

She opened her eyes to darkness, a hissed whisper, and a cool hand on her shoulder, shaking her.

“Miss! Miss, please wake –” Through the shadows she recognized Sophie, stepping hurriedly away from the bed. “Oh, thank goodness. I’m so sorry to wake you, miss –”

“It’s all right. What’s wrong?”

“I’m so sorry, but – Jasper said he heard something. Something downstairs, miss.”

“It’s probably not,” came an agitated whisper from the hall. “I only said I thought –”

“You did, Jasper, there’s no use denying it,” another voice said from the hall, lower and calmer, as she swung her feet to the floor. Roland was always calmer. “Apologies for disturbing you, Miss Highbury,” he added, raising his voice only slightly. “But it seemed prudent.”

She nodded, pulling on the dressing gown Sophie offered. “It’s all right, Roland.” She belted the gown with a tidy knot, noted that her hand wasn’t shaking. Good. “I assume you believe it’s a Creature, Jasper?”

Sophie whimpered and crossed herself.

“Well, miss, it sounded – we thought – in case it is, miss...”

“That I ought to meet it first. Quite right.” With Sophie at her elbow, she reached the door and looked at the two men beyond it. Jasper’s waistcoat wasn’t fully buttoned, his hair standing up in tufts on one side. Roland held a hurricane lamp aloft, the flame at the low wick lighting the faces of the gathered group and not much else of the long hallway.

“Which room, Jasper?” She kept her voice low, and he answered in kind.

“I think... it might be in one of the front rooms, miss. The parlour perhaps. Or the dining room.” His gaze darted to the darkness at the end of the hallway.

“Well. Let’s hope for the former, shall we?” she murmured, with a smile meant to lighten the mood. It had no noticeable effect, so she nodded at Roland. “A little more light, Roland, and we’ll investigate.” She turned to Jasper and Sophie as Roland adjusted the lamp. “You two might stay up here, I think.”

“Thank you, miss,” Sophie breathed, just as Jasper whispered, “But what if you need us, miss?”

“Roland has experience with Creatures, if that’s what it is, and it will want to communicate with me. We shall be fine.”

“But what if it’s not a Creature, miss?”

She blinked at him. “In that case, I’ll scream, and you and Sophie should run as quickly as possible down the back stairs, through the kitchen, and outside to call the patrolman. Shall we, Roland?”

“Yes, miss.” He handed her the lamp. “After you, miss.”

“The one and only time you’re likely to say that to the mistress of the house, I imagine,” she murmured as they moved toward the head of the stairs.

“It is customary, miss.”

“Yes, of course.”

The dry exchange helped to calm her further, but they were partway down the stairs before she realized she was moving more slowly than she typically would. The darkened house felt as if it were holding its breath, the bannister cold beneath her fingers. Roland’s soft footfalls were a reassuring echo behind her every step. She couldn’t hear Sophie and Jasper behind them anymore, so she asked, very quietly, “If it is a Creature... why now? Why here?”

He hesitated only a moment. “No one knows, miss. They arrive when they like.”

“Mr Darwin thinks there must be more to it than that. In his last book he said they reflect their surroundings when they settle and then they thrive there, just like any other of God’s creations. Similar to a bird with a beak just the right shape to gain its food. Except... well, except birds aren’t born able to shape their own beaks to their home, I suppose.”

“I don’t believe so, miss.”

“It’s quite extraordinary, really, when you consider it. You told me yourself what happened when Colonel Howittson’s Creature arrived. Who else has a Creature in its stables caring for prize horses? It’s almost ridiculous.”

“Perhaps, miss.”

“But the man is fixated on his damn horses, so a Creature for horses it became.”

“Language, Miss Millie,” Roland murmured as she reached the bottom step. She turned a disbelieving face to him, and his mouth quirked upwards. “Apologies. Too long a habit.” He looked beyond her to the front door, all trace of a smile fading. “They are unpredictable, though. Remember what happened at *Punch*.”

“Yes, of course.” As if there were anyone left in England who didn’t know what had happened at the magazine’s office when its Creature burst into being, a slicing whirligig of outsized typewriter keys, shrieking laughter on a razor’s edge. Or even to poor Mr Darwin himself, buried and almost lost forever under the rustling mass of insects and feathers that had

bloomed in his study. And everyone knew how to decipher the tactful language of the *Times* obituaries that referred to Creature-related events, or else read the less circumspect papers that published details.

Far fewer knew what had happened at the Ashbee house, because Elizabeth Ashbee was an old friend and had told Millie in the strictest confidence. Even Elizabeth hadn't been aware of her husband's collection of very specialized literature before the Creature had appeared. "I would never have guessed it of him," Elizabeth had whispered, her cheeks pinkening. "It really was quite... startling. Although I must say we have grown, well, more accustomed to it now. And of course it's an honour just to have one, and we're fortunate, in some ways, especially after what happened at *Punch*, those poor people." The visit had been cut short when a soft thump, and then another, had sounded from upstairs.

