The Solstice Tales

by WolfenM

Summary

Two classic holiday tales retold as part of the Gaiankind storyverse. In "Nussknacker", an heirloom turns out to have a magical history -- but will its current owner, a young lady, want anything to do with it after her strange uncle, Drosselmeier, tells its tale? In "A Conspiracy of Spirits: The Love Story of Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge", we learn why Marley did what he did for Scrooge -- with a little help from Drosselmeier ....

Notes

This is a two-story collection. If you enjoy it, I hope you will consider buying a hard copy! :) You can do so through Lulu (where I get the biggest cut, to be honest) or now Amazon. You can learn more about my Gaiankind series, of which this is a subseries, here.

Both tales in this volume are retellings of classic stories, done in such a way as to fit them into the Gaiankind storyverse. That's much the spirit of Gaiankind: it draws heavily on
myth and folklore, including classic literature (which is a more modern sort of mythology).

The first tale, "Nussknacker", is based on ETA Hoffman's "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King", and is also somewhat inspired by the Alexandre Dumas rewrite/Tchaikovsky ballet. In addition, I must thank the animated film The Nutcracker Prince for making me aware of "The Story of the Hard Nut", which is a tale-within-a-tale, part of the original story that was cut out of the ballet.

The second tale of this volume, "A Conspiracy of Spirits: The Love Story of Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge", is, of course, based on the famous work by Charles Dickens. Indeed, much of the dialogue and actions between Scrooge and Marley, and bits later between Scrooge and the ghosts, are from the original text (though I have made small alterations). Many thanks to Disney for producing the audio play album that I listened to repeatedly as a child, cementing my love for the story.

Thanks also to my friends and family, online and off, for their encouragement and input, especially on deviantART and Facebook!

Special thanks to my “sis” Sara for initially creating the mage that eventually evolved into Drosselmeyer, to Dennis for his undying and revitalising enthusiasm, and to my dear KAM for being such an editorial help and encouragement these many years as I developed this storyverse.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Despite the cacophony of a myriad of ticking clocks, Drosselmeier, the much sought-after clock-and-toy-maker, heard the unmistakable tinkling of his front bell telling him that someone had just entered his shop. He quickly flipped his eye patch down; it wouldn't do for anyone to know that a perfectly healthy eye lay beneath it. Wiping his greased fingers on a towel, he left his task on the workbench and stepped into the shop proper.

"Herr Drosselmeier!" came a hearty greeting from the equally hearty man standing just inside his doorway. The newcomer courteously tapped the tips of each if his boots on the welcome mat, knocking off the snow, then stepped up to the counter.

"Herr Stahlbaum," Drosselmeier returned with a smile and a bow of his head.

Stahlbaum's smile faded, his eyes haunted. "I haven't heard from your nephew Christoph in nearly a month. You're still visiting him every week, yes?" he asked tentatively, and Drosselmeier nodded. "How is his boy Erich doing? Any progress in his recovery? I'd go see him myself, but this is our most hectic time of year...."

And Stahlbaum was busier than ever, what with taking over much of Christoph's work so that the man could focus on Erich. No, Drosselmeier could not begrudge Stahlbaum in the slightest for not taking what amounted to almost a day and a half of travel, round-trip, to see a boy he knew mostly only through Christoph's letters. Indeed, Drosselmeier was quite glad that Christoph had made such a good, life-long friend as Stahlbaum in their boarding school days, and himself was very fond of the man.

"Unchanged, I'm afraid," the toymaker answered. "His eyes are open, he eats, they can even get him to walk about when he's led by the hand, but...otherwise, he's still catatonic. It's as if his body is a house where the lights are on, but no one is actually home.... Ah, but he's been like this so long now, I don't think his parents hold much hope that he will ever recover," he sighed.

"To think such a thing could happen," Stahlbaum remarked sadly. "One minute, you're playing in a tree, like any boy, and the next... Well, I always thought strokes only afflicted the elderly...."

If you only knew, Drosselmeier thought to himself. Aloud, he asked, "What about you and yours, Stahlbaum? I hope my goddaughter is well?"

Stahlbaum nodded. "She is, she is—although she's a bit distressed. That's why I've come to see you, in fact, though I know how busy you are yourself."

"Oh?"

Stahlbaum removed a wrapped bundle from his cloak and handed it to the elder man. "Fritz was playing with it the other day, when Marie wasn't looking," he explained while the tinker unwrapped the item. "The little fool put a toy cannonball in it. Don't know what he expected to happen, other than for it to get broken," he muttered.

In the bundle was a wooden nutcracker, its "ponytail" handle splintered. Even without that, it would have been in sorry shape, it cloth clothing tattered, its paint faded and chipped, and its head missing some hair. "I'm not sure whether Marie is more upset over the fact that she can't crack walnuts with it anymore—you know how fond she is of them—or the simple fact that it's broken. I offered to just buy her a new nutcracker, but she seems terribly fond of this one. Can you fix it?"
Drosselmeier raised the brow over his patchless eye.

Stahlbaum put his hands up in a surrendering gesture.

"All right, all right! Not 'Can you fix it?' but 'Will you fix it?' As I said, I know this is your busiest time of year, and so I'm sure you have plenty of tasks far more worthy of your skills...."

Drosselmeier gave him a wry smile. "Worry not, my friend; Marie will have her dear nutcracker back soon enough, hale and whole. But she will have to wait till Midwinter's Eve, when I come for that party of yours."

Stahlbaum grinned. "Fair enough, fair enough!" He drew out his purse. "And how much do I owe you?" For if anyone wished to have Drosselmeier's skilled hands put to a task that they desired of him, it was well-known that they had to be prepared to pay a pretty penny up front.

Well, *usually* they did.

Drosselmeier waved a hand at his friend. "Put that away! She's my goddaughter, isn't she? And it will take very little effort on my part to fix this. Consider it part of my present to her."

"Well, then! I reckon I'd better leave you to your work!" Stahlbaum smiled warmly and offered his hand, which the elder gentleman shook firmly. With a wave of farewell, the marginally younger man then stepped back out into winter's harsh embrace.

Drosselmeier went back into his work area, his attention focused on his newest patient.

"Well, my old friend," he asked it, "how are you and Marie getting along?" For while Stahlbaum believed the doll to be just an old family heirloom of his wife's, the toymaker was actually well acquainted with it. "You've no idea how happy I am that Stahlbaum brought you to me today; now I know just what to make for the party this year!" And the old man immediately set all his other work aside, to begin work on a new piece under the nutcracker's watchful eye.
Drosselmeier, after arriving at the Stahlbaum Solstice party bearing gifts, begins telling the story of how the nutcracker came to be.

"Good show, old man, good show! You've outdone yourself this year!"

Marie heard her father congratulate her godfather, but the sixteen-year-old maiden was too busy examining the workings of Drosselmeier's latest clockwork marvel to pay them or the rest of the crowd any attention as they fawned over the man and his creation, much less notice when they eventually abandoned it. So intense was Marie's concentration on the castle, she didn't even realise when the party was mostly over, not until her godfather laid a hand on her shoulder—and nearly startled her out of her skin in the process.

"Sorry, my dear! I was just wondering if you like it?"

