkweed and a hundred other fine fibers, in shades of white and grey and gold. Two leapt forward and took Amber and Jason by the hand, and led them down between the lines as the fairies cheered wildly.

At the end they found a table, elaborately set with plates made of shining beetle-shell, acorn-cap bowls, thorn knives and carved twig forks.

And on the other side of the table stood three fairies. In the center was the one they had rescued, her injured wing now bandaged with something green and white; to her right was a male fairy taller than any of the others, fully Amber’s own shrunken height, while on her left was a female fairy of Jason’s current size.

The tall ones wore rings on their heads, like crowns—a simple gold band on the male, while the female’s had a diamond chip set in the front—and Amber realized these must be the king and queen; dredging up a memory from an old movie, she curtsied deeply, going down on one knee, wishing as she did so that she had worn a skirt instead of jeans. Jason, after a moment’s befuddlement, picked up his cue and bowed.

“It’s all like a story,” Amber whispered as she rose.

Jason nodded.

“Welcome to our home,” the fairy king announced. “We do not ask your true names, as we seek no power over you, but what names shall we call you?”

Amber and Jason exchanged glances.

“Amber, your Majesty,” Amber said.

“Bill,” Jason said.

Amber glared at him. “Bill?” she asked.

He shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

“Come then, Amber and Bill, and feast with us!” the king proclaimed, “that we might honor you for what you did for our beloved subject, whom you rescued from that foul monster and brought safe home to us!”

Amber started to object that Charlie wasn’t a monster, just a cat, her cat — but then she stopped herself. To these things, a cat would be a monster, and if she admitted Charlie was hers they’d hardly feel kindly toward her, would they?

The king waved a hand, and fairies began to load the table — which, Amber saw, was made of an old clapboard set up on chunks of 2x4 — with food. Nuts, berries, steaming chunks of meat — Amber wondered what sort of meat it was, but decided not to ask. The acorn bowls were filled with golden wine—probably made from dandelions, Amber guessed.

She remembered stories of fairy feasts, and people being lost for years, or forever, if they ate so much as a bite — but this wasn’t a story, this was real, strange as it seemed, and it would be rude not to eat.

Besides, the chance to bite into a strawberry the size of her own head was just too weird to miss. She and Jason, as directed, sat down on chairs made of empty spools and joined in.

As they ate, the fairies sang, and although Amber wasn’t usually interested in folk music — she preferred Elastica — she enjoyed it immensely. Their voices were beautiful, and about every third song was a funny one, and she laughed until she cried at those, though the minute each song ended she could never again remember any of the words or jokes.

Everything was delicious, everything was wonderful. Maurienne, if that was her name, stared across the table at Amber and Jason with a look of adoration that made Amber feel ten feet tall; the king and queen smiled proudly at them.

At last the feast was done and the dishes were cleared away; Amber felt full and sleepy and fine. The king and queen arose, and Amber remembered that she was supposed to stand as well; she got to her feet and stood, swaying slightly. Jason followed suit.

“And now,” the king said, “the reward you were promised!”

He gestured, and Amber felt something touching her shoulders; she turned, startled, and found that two fairies had come up behind her and draped a cloak across her shoulders.

Two others had done the same for Jason.

“Cool,” he said.

Amber, tired as she was, tried to focus on the cloak that covered her shoulder.

It was fur, fine black fur; she stroked it.

It was sleek and soft and smooth.

It felt somehow familiar.

“What kind is it?” Jason asked, as Amber looked up, horrified, at the king’s smiling face.

He had canines almost like fangs, she noticed for the first time, and the queen’s smile was equally sinister; the two were leering, mocking.

“Why, you said that the reward you asked was to see us all safe,” the king replied. “This cloak is the sign of our safety, now and forever, from the Beast that savaged Maurienne. What else would be fitting for your cloaks but the Beast’s own hide?”

“What?” Jason said. His face went pale, but Amber didn’t notice.

“Charlie!” she shrieked.

And then the fairies and the candles and the table, the king and queen and everything else, vanished, and Amber and Jason were kneeling together in the moonlight in the weeds behind the garden, each of them clutching a scrap of their cat’s skin.

*end*