Millicent Highbury didn't want startling, or unpredictable, or the honour of being chosen. Since her father's death she had arranged everything in her life very carefully to ensure none of it would never happen. Here in the dead of night, paused at the base of the stairs, she couldn't see the paintings on the walls but knew they were as bland an assortment as possible: a seascape here, a fruit bowl there, a field of flowers nodding over the sideboard. The library was similarly unfocused, shelves upon shelves of philosophy, history, mathematics – no fixations to lure and shape a Creature. Millie herself pursued eight different hobbies with careful and equal attention to each, which required some time management and did not allow favouritism.

She reminded herself of all this, but the words slipped out before she could stop them. "Are we ready, Roland?"

"No one ever knows for certain, miss. But I believe so." He was as steady a presence as he'd been since her childhood, but she thought she heard a low note of anxiety.

"Well. Nothing more for it, then." She moved toward the dining room, but Roland halted her with quiet words.

"I believe it's in the parlour, miss."

She turned that way and they both paused to listen. After a long moment, she thought she heard a faint sliding of cloth. A glance at Roland caught him frowning intently ahead. She straightened her shoulders, raised the lamp, and walked as confidently as she could toward its doorway, no longer trying for quiet.

She paused two steps in, raised the lamp to shoulder height, and spoke over the pounding of her heart in her ears. "My name is Millicent Highbury, and this is my house. Make yourself known, please."

Silence, and then the same slipping whisper of sound teased her again. Was she imagining it? The furniture gave too much shape but no clarity to the darkness. She should have turned the

lamp up further before they came in. Even as she thought it, Roland stepped beside her and raised the wick until the flame brightened and she could make out every item in the room.

There was nothing there that shouldn't have been. Shadows still clung to the corners. She looked briefly again at Roland, who looked unexpectedly stern.

"I am the mistress of this house, and you will respond," she said, raising her chin and deciding that everything the etiquette books said about greeting a Creature for the first time could go hang.

Something rippled in the blackness beneath her father's old chair, a brief greasy gleam in the lamplight.

Mistress

Beside her, Roland tensed.

"Yes, I am mistress. Make yourself known."

Deep shadow pooled under the settee now, with a sound like a lady's hem sweeping across a carpet, and the feeling of someone stifling a laugh at her expense.

She narrowed her eyes. "Respond or leave. This is my territory."

Mistress

The word was more thoughtful, rolled through her mind as if the Creature were tasting it. The drapes at the nearest window furrowed as if in a breeze. Something long and whip-thin darted along the top of the window frame, too fast to track.

"You cannot be civil? Fine. Leave."

The room went still and watchful. She bore its scrutiny, more annoyed than anxious now. She wondered how many people refused a Creature. She'd never heard of it happening, but surely it did.

Your territory

Yours

"This territory is clearly marked," Roland said quietly. "And you've been told."

The nearest corner snarled, the fireplace poker scraping sparks across the hearthstone.

"No," both Millicent and Roland said sharply, and the noise stopped. The lamplight gave Roland odd shadows of his own as she handed him the lamp. He met her eyes and nodded an apology.

She turned back to the centre of the room and brought her hands together in a loud slap.
“Out!”

They stood motionless amid a softer snarl, a whirl of movement that knocked a wing-back chair askew, set the chandelier chiming, flickered the flame wildly within the glass of the lamp, and then the room was empty.

She waited a few more minutes to be sure, then turned to Roland. “You could hear it. When it spoke.”

His gaze swept the room before returning to her. “Yes, miss.”

“I had no idea that was possible. Homeowners only, I thought.”

“It seems not, miss.”

“Perhaps because you’ve had previous experience with them?”

“Perhaps so, miss.” He gestured toward the doorway. “Would you prefer to return to bed? Or shall I have Sophie prepare some warm milk?”

“I’m no longer a child,” she said irritably, and headed toward the stairs.

“No, miss. I only thought it might help you return to sleep after the disruption. Something stronger, perhaps?”

“No, I’ll be all right,” she said, pausing on the stairs to take back the lamp. “Do you think we’ll be bothered again?”

“Unlikely, miss.” He continued only when she made no move to leave. “Creatures are great respecters of territory, on the whole. In finding one is sufficiently defended, they generally move on.”

“Indeed?” she asked. “I hadn’t heard that. I suppose there is still much we don’t know about them, after all. Jasper will be much relieved, at least.”

“I imagine so, miss. If there’s nothing further, I’ll ensure the ground floor is secure before I retire.”

“So any further noises I hear from this level will be you, and not some invading creature.”

“You have my word, miss.”

“Thank you, Roland. Oh. Would you like the lamp?” She held it toward him, its light sliding across his impassive face. For an instant his eyes threw the light back in red-gold coins, like a hunting animal’s. He blinked, and the effect was gone.

“No need, miss. I’m quite used to navigating these hallways in the dark.”

"Of course." She added, "After all, you have been a resident defender of Highbury territory for many years, haven't you?"

"Some time now, yes."

"Thank you for your assistance tonight."

"No thanks required, Miss Highbury. You had the situation under control."

"Hmm. Thank you for your presence, then. I'm grateful you decided to stay." She cleared her throat a little. "After my father's death, I mean."

"I'm happy to remain, miss. Good night."

"Good night." She took the light up the stairs, and the darkness of the house folded him into itself.

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