Laughing made it difficult to breathe deeply and calm her speeding heart, much less speak, but she could at least nod. "It's truly brilliant, Uncle," she finally told him, earnestly, as she went back to watching a swan circling in the moat. She then peeked into each of the castle windows for the umpteenth time, delighting again in the attention to detail. She could see countless dolls within, scurrying about in their household tasks. Though far smaller than a real one, the castle was massive enough that any of her own dolls could still fit through the castle entry—if the doorway weren't already taken up by the king and queen, who stepped out now and again to gaze upon their kingdom.

"I wish I could go in!" Marie sighed.

"But you can, Marie!" Drosselmeier told her conspiratorially. "I promise you that one night, after you've closed your eyes, you will be able to enter the castle."

She granted her godfather a tolerant smile. "Oh, certainly I shall—and then I'll forget the whole experience once I open my eyes again!" she added ruefully.

"Perhaps—but that will be up to you. For now...."

She saw him look about, his gaze finally resting on Fritz, who had apparently lost interest in a castle he couldn't actually play with. The boy was now occupied with his own toys in a far-off corner; Drosselmeier gave a nod of satisfaction. Marie realised then that the man had wanted to make sure that her little brother was not privy to what he was about to say. A thrill of excitement rippled through her.

"I have another gift for you!" the old man whispered.

"But Uncle!" she protested, the loudness of her own voice startling her. She kept her voice low as she tried again. "This is already so much!" she insisted, waving a hand at the clockwork castle.

"This next present was no extra trouble for the likes of me!" he clucked back at her, leading her by the hand to the ornate tree. Underneath it sat a rather innocuously wrapped box; he gestured to it.
She knelt beside it, Drosselmeier settling himself down on the floor next to her, seeming as eager as if the gift were for him.

Shyly, she undid the wrapping, casting a nervous glance now and again at Fritz, worrying that he might cause a scene if he noticed her opening another present. Her fears were quickly forgotten, though, when she laid her eyes on the box's contents.

"You fixed him!" she gasped, quickly grabbing her mended nutcracker up in her arms and hugging it tight. She then looked it over, noting how, besides its handle having been restored, its clothes and paint looked new. In addition, its head was now well-haired. It looked much younger now. "Thank you, Uncle!"

"And that's not all, my dear. Look in the box again."

Casting her godfather a quick, puzzled glance, Marie obeyed. Resting in the tissues was another doll, one that looked something like Marie: similar features, the same paleness, and the same bright blue eyes. The only noticeable difference was that its hair was gold-coloured, while Marie's was chestnut. Its dress, white silk embroidered with sparkling glass beads and silver thread, was fit for a princess. At first she thought it was made of porcelain, but closer inspection revealed that it was actually wood. Marie also noted that the limbs were jointed with metalworking similar to that of Drosselmeier's usual automatons, which allowed for far more mobility than most toys. Even the dainty fingers were jointed!

"Oh!" Marie breathed. For a long moment, she was as at a loss for words as she had been while regarding the clockwork castle. She might have reached an age where she was, according to her mother and society in general, too old to actually play with toys, but she didn't think she would ever lose her fondness for them, or stop collecting them. "She's the most beautiful doll I've ever seen! But... why, Uncle?"

"They're a pair, your nutcracker and dear Clara here. Would you like to hear their story?"

"Their story?" Marie laughed. "Uncle, fine as he is, my nutcracker is an heirloom, not one of your wondrous toys! He's probably older than you!"

Drosselmeier smiled, and there was a glint in his eye that seemed to emphasise her words, making him seem much younger than he was supposed to be. "Don't be so sure of that, my dear. Now, would you like to hear the story or not?"

She nodded, causing her ringlets to bounce. "Forgive me, Uncle! I pray you, please continue!"

He rolled his eyes, sighing dramatically. "Well, if you insist. Let's see, now.... You remember me telling you of Thot?"

Marie smiled gleefully, and quickly looked about for her mother. Marie had heard many marvelously magical tales from Drosselmeier before, and knew from past experience that her mother would not approve of this one. "He was that shapeshifting elven mage, yes?" she whispered. Ladies did not listen to tales of devil's work, and some would insist that magic fell into that realm of activity. "The one who became a god in Egypt?"

"Yes, though he was hardly the only magic-user elevated to such a status there. Remember that Isis was also considered a goddess, as were her husband and son. All the same, though, it was Thot who taught Isis how to raise the dead."

"And he eventually came to Europe, and became one of Odin's ravens, for a while," Marie remembered. "Wait, wasn't he also the one who made that magic mirror out of a dryad—"
"Yes, yes, that was him," Drosselmeier cut her off.

Marie ignored his interruption. "— for the Queen of the Underworld? And he even bound that poor dryad's soul to the mirror...."

"He'd had his reasons!" Drosselmeier pouted.

"And didn't he end up having to resurrect his own daughter after the queen poisoned the girl with an apple?"

"You say it like it was his fault!" Drosselmeier complained.

Marie smirked. She wondered why Drosselmeier took that story so personally. He'd seemed reluctant to tell her that tale in the first place—but then, why make it up if not to tell it? "Oh no, of course it wasn't his doing!" Marie placated him. "So this is another story about Thot?"

"Yes, but you may remember that Thot was not his only name."

"He was Huginn when he was with Odin, and in that dryad story," Marie offered, hoping that her godfather wouldn't get upset again.

"And he's Huginn in this one," the man revealed with a sigh. "After that...incident with the dryad and his daughter, he spent many endless years travelling the world, using his skills to earn his daily bread by healing the sick and wounded, and restoring the recently dead to life.

"Do you remember, dear Marie, what a scholar he'd been when he'd gone by the name of Thot? How, despite his supposed 'godhood', he yearned to understand the universe? Well, that hunger never left him. He longed to do more with his power, to bring life to that which had had none before, to animate the inanimate. He knew that souls could possess objects, and move them with spirit energy, but that was not the same thing as being alive—those objects did not need to breathe or eat and, though they could be destroyed, did not die. And although they had a soul, they had no lifeforce.

"Huginn studied anatomy and biology, religion and metaphysics, but quickly discovered that even the most esoteric knowledge was not enough to accomplish what he wished. So he studied with the greatest clockmakers and tinkers, toymakers and puppeteers. But of course this was not enough for him, making bits of wood and metal that could move about on their own: he became obsessed with the idea of giving true life to the automatons. Through the centuries, he became a master clock-and-toy-maker himself, but never actually achieved his ultimate goal."

Marie smiled with fond exasperation at the revelation that the elf shared an occupation with her godfather, but retained just enough politeness to refrain from remarking on it.

"One day," the old man continued, "he came upon a barony where he had once lived before—one that was in need of a clockmaker. By then, being able to raise the dead was no longer a skill he cared to advertise: rather than being grateful, men tended to consider him a demon and drive him away. In fact, most everywhere he went those days, mankind seemed to be crusading against magical folk, driving them into hiding. But this barony, which was in a remote area of the Alps, seemed mostly untouched by that war, and still played host to other magical beings; he decided to settle there again for as long as he could. Though none living there those days had ever actually known him, they knew of him, and the baron's family welcomed Huginn with open arms. By the time the war against magic reached the barony in earnest, he had been the trusted advisor to four generations of their rulers.

