



The Unbearable Presence of Fairies

TINKER BELL CAN BE A LOT

"I am a violent man who has learned not to be violent and regrets his violence." -John Lennon

Consider this. Coming into work is the worst part of most people's mornings, but coming to work for the Human Encounters Corporation? That will drive you mad.

The HEC Building stood enormously tall — taller than even the L.L. Beanstalk Tower. And our company motto, "Making the World of Humans Magical Day by Day," still glittered with fairy magic even though it was considered outdated back when the Grimms were first touring Europe. I combed some hair out of my eyes and was greeted

by the front desk Manticore, his lion jowls showing a slight grimace. Evidently, the Sphinx was out sick — just my luck. Either way, neither would let me pass without answering today's riddle. Although the Sphinx would have been infinitely friendlier and offered hints, fucking Manticores just glared at you! And if the Manticore screwed up the puzzle, it was only because he couldn't be bothered to read it all the way through.

I was told that prior security had been put in place centuries ago to guard our workplace against the corporate espionage of a Rakshasa (or any other shapeshifting demons) from rival companies or clans. Finally, that protection had been updated. Now, all employees had to use the company's proprietary "Riddle Password System". Whether human or mythical, everyone had to answer a riddle each morning before gaining access to the building.

Since I was fairly new at the company, I was still getting the hang of the RPS process. At first, it was fun because there were patterns. However, the company's magic mostly erases your memory after the riddle is submitted, making each morning unnecessarily challenging. Exasperating. My brain was starting to fray from dealing with the RPS... Every. Single. Morning.

Ugh! Why doesn't Corporate just switch to regular phone passwords? And why do the passwords have to be longer and more complicated every time? I kept being asked to "Please try again," even though I knew I answered correctly. The password requirements are so stressful because if you don't get it right quickly, you can't even go to work. Even worse, after trying three different answers, the system potentially accepts one as "the right choice" — how is this supposed to outsmart the Rakshasas? I call bullshit!

If anyone answered today's riddle (which was really the same stupid riddle with randomized new answers) incorrectly too many times, they were in a world of hurt. The Manticore security guard would sting them with their scorpion tails, causing the poor soul to fall paralyzed onto the floor — and obviously miss work. Unfair! Then, the receptionist would have to watch in horror as the lion part of the Manticore tore them limb from limb before eating them alive. Manticores fucking suck!

Finally, the riddle began. "It can't be touched and can't be felt. It can't be seen, or heard, or smelt." The Manticore paused, tilting its head back to recall the rest of the puzzle. "Hmmm, I think it went something like... Ah! It lies behind stars and under hills, and any empty holes it fills. It comes early and follows after, ends life, and kills laughter. What is it?"

I glanced at the paper in my hand. "It's darkness," I hoped. Thankfully, I had made a cheat sheet of likely answers, and it worked *this time*. I stuffed the paper back into my pocket, triumphantly. The Manticore snorted through its feline nose, stood aside, and let me pass as I swiftly entered the elevator to the 14th floor. The Manticore, as infuriating as he could be, I could deal with. As long as I didn't have to share some elevator space with a...

"Hi there!" a squeaky voice assaulted my eardrums.

Ugh. A fairy.

Being stuck in an elevator with a fairy was exhausting. Each flutter of her wings produced a glitter of golden dust that bathed the compacted space, and every garment of clothing I had on for that matter, with a brilliant light. The glitter would magically *intensify* your feelings, which, in general, is nice — if you're already happy. But today I was just in

a mood. Now I had to think only happy thoughts if I didn't want to become a madcap miscreant for the rest of the day.

"Oh, you're not floating from the dust. Does that mean you're not having a happy-filled good morning?" the fairy asked in her squeaky tinkling voice. "Well, I just can't let that abide! After all, mornings are bright and sunny when you have good company." She was giving me an obnoxiously smug smile, fingers to her dimples and all.

"No...please don't. I don't need any, so just..." I tried replying politely, trailing off as I desperately moved to brush off the pixie dust from my person but it was no use. The golden flecks had penetrated. I didn't ask for this; I told her to stop. Dammit, Janet.

My temples ached as my thoughts grew louder. Why did we even have to share an elevator with fairies anyway? They had wings, they could just flutter all the way up to the 14th floor if they wanted to. That sounded like pure laziness to me. Not to mention their outfits and pretentious wands were an eyesore. This fairy, for example, wore a business suit clad in acid green and crocodile skin boots. How the Hobs managed to thread them in such a small size baffled me — impressive, though. Anyway, she fluttered back and forth, sparkling with an emerald aura that triggered my gag reflex if I stared at it for too long.