"The fifth Baron, Machtgier Reichlich, gained his title through marriage, and to be honest, Huginn
did not much like the man. But Huginn adored Greta, the baroness; she had been one of Huginn's
godchildren, after all, and had made him godfather to her own daughter, Clara. Huginn doted on
Clara, as he had all his godchildren, as if she were his own. He called her 'Pirlipat’, which meant
'mouth filled with pearls'. And Clara did indeed seem to have pearls for teeth, gracing her with a
smile that Huginn never tired of. She was also gifted with hair like spun gold, skin as soft and
white as the purest silk, and eyes like azure. Yet for all her beauty, and all the attention that it
brought her, she was neither arrogant nor spoiled.

"She had a heart that more than matched her exterior, always looking to help others and sharing
her family's bounty—kindness and generosity being traits that she'd inherited in abundance from
her mother. She never gave much credence to appearances either, but seemed to have an uncanny
ability to see to the heart of any being she came in contact with. She was a child out of a faerytale;
indeed, she was even fey, on her mother's side.

"So it came as no surprise to Huginn when, one day, in the garden of Baron Reichlich's estate,
Clara befriended a brownie squirrel."

"Brownie squirrel?" Marie asked. "Was he made of chocolate?" she giggled.

Drosselmeier granted her a bemused smile. "You remember me telling you of the Gaiankind?" he
asked.

Marie nodded. "They are beings of magic, made that way by the Elementals of Earth, Fire, Water,
or Air," she recited.

"Or by a Celestial body, like the Sun, or Moon, or the Earth herself," Drosselmeier added. "Well,
like elves and waerwolves and faeries, brownies are Gaiankind. They're a sort of small animal-
people. They have fur and tails and faces that resemble those of their animal kin, but their tiny
bodies are human-like—most of the time. They can make themselves appear to be true animals,
though, if they wish. When they are their brownie selves, they wear clothes woven of faerie silk,
which can change shape as they do."

Marie raised a skeptical brow. "'They can'? 'They are'? Uncle, you sound as if you believe they
are real creatures!"

Drosselmeier smirked at her. "I dare say you will yourself when the tale is done. That is, if you
ever let me finish it."

At once, she made herself the epitome of contriteness, and he resumed his tale.

"Pirlipat wasn't the slightest bit alarmed when the brownie squirrel called hello to her from his
perch in a tree in the baron's garden. She—" Drosselmeier apparently saw Marie start to open her
mouth to say something; he answered her question before she could ask it. "No, she couldn't talk
to animals, nor can brownies speak any human tongue very well—their mouths aren't shaped right
for it—but they can speak mind-to-mind, sharing thoughts.

"So when he said hello, Pirlipat heard him and invited the brownie lad to come share the nuts she
had gathered from around the trees in the garden. She and this Nussknacker, Prince of the
Squirrels, became fast friends.

"Now, Pirlipat knew that her father, having married into the barony and hailing originally from a
distant hamlet, was not overly fond of magical beings; wisely, she kept her friendship a secret over
the years, even as she and the squirrel prince basically grew up together.

"One day, when Pirlipat was barely sixteen, Reichlich invited a large number of prominent guests
to stay at their home for the Harvest Festival, in hopes that he might find a suitable marriage prospect for her. Greta, kind and generous and humble woman that she was, helped in the kitchens with the preparations in the days before it, as had always been her family's custom. She was actually quite good at making sausages—the best in the world, some would have said."

If she didn't know better, Marie would have sworn Drosselmeier looked wistful for a moment....

"While Greta was preparing the sausage," he went on, "another brownie, Mouserinks, Queen of the Mice of the barony, made a grand entrance into the kitchen, and asked for some of the meat. Greta, of course, had to refuse—the sausage was for her husband's coming army of guests, and he would be angry if there wasn't enough for all of them. But Greta was willing to let the mice help themselves to the larder, as again was the custom of her family. After all, it could only bring them good to keep the Queen of Mice happy, so that she in turn might keep her small but numerous people under control.

"But Greta did not know that Reichlich, upon finding a gathering of mice feasting in the kitchen one evening, had recently forbidden the servants to continue leaving offerings to the mice, and had instead demanded that traps be laid in the larder. He certainly didn't want his esteemed guests to find his home overrun by vermin! Greta was also unaware that the people of their barony, who had once been so welcoming of the mice, had, under the Baron's orders, taken similar measures, laying traps not only in their own larders, but also in the fields. Seven of Mouserinks' sons had died in one trap or another.

"*So my people are not worthy to eat as well as your human guests do, Lady Baroness?* the Mouse Queen asked, mind to mind. *Is that why your Lord Baron saw fit to kill my children? Why he now makes it impossible for my subjects to find food in a land that was theirs long before your people came? If you want a war, then so be it. Henceforth, we will take what we want, by whatever means necessary!*"

"And with that, her subjects rushed forward, making short work of the sausages, then raced away as quickly as they'd come. Before leaving, Mouserinks paused and turned back to Greta, who was staring at the empty table in numb disbelief. *Because you had always been so kind to us before, and I am certain your husband is alone in being the source of my woes, I will give you one last warning. Look well to your daughter, Baroness, lest you lose her as I lost seven of my own children!* The Mouse Queen departed then, leaving Greta to face her husband's wrath over the sausages.

"Reichlich was indeed angry. He told his wife that it was her fault for having encouraged the mice to come to them for food in the first place. And demure creature that she was, she bent easily to his whims, accepting his law against feeding the brownies—or any of the other small faer folk—without protest. She was far too worried for Clara's safety to object anyway.

"Greta did, however, hire a trio of waercats to act as 'handmaidens' for Clara. Always present, one keeping a watchful eye as the other two slept in shifts, the guard-cats kept the mice from getting anywhere near Clara, who was now kept confined to her suite and would continue to be until the menace was eliminated. Huginn, in the meantime, was ordered to devise new and better ways to catch the mice.

"Huginn was not happy about his work, but he was too worried for his Pirlipat's well-being not to complete his task. He also feared angering Reichlich and subsequently being cast from the barony, never to see Pirlipat or Greta again. He might have used his magic to control or imprison or even kill Reichlich, but he had seen too much of the battles between men and magic. He was not eager to start an uprising in the barony that could end in the deaths of those he loved as much as if they were his own kin.
"Now Clara, being the clever girl she was, noticed that her feline nursemaids seemed to get
drowsy if she stroked their fine fur while they sat watch in her lap. So one afternoon, when the
heaviest sleeper of the three waercats was on guard-duty, she told the feline that she was quite
cold, and had the she-cat, in human guise, stoke the fire until it was almost unbearably warm in
the room. Clara then called for and offered the waercat a bowl of warm milk, which, after returning
to her four-legged form, the cat happily accepted. Once the waercat was finally resettled in her lap,
Clara stroked her fur and hummed to her until the cat was lulled to sleep. When Clara was quite
satisfied that the cat wasn’t going to reawaken anytime soon, she slipped out from under her,
grabbed a wrap from her wardrobe, and opened the door to suite's balcony.

"Clara called out to her dear friend Nussknacker, not knowing that he was out gathering food
from his stores on the other side of the garden wall and could not hear her. But someone did hear
her: Mouserinks, who had been waiting patiently for days on end for such an opportunity. She’d
left the meat of a cracked walnut on the balcony rail. Clara, thinking that it was a gift from her
brownie friend, happily munched on the treat. At the same moment, the Mouse Queen stole up
alongside the poor girl and bit her on the toe. Clara kicked out in pain, and Mouserinks flew up
over the balcony rail, landing in the garden below.

"Clara had a sinking suspicion that she had made a grave error that day, but, feeling ashamed of
having tricked the very people who had been trying to protect her from the mice, she could not
bring herself to tell her maids about the encounter. After cleaning her foot with water from the
basin on her dressing table and wrapping her toe in a handkerchief, she crawled back into bed,
and, in the heat of the room, soon fell as deeply asleep as her nursemaids.

"She was awakened later that evening by the screams of another of the waercats. Annoyed at
having been disturbed, Clara tried to scold the cat-maiden, but found her tongue thick in her
mouth, and her jaw stiff and sore. She tried to sit up, but every joint in her body seemed arthritic,
and she was too weak to even lift her arm for more than a moment. Still, a moment was all it took
for her to see what had set the other cat-woman to screaming.

"Clara was now hideously deformed. Her arm and fingers were swollen to four times their normal
size. She managed to turn her head and look into her dressing mirror, only to discover things were
far worse than she’d even imagined. Her golden locks were now pale and brittle, her eyes wide as
saucers, and her once cute-as-a-button-nose now better resembled a wedge of cheddar. Her head
was now as wide as her shoulders, and her mouth was set in a wide rictus, which nearly split her
face in two. She shrieked at the sight of herself (as well as her new mouth would allow).

"Drawn by the cries of his goddaughter, Huginn threw open the doors to her suite and raced
through the rooms, hunting for her. He let out a yelp of terror when he found such a frightening
creature in his dear Pirlipat's bed, and came very close to casting a spell at it, when it suddenly
occurred to him that it might actually be Pirlipat resting there. The monster confirmed as much;
using his power, with her permission, he read her mind and saw all she had been through. Huginn
attempted to use his Earth magic to determine what was wrong with Pirlipat and reverse her
condition, but found that the spell on her was too strong.

Reichlich, when he learned what had happened, was understandably furious. Though she was
none too pleased with the waercats herself, Greta convinced her husband to stay their executions,
banishing them instead. Huginn, meanwhile, managed to save his own hide over his failure to
catch the Mouse Queen by reminding the baron that Clara still needed a cure, something the elf
couldn’t provide very easily if he were dead. Reichlich agreed to give Huginn until Midwinter's
Eve, just a week away, to restore Clara to her former health and beauty, saying that if the elfin
mage hadn’t managed it by then, then there was probably no hope anyway.

"Huginn sat for hours by the fountain in the garden, under his beloved Pirlipat's balcony, mentally
studying every scrap of healing and herb lore he could think of, when he caught something
scurrying out of the corner of his eye. He turned to find Mouserinks sitting beside him, just out of
reach. Small creature that she was, the fall from Clara's balcony hadn't harmed her in the slightest.

"I've heard of you, elf—a master of life and death, are you not?" she asked.

"After a fashion, yes,' Huginn replied. 'But I do not seem to be as much of a master as that I can
reverse what ails my young friend. How did you do it, Mouserinks? And if you're such a powerful
mage, how is it that you weren't able to save your own people?"

"Oh, a mage I may be, but I'm not so powerful as that," she replied. "I'm sure you remember the
dryad who lived here once, parent to all the Gaiankind clans of this region, including my own?
After it was lost to us, most of the faer clans in its domain hoarded the walnuts bearing the
remnants of its power, but over so many years, few clans have even one of those left. Using last
walnut left to my own clan, I was able to weave the shape-changing spell that afflicts the girl now.
And since a dryad's magic is far, far stronger than yours, that is why you cannot reverse it with
your own power, great though it is. I wove the spell most carefully, too, with knots that can only
be undone under special circumstances, so even if you could find another dryad, they might not
un-puzzle the charm. But I have thought on it, and decided that I am willing to tell you the way to
reverse the spell after all—if you will first do something for me."

"Name it!' Huginn told her, desperate.

A number of Mouserinks servants scurried up behind her, struggling with a large bundle of cloth.
When they opened the bundle, they revealed six mouse heads and one very-very-large-but-still-
whole mouse body.

"This is all we could recover of my late sons," Mouserinks told Huginn, her eyes glinting with a
mad light. "I have met multi-headed dragons, and see no reason that there can't be multi-headed
mice. If you can join those six heads to the shoulders of my seventh son, and bring the lot back to
life, then I will tell you the secret to saving Clara."

"Why didn't she use the nut to bring her sons back to life?" Marie interrupted, immediately
regretting having done it.

Drosselmeier didn't get angry, though; he just sighed. "The nut needed to be consumed to work,
for one thing, and the dead don't eat. For another, it takes considerable medical knowledge to
merge those parts in such a way as they might function—knowledge which she didn't have. So
instead, she used the nut in a ploy that allowed her both revenge against the Reichlichs and to
coerce Huginn into helping her.

"Huginn eyed the remains, deciding that, while it would be difficult, it was by no means
impossible. He therefore agreed to the bargain, and Mouserinks left him to his work. Before the
sunset of the next day, Mouserinks had her sons returned to her—after a fashion. She was well
pleased.

"Fine work, Master Clockmaker," she said. "And now, I shall tell you what I saw in my dreams
—for while I am no great mage, I am a Seer of considerable talent! That was how I knew what to
do to curse yon Clara and have my sons returned to me." Her voice grew distant as she spoke her
prophecy. "I see a young male, one who has never shaved nor worn boots, cracking open a nut of
a dryad with his own teeth, and feeding it to Clara from his own lips whilst his eyes are closed.
But take care, for the future is never set in stone! If this tale is to end happily, he must first be
promised Clara's hand in marriage for his success! And after he has fed Clara the nut, he must then
take seven steps backwards—with his eyes still closed! If he should stumble before the last step is
taken, he will take Clara's fate for his own—and more." And with her last words, Mouserinks
suddenly bolted away, her monstrous, seven-headed son following just behind her.

"Nussknacker dropped out of a tree to land beside Huginn, having listened to all. *I will appeal to my clan, get them to give Pirlipat our last dryad nut...*"

"I thank you, my friend,' Huginn replied, 'but I fear that may not be enough, if we can't solve the riddle she left us with. The dryad's nut would hold the power to restore her, but only if it is given under the terms of the spell. We need to figure out who the young man she foresaw is.'

"*But if she foresaw it, doesn't that mean the events will come about no matter what?* Nussknacker asked.

"'Perhaps,' Huginn replied, though he wasn't at all sure he trusted the Mouse Queen's wor—"

"Mouse Queen?" Marie's mother, Margaret, interrupted the old man's tale. "Are you telling Marie a bedtime story, Herr Drosselmeier? At her age?"

"Something like that," he replied wryly, "but I suppose the hour is late. Time for us all to retire."

"Oh, no, Uncle!" Marie pleaded, a little surprised to find, as she looked about, that the party had ended. Even Fritz was sound asleep amongst his toys. "You must finish!"

"Heh, listen to this one," Drosselmeier commented to Margaret. "So demanding!"

"Well, she is descended, albeit distantly, from a line of Barons," Margaret replied, patting Marie's hair affectionately. "It's in her blood to be bossy—as it is in mine! And I say it's time for bed!"

"Oh, Mama!" Marie pouted.

Drosselmeier shook his head, smiling. "You can wait till tomorrow evening to hear the rest, I think, Marie."

She perked up at that. "You're going to be here for Midwinter's Day?"