"Well-if-you're-really-feeling-down-misery-sure-loves-company. And-just-the-other-day..." The fairy's manic ramp-up of enthusiasm left me mentally stumbling. Her excited arm waving blew even more mood-altering glittery magic into my face.

The fairy went on about her life, failing to notice how little I cared about her endless list of grievances. Like how she thought her boyfriend was such an immature twit, or that he was flirting with the mermaids

at the lagoon, just to make her jealous. And I stood there silently as she explained that her boyfriend had broken his condo's HOA rules by getting a large pet — an alligator or a crocodile, I could never tell the difference, and I didn't really care.

Anyway, I lost track of where her speed-of-light rants were going. Something-something about a stupid male gaze dress code (fair). Then it was about some boys who got lost, and a creeper obsessed with leather and velvet. Her boy troubles seemed to never end. Anyways, while she was complaining, her intoxicating dust had me stewing in some of the most horrid, gloom-inducing scenarios I could think of. My thoughts were just too terrible to share.

The fairy's enthusiasm, endless humblebrag stories, and damn sparkly glitter were making this vertical commute so much worse. It was petty, but I kept thinking about how bad my life was compared to hers. I wished she'd just disappear so my feet would stay rooted to the rising elevator floor. I'd do anything to spite that fussysock's cheery attitude.

"And-then-we-had-to-rush-to-the-vet-because-his-pet-ate-the-alarm-clock. Isn't-that-unbelievable?..."

"Yes, unbelievable! To be honest, you're annoying, and I can't stand this anymore. I don't give a flying fuck about any of this!" I was really trying to be patient, but the additional emotional hit from the dust was too much, man.

The fairy gasped in horror. It was funny the way their faces get when angry, like bright red cherry tomatoes.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed. "There is no place for that kind of naughty language! You know, at the HEC, we believe in a family-friendly work environment."

"Family-friendly?! Who made you the language police?" I waved my hand in frustration and she dove to avoid it. "I don't believe any of this. As a matter of fact, I don't believe in fairies either!" As the mean-spirited string of the syllables left my mouth, I realized the consequences of my words.

That annoying little fairy let out a piercing shrill before collapsing straight to the floor. She appeared still and lifeless as the golden glow dimmed. I rolled my eyes before recalling a meeting back at ACRID, the Anthropoid and Creature Resources for Individual Development. The memo had clearly stated that "all employees were instructed not to pronounce their disbelief in fairies out loud, as the act alone would incapacitate them on the spot, or worse." *Or worse.* For a second, I smirked, pleased to have finally shut up that annoying chit-chat of a gnat, but then I considered how murder could definitely get me fired. I gasped in horror as the color around her faded to gray. She was for real dying. "Oh, bugger!"

The elevator was making its way to the 14th floor. What to do? I knelt down by the fairy, knocking on my forehead to remember what to do in a crisis situation. I recalled a CPR seminar hosted by Dr. Barrie on how to revive a fairy should it unexpectedly drop from the air. Reluctantly, I prepared to perform a type of "belief resuscitation." I clapped as hard and loud as I could and chanted "I believe. I believe. I believe. Oh please, breathe." over and over again. It was hard because the damned dust told me she deserved it.

"C'mon, breathe, damn you! I believe!" **I believe!**

Slowly but surely, the golden glitter of her wings expanded, and she began to cough, gasping for air. Regaining color and consciousness, she shot me a stare full of daggers. She flew up to my face before giving me a

hard smack of her wand right between my eyes, but a bee sting would've hurt worse. Honestly, the whole ordeal was taxing but finally over. From there on, she turned away from me, pouting as she fluttered out as the elevator doors opened. I sighed with relief after undergoing that seriously unforced error. To my dismay, I was going to remain under the influence of that blasted dust for a few more hours.

Coming to work and dealing with fairies could be a trial by fire every morning. But let me tell you that trying to console a vain Medusa after a makeup disaster in a fully mirrored elevator? Oh well — let's just say that's a story for another time, or maybe another book.



See the end of the book for elevator etiquette rules followed or broken.
Elevator Etiquette Codes: 2B, 2F, 6B, 6C, 6H