He nodded, and Marie let out a happy little squeal. She gave her uncle, her mother, and her father each a peck on the cheek before running up the stairs, her father following with the sleeping Fritz on his shoulder.
Nussknacker - 3

Chapter Summary

Marie, in visiting the nutcracker in the middle of the night, bears witness to an epic battle.

Try as she might, Marie could not fall asleep. This, of course, was one of the many reasons why her mother was always warning her off of Uncle Drosselmeier's stories: the fanciful thoughts he planted into her mind made her brain "feverish" and kept her from much-needed rest, which in turn made her "hyper and strange" the next day. No, Margaret preferred to see Marie keep her feet firmly planted in the real and practical—basically, anything guaranteed to bore her and put her to sleep.

But her mother's words could not change Marie's nature: she was a dreamer, and the night was her day. Thoughts of the mundane world her mother wished for her, a life of running a household and rearing children, threatened the girl like a storm-cloud waiting to wash all the colour out of her life. If she had not been born a girl, perhaps she would have apprenticed herself to her godfather, and spent the rest of her days bringing a bit of, she felt, much-needed whimsy into others' lives. Or perhaps, even as a woman, she might become a writer, like Ann Radcliffe or Eliza Haywood or Jane Austen! Anything to allow her imagination to thrive! If only she could convince her mother that she knew the difference between fantasy and fiction—unlike dear old Uncle Drosselmeier!

Her father, at least, was too involved in his business workings to chastise Marie much for daydreaming. He also indulged her fondness for dolls, and brought her novelties from France, Italy, even China once, when he returned from business trips. But her father wasn't usually around to act as a buffer between her and her mother. And as she did in fact love her mother, she tried not to upset the woman, which was why playing with her dolls had become a clandestine, nightly activity, when the rest of the house was fast asleep.

Finally, when the grandfather clock in the sitting room struck a quarter to twelve, Marie decided it was safe to indulge in her hobby. She lit a lamp, put on her dressing gown, and padded lightly down the stairs.

The sitting room was home to the china cabinet where her best dolls and Fritz's toy soldiers were on display. She felt a stab of guilt; her mother must have tidied up after Fritz before retiring herself, something Marie normally did. And when Marie was close enough, she could see that her nutcracker, too, was back in his old spot.

The clockwork castle was also in the room, to be displayed there for the rest of the holiday season—perhaps longer. She spent a few more minutes marveling at it. As it was currently inactive, though, she quickly lost interest, returning her attention to the cabinet.

Setting the lamp down next to the castle, she opened the cabinet door, wincing as the hinge squeaked. She paused, holding her breath as she strained to hear if anyone was moving about on the second floor. Satisfied she hadn't disturbed anyone, she lifted the nutcracker off the shelf—and then her new Clara-doll, as an afterthought.

Cold, she set the dolls down on the mantel and started a small fire. Tempted to light some of the candles on the tree, she decided against it. At last, after gathering the nutcracker and her newest
 doll back up in her arms, she settled on the floor to examine Drosselmeier's handwork.

First, she took another long look at the Clara-doll. Had Clara really looked so much like Marie herself? Marie shook her head. Of course she didn't—she didn't exist! Honestly, Marie! She set the doll aside, then surveyed the repairs to her nutcracker.

It was as if he had never been broken. The shade of his new "ponytail" lever was a perfect match for the rest of his brown hair. Her brother had once said that the nutcracker was an ugly, creepy little thing, but she'd always felt there was a certain sweetness to it. It seemed...earnest, somehow. Determined.

Damn, she wanted a walnut.

But nutcrackers were nothing if not noisy, so she abandoned the thought, instead getting up and returning her treasures to the cabinet. She'd just closed the cabinet door, when the clock struck midnight, making her jump. She stifled a giggle, then glanced at the clock, as if to deny that it had startled her.

What she saw when she laid her eyes on the thing only startled her even more.

There was her godfather, reflected in the clock's glass door. She glanced behind herself in confusion, but he wasn't there. She looked back at the glass, and suddenly realised that her own reflection was inexplicably absent—and that what stood behind Drosselmeier wasn't her home, but the mess that comprised his shop, which she was always chiding him over.

"U-Uncle...?" she finally managed in a rasping whisper, after several unsuccessful attempts to speak.

He looked alarmed, his mouth moving as if to tell her something but the sound could not reach her through the glass that separated them. He gestured urgently, pointing. She followed the aim of his finger to the clockwork castle—and very nearly screamed, except that her vocal chords once again didn't seem to want to cooperate.

Balancing atop the highest turret was what looked to be a giant, malformed mouse—the size of a housecat, she reckoned—with glowing red eyes. Well, no matter its size, it was still only a mouse—one that, at more than halfway across the room, was a harmless distance away. After the initial shock faded, it seemed silly to be so frightened. She was no fainting maiden! She also thought that mice were generally cute, had even secretly kept one as a pet for a few months when she was five—surely they weren't so horrible as people said?

She changed her mind when the king-sized mouse opened its other six sets of eyes. It had seven heads, just like in her Uncle's story.

*This is not happening. This is not happening, this is NOT—*

Glass tinkled behind her, and she spun around. There was a hole in the glass of the door of the cabinet.

A hole directly in front of where the nutcracker no longer stood.

She heard the distinct patter of something small running past her, towards the tree, and an answering shiver went down her spine. She feared it was another deformed rodent. And then she saw her nutcracker: he was climbing the Yule tree in an apparent effort to reach the tabletop. The mouse-thing saw him too, and hissed. The nutcracker snagged a small metal sword ornament and waved it in challenge.
Oh. I'm dreaming. Okay, then. And she sat down cross-legged to watch the spectacle, no longer the least bit worried or scared.

As she watched, the mouse leapt into the tree and scurried over to the nutcracker. It grabbed another little sword ornament off a branch and began swinging it at the doll. The nutcracker lost its balance and tumbled to the floor. The mouse leapt at him, but despite his clumsy construction, the nutcracker rolled away and got to his feet in time to parry another strike from the mouse.

I hope we get to the part where I get to go into the castle soon! For she had never been terribly interested in battles, not the way Fritz was. Then she got an idea—if she knew she was dreaming, maybe she could just bypass this part of the dream....

She tiptoed over to the castle, giving the fighting pair a wide berth. Now, how do I do this...? She tried thinking of herself shrinking—nothing happened. She got the idea to climb onto the tabletop, but it started to tilt when she put her weight on it, so she quickly gave that up. She tried opening the door and sticking her face in, thinking that might trigger some shrinkage on her part, but all she did was cut her nose on the sword of the king, who was standing with the queen, just behind the entry. Baffled that she had felt the cut and yet it did not wake her, she turned her attention back to the battle, deciding that there was nothing to do but wait it out.

The mouse had given up on using the sword—the Nutcracker was made of wood, after all—and had instead filched one of the candles from the tree. It magically burst into life, and he chased the nutcracker around the room with it.

Marie willed the mouse to fall over dead—it didn't even stumble. She scowled and tried again—still nothing.

A hundred tiny taps drew her attention back to the cabinet, where she found Fritz's tin toy soldiers beating their tiny fists against its doors. Grinning in almost-devilish delight, she hurried over and opened the cabinet. The tin cavalry rushed forward first, and then the foot-soldiers leapt to the floor. She clapped and cheered them on as they converged on the Mouse King. The first cannon shot hit his tail and pinned it for a moment against a box; when the ball loosened from the dent it had made and fell to the floor, she saw that the mouse's prehensile appendage now had a kink in it.

The mouse let out an angry squeak, and was answered by a thunderous, alarming sound that erupted from the walls. Within seconds, the room was flooded in a black tide of vermin, who swept the soldiers back from their rescue attempt. Holding his candle aloft, the Mouse King converged on his nutcracker quarry, who was now being harried by a number of the king's subjects.

Furious at this turn of events, Marie pulled a slipper off one of her feet and threw it at the monstrous rodent. The soft material couldn't harm it, of course, but it did catch the creature's attention; while it was distracted, the nutcracker broke free of his other assailants and ran the king through the gut with his sword. The seven heads of the mouse let out seven identical shrieks of pain. With his massive, damaged tail, the king knocked the nutcracker aside and ran off into a dark corner. Outraged at the injury to their king, a small host of the mouse subjects abandoned their individual battles to swarm Marie. In trying to back away, her foot slipped on another cannonball, causing her to pitch backwards into the clock; her head cracked the glass soundly before she fell, unconscious, to the floor.
Chapter Summary

Drosselmeier to the rescue!

When Drosselmeier burst in through the front door, he nearly collided with Marie's sleepy parents, who had just reached the bottom of the stairs. Without stopping to greet them or explain his presence, he ran straight into the drawing room, crying Marie's name.

He found her lying on her side, blood pooling under her head. He didn't move her at first, laying a hand against the back of her neck. When Herr and Frau Stahlbaum caught up a moment later, Margaret screamed out in horror. Even so, stout-hearted and practical woman that she was, she did not faint; instead, she rushed out the door to get the doctor. Marie's father rushed to his fallen child's side, obviously intending to lift her and carry her to her bed, but Drosselmeier denied him, explaining that she had a severe head injury, and that he needed to determine the extent of the injury before he would know if it was safe to move her.

What Drosselmeier didn't tell Stahlbaum was that Marie would most certainly die if he didn't use magic to heal her—which was precisely what he was doing. It bothered him that he would have to leave some of the cut—how could he explain it healing in mere moments?—but at least he could heal the injury to her skull and its precious contents, and get her body to replace the lost blood faster.

He allowed himself a small smile: wasn't this what faery-godfathers were for?
Chapter Summary

Drosselmeier finishes the story of the nutcracker.

When Marie opened her eyes again, she wasn't at all disoriented—at first. She had thought she'd been dreaming the battle between the toys and the mice, after all, so it only made sense to wake up in her room. No, the confusion didn't start until she turned her head and noticed her godfather snoring softly in a chair by the head of her bed. It was compounded when, in the act of turning her head, she felt a slash of pain lancing through the back of her skull. Then she realised there was something wrapped around her head. When she sat up, a wave of dizziness pushed her back against the pillow.

"Now, now, none of that," Drosselmeier chided her, opening his eye. "You had a nasty fall, my dear—thank the stars I got here quick enough to save you. Those wretched rodents…," he added, apparently to himself.

"Rodents…? You mean...are you telling me that wasn't a dream?!"

"Shhhhh! You're going to get us into trouble with your mother! But to answer your question, yes, that's precisely what I'm telling you. Why else do you think I'd have come here in the middle of the night? Granted, I told your parents that I had just been out for a walk when I heard screams coming from your house, but really, what are the odds? No, I saw you through the clock, and I rushed over right away when I saw the Mouse King. Believe you me, I had an entirely different night in mind for you and Erich than battling vermin bent on revenge!"

But Marie's mind hadn't quite caught up with all of her godfather's words. "Saw me in the clock...I saw you, too! So...it must be real. All of it." She felt she should be having a harder time believing it, but it seemed far more difficult to explain how else Drosselmeier knew what she'd seen. And he was right: the idea that he just happened to come along outside at the right moment seemed, oddly enough, too far-fetched.

Far-fetched? When did a midnight stroll in his own neighborhood and lucky timing become more unbelievable than a midnight battle between toy soldiers and mice?

Marie's mother suddenly swept into the room, her skirts swirling. "Ah, so you're up! You gave us a nasty scare, Marie! What's gotten into you, playing with dolls in the middle of the night?" Marie realised then that her parents had only seen the soldiers strewn about the floor, not the mice; the rodents must have retreated before the humans' arrival, taking their dead with them. If the elder Stahlbaums had seen the tiny specs of mouse-blood on the floor, they must not have recognised them for what they were. "I hope this finally puts you off such childish nonsense!" her mother added.

Marie understood that her mother's harsh words came from the fear she must have felt earlier—now that Margaret knew her daughter would be all right, the worry had morphed to anger. Marie didn't bother trying to explain the mouse battle—when all was said and done, she had gone down there to play with the dolls, after. Besides, her mother would never, ever believe her, and would likely think her daughter's fanciful excuse good reason to limit—or even cease—her contact with Uncle Drosselmeier! No, Marie was wise enough to know to keep her mouth shut even without
"You're to spend the day in bed," Margaret told her sternly. "If I see you stick so much as a toe out, I'll bite it off myself!" Marie stifled a giggle, remembering how Mouserinks had bitten Clara's toe. Margaret didn't catch her, though, turning her own attention to the clockmaker. "And you! Don't go getting her all worked up, all right?" Despite her words and the worry-lines on her brow, there was half a smile on Margaret's lips. "I do thank you for agreeing to keep watch over her today, though—and for the help you gave us last night! I couldn't ask for a better godfather for her!" This was doubtless why Margaret hadn't insisted that the old man leave Marie be. Besides, having Marie listening to faerytales had to be better than having her sneaking out of bed—for the moment, at least.

As soon as her mother was gone, whispered questions poured from Marie's mouth. "Uncle!" she hissed. "How is it that I saw your shop in the glass of the clock last night? And did that mouse really have seven heads, like the one in your story? And how come Fritz's soldiers never came to life like that before? And what do you mean when you say that last night wasn't what you had 'planned' for me and Erich?"

For she had met Erich a few times, and they had been pen-pals for years before his fall. In fact, she believed her parents had originally planned to marry her off to the boy, a situation that, despite the fact that she wasn't to be given a say in the matter, she had to admit didn't strike her as such a bad fate—quite the opposite! She had a notion that he would be far more tolerant of her eccentricities than her mother. But his accident and subsequent catatonia had put such a scenario almost entirely out of the realm of possibility—leaving her both sad for him and more at odds with her mother than ever. After all, what was the likelihood of her mother's next choice for a suitor being...well, as suited to her?

A thought occurred to her before her godfather could answer. "Wait...did Erich wake up??" she asked excitedly, no longer caring about any other questions she had.

Drosselmeier swept a long, white lock of hair from his brow, with a look on his face that silently asked if she was quite done speaking already. She had the sense to look chastened, and he finally replied. "I think, Marie, that in order to answer your questions, I need to first finish my story from yesterday. Are you up to it?"

She nodded fervently, and immediately regretted it. Wincing, she said, "Yes! I don't think I'll be able to rest at all until you do finish!"

"So where was I?"

"Um...Huginn had confided to Nussknacker what Mouserinks had told him about the spell, and he was worried that they might not be able to find the young man who was to break the spell in time."

"Ah, yes! Thank you, my dear. Nussknacker got the nut, as he'd promised. Meanwhile, Huginn explained the situation to Greta, who in turn helped him convince Reichlich to meet the demands of the spell—that is to say, the Baron agreed to allow whoever saved Clara to then marry her. Huginn sent word out far and wide of how the beautiful young heiress of a barony had been bewitched, and that her hand would go to whoever could save her. Reichlich did insist on one stipulation, inspired in part by one of the demands in Mouserink's spell and also his own pride: other than the guards and Huginn, everyone in Clara's presence was to cover their eyes, so as not to see her ugliness. Huginn started to protest that nothing in the spell said that her savior must close his eyes before feeding her the nut, but then thought better of it and acquiesced. After all, what man might save her if they all went running in terror at the sight of her? Huginn might have felt that Clara was better off without such a man, but what mattered most at that moment was
reversing the spell, not the valor of the man who saved her.

"In the days before Midwinter, hundreds of men, young and old, rich and poor, were blindfolded, then allowed to take a stab at cracking the nut. None could; a few even broke their teeth. But then, few of them really met the requirements: Huginn admitted to Nussknacker that he doubted there was a male over ten who had not ever worn boots, or a man over sixteen who had never shaved.

"Huginn was beginning to suspect that the rest of the Mouse Queen's demands might just be codswallop. Granted, she had sworn a magical oath to tell him how to cure Clara if he completed the task she'd set him to, but there was nothing in the oath saying she couldn’t throw a few extra lies into the mix. While it made sense that something from a dryad might transform Clara, the rest of the requirements just seemed too ridiculous. As the Midwinter feast approached, Huginn become more and more convinced that Mouserinks had indeed thrown in false requirements, either to make the situation that much more humiliating, or as an effort to prevent them from succeeding altogether. Perhaps she didn’t believe that Reichlich would have allowed Clara to marry anyone who wasn’t of the same station or higher. Perhaps she thought that no man would be willing to touch his lips to the cursed young lady. Huginn couldn't figure out what her angle might be with the whole walking-backwards-blindfolded bit, though....

"Midwinter's Day arrived, and by that evening, it seemed that they had gone through every last candidate. With the last failed attempt to crack the nut, Reichlich declared angrily that Huginn was to be burned at the stake at midnight if no one else came forward.

"Desperate to save his friends, an idea formed in Nussknacker's mind. The dryad's nut was supposed to contain vestiges of the dryad's transformational powers—it seemed reasonable to think it might transform Nussknacker himself into a human, allowing him a chance to save Clara. He had never worn boots or shaved, after all! And if it didn’t work, well, at least with hands he could better help Huginn fight his way to freedom. Granted, if the nut worked, Nussknacker would be trapped in the body of a human forever—but life as a man was nothing compared to a life without Clara, he'd decided.

"Nussknacker found a blindfold that one of the aristos had cast aside in anger after having failed to crack the nut. There was a bit of hair caught in the knot of the blindfold; Nussknacker pulled it free, then stood before Clara's throne. Taking the nut, he cracked it easily with his squirrel teeth. He ate half the kernel, then the hair; just as he expected, the magic within the nut granted his wish, making him into a human. His faerie-clothing changed shape to match the style of the nobles present, sans the boots. He closed his eyes upon reaching full height.

"Nussknacker took the other half of the nut's kernel and held it with his lips. He reached out with his hands, found the armrests of Clara's throne, and leaned forward, feeding the deformed girl the nut by kissing her, just as Mouserinks had demanded. Pirlipat immediately began to revert to her true form, eating the nut as she changed. In less than a minute, she was back to normal. Her eyes had been open the whole time; she knew who had saved her. She let out a delighted cry and threw her arms around Nussknacker, kissing him in thanks."

Marie wrinkled her nose. "Oh, surely you can give it more spice than that!" she protested. "How about something like...Clara pressed her now-soft lips to his, in more than gratitude: she had never realised how much she had cared for Nussknacker until that moment. And it was the same for him, for why would a brownie think to love a human so? But in that moment of joy, she shed a tear of grief as well, for she knew he had given up his old life with his people for her. For his part, though, he wouldn't have had the heart to leave her even if he could change back."

Drosselmeier coughed, looking embarrassed. "Wellll...eh, it was something like that, yes. But while I've no doubt that Clara and Nussknacker were indeed soulmates, and realised it with that kiss...that wasn't how the story ended."
Marie waited with baited breath for him to continue; he didn’t. "Well?" she asked finally.

"Well' what?"

"Aren't you going to tell me how it did end??"

"I thought I wasn't telling the story well enough for you," he teased. "I was waiting for you to finish it."

Marie grabbed one of her pillows and threw it at him.

"Careful now," he laughed. "You don’t want to draw your mother up here! But all right, I'll finish it, I'll finish!" he insisted, holding his hands up in surrender when she held up another pillow.

He quickly sobered, his eyes filled with an old sadness. "Clara and Nussknacker's union might have meant new life for the magical beings of the barony, but, alas, it was not meant to be. Remembering the Mouse Queen's words about the spell, and fearing that Clara might revert back to that painful state if he did not complete the counter-spell, Nussknacker took six steps backwards, while still blindfolded. But before he could take the seventh step, Mouserinks, enraged that her attempt to punish the Baron's heir had been thwarted, ran out and bit Nussknacker in the heel. He transformed almost at once, afflicted with the same vile spell that Clara had been felled with—but with far worse effect than my Pirlipat had suffered. He shrank as well, until he was squirrel-sized (though he still looked human), and his flesh became wood. My only consolation was that Nussknacker's heel came down on Mouserinks as she bit him, breaking her neck before his transformation began."

Marie raised a brow. "Your Pirlipat? Your consolation?"

Drosselmeier looked at her sadly, but did not explain, instead continuing the tale as if she hadn't interrupted. "Hearing his daughter's sobs, the Baron removed his blindfold. 'Clara, you're back to norm—what is that...thing?' he asked when he saw Nussknacker's new form. 'He's not a thing; he's my betrothed!' Clara snapped back through her tears. The Baron's friends began to remove their blindfolds. 'Clara, my dear child, your illness has addled your wits! Put that hideous thing down, at once!' her father demanded. Pirlipat—Clara could not stay in her home one more minute, knowing that her father's cruel and bigoted attitude towards the brownie folk had ultimately led Nussknacker to this end. She ran out of the hall, Nussknacker held tightly in her arms. Her father assumed she was only having a tantrum, but neither he nor Greta ever saw her again."

"Reichlich wanted to blame me for her disappearance as well—"

"You?"

"—but Greta pointed out, in front of his friends, that Clara had certainly been cured of her curse, and whatever she'd done after was of her own free will. I later learned that Clara had first gone seeking the squirrels, who, with great sadness, informed her that they had no more nuts."

At that point, Marie was starting to think her godfather was nuts himself, but as she had no explanation for the happenings of the previous night, she let him continue uninterrupted.

"Greta begged me to find Clara—not that she needed to beg—but I didn’t find my sweet Pirlipat until years later. By then, Clara was married—not out of deep love, but friendship at least. I respected her wishes to stay hidden and be left alone, only telling Greta that she was alive and well. I kept an eye on them both for the rest of their days, and on Clara's children, and her children's children, and so on."
"A decade ago, I met the real Drosselmeier, and, sensing some faer blood in him, decided to get to know him better; we became fast friends, although I never revealed his magical heritage to him, much less my own. I came to know all about his life: how he had taken in his younger brother's son, Christoph, when the boy's parents had died in a carriage accident; how Christoph had met your father in boarding school, and had eventually become an apprentice to your grandfather, then became your father's business partner. Getting to know the lads, and finding Stahlbaum to be a fine fellow, I even arranged the circumstances under which your and Erich's fathers met your respective mothers, who were, in turn best friends. Then one night, when the elder Drosselmeier and I were sightseeing in a nearby city, he decided to head back early to the inn where we were staying, while I remained a while longer at a tavern we'd dined at. When I finally returned to the inn, I discovered that it had been destroyed in an accidental fire. Drosselmeier had been trapped inside—there was little left of his remains for me to restore to life. I did, however, find one of his silver-white hairs on my coat, which was enough to claim his shape with. I decided then and there to assume his identity, which made it easier to watch over his family—and yours. No longer would I have to watch from a distance—I could be involved again!"

The clockmaker stared at her then, with a grave intensity.

After a long moment, she smiled broadly at him. "You almost had me there!" she said, wagging a finger. "Honestly, Uncle, trying to fool an injured girl!"

Her finger stopped moving as she saw her godfather's features melt before her eyes. He seemed to grow younger, though his hair remained long and white. His wrinkles faded, his skin getting paler than ever, to the point of seeming grey-tinged, all pinkness gone, and somewhat luminescent. He flipped up his eye-patch, revealing a perfectly hale orb beneath; it, along with its twin, grew somewhat larger, narrower, and slightly slanted. The colour changed as well, from sky blue to silver. His features became sharper—especially his ears, which had gown long and pointed. He had a thin beard now, despite having been clean-shaven just a moment ago. She would have called him beautiful instead of handsome, although he still had a definite sense of maleness to him.

She bolted upright, then grasped her head in pain, doubling over. She opened her eyes, but didn't let go of or raise her head, only glared at him from the corners of her eyes. She stayed stark-still for a long moment; when the pain finally eased, she dropped her arms, then slowly raised her head level. "You're an elf!" she finally informed him. It sounded like an accusation, even to her.

"Yes, I am," he whispered, glancing nervously at the door. His features quickly melted again, back into the ones she knew.

_I hit my head. I'm hallucinating. I was sleepwalking, I fell, I hit my head, and now I'm having delusions._

Except...that didn't explain how he knew what she'd seen in her "dream." Unless...she'd been hallucinating parts of their conversation since waking? Maybe even all of their conversation? Maybe she hadn't crept out of bed, hadn't fallen, and consequently hadn't woken up to have the most bizarre experience of her life: watching a man's face transform itself into another visage. Maybe she was still asleep.

That made her feel a little better. If it was all just a dream, she should just sit back and enjoy it, right? Well, except that idea hadn't worked out so well during the mouse-battle part of the dream....

"So you're really Huginn?" she asked, still skeptical.

He sighed, looking frustrated. "Yes, I am."
"So I'm...what? A descendent of Clara, through my mother's side? That's what you meant by being able to be involved *again*?"

He nodded.

"And my nutcracker, the one that's been in the family for generations—that's Nussknacker? *The* Nussknacker?"

Another nod, and a smile this time. "You're doing an excellent job of putting all the puzzle pieces together for someone who doesn't seem to believe any of it," he remarked.

She ignored the taunt—deciding whether or not she believed could come after she figured out just what it was she was supposed to be believing in the *first* place. "And that's what you meant about him being an 'old friend of yours.'" It wasn't a question. She paused, scowling. "So that seven-headed mouse...that was the son—er, sons of Mouserinks, right? Has he—have *they* come back for revenge for their mother?"

Huginn-Drosselmeier nodded again. "He went after Erich first."

She forgot for a moment that she believed this all a dream. "*What*?! *Why*? Does the Mouse King know who you really are?"

Drosselmeier shook his head. "He's not looking for *me*; I had nothing to do with his mother's death, and even saved his own life! In fact, it's my magic, regretfully, that's kept him alive all this time. No, he's much more likely to be looking for *you*, as keeper of the nutcracker and Clara's descendent, than me."

"What's that got to do with Erich? I mean, I like Erich, I do, and I guess I would have been betrothed to him if he hadn't gotten hurt, but...well, we grew up in different towns! I only know him through our letters, really! So why wouldn't the Mouse king go after someone closer to me—like my mother—since Nussknacker killed Mouserinks?" Marie grew ill at the thought, grateful that the Mouse King hadn't done so, whatever his reason.

"I didn't say that he went after Erich because of *you*," Drosselmeier remarked. He regarded her silently for a moment long enough to tempt her into pillow-tossing again, then asked, "Do you know how Erich was hurt?"

She nodded. "He was climbing a tree, and fell."

"That's not the whole of it," he told her. "Erich was the best tree-climber I'd ever seen. Enough to make menickname him 'My Little Squirrel', in honour of my old friend," he added pointedly.

Marie made a sound of disbelief. "You're saying that Erich is the reincarnation of *Nussknacker*?"

Drosselmeier arched a brow at her. "In a world of seven-headed mice and shapeshifters, I wouldn't think it was all that implausible. It turns out that Erich is a descendent of the noble whose hair Nussknacker ate, creating a bond which I believe Nussknacker's soul could have used to escape the nutcracker when his mother visited here whilst pregnant. Plus, well, it would explain why the Mouse King went after him, wouldn't it?"

"But are you really sure that the Mouse King is to blame for Erich's fall?"

Drosselmeier nodded. "Christoph said Erich mumbled something about a mouse and seven heads before he lost consciousness."

Well, unless Drosselmeier had told Erich the story too, that seemed pretty positive proof. "All
right, let's say for one minute that Erich is Nussknacker: how did the Mouse King know?"

Drosselmeier shrugged. "A vision? His mother was a Seer, after all."

"Was she, though? Her death sounded an awful lot like a self-fulfilled prophecy, to me!"

He seemed taken aback a little by that remark. "And just how do you know about self-fulfilled prophecies?"

She rolled her eyes. "Who gave me the book on legends and mythology for my twelfth birthday...? Wait, you're not going to tell me those weren't myths now, are you?" A few scary thoughts filled her head before he could answer, like how Huginn was Odin's raven, and how Drosselmeier had claimed that Huginn was once the Egyptian god Thot....

Drosselmeier barked a laugh, then quickly stifled the sound. He waved a hand dismissively. "Let's not worry about that now. My point is: however he did it, it seems that the Mouse King knows who Erich is—or rather, who he was."

Her eyes bugged. "Are you saying that Erich's dead?"

"No, no—well, okay, yes, sort of. I guess it depends on how you look at it." Drosselmeier took a deep breath. "When he fell, his soul went back into the nutcracker, Pirlipat."

Her eyes widened. She thought of the doll he'd given her, the one that looked a lot like her and was named Clara... "You just called me Pirlipat," she said in an accusatory tone. "You think I'm her—don't you?"

"I...at first, I thought you reminded me of her just because you were her descendant. But you're like her in so many ways, Marie—just like Erich reminded me of Nussknacker. And now the Mouse King has come here. I don't think it's all just a coincidence."

Marie was about to scoff again; then she remembered she was dreaming, so arguing was rather pointless. Besides, she was curious now as to where her imagination was going to take this.

"So...you said that last night wasn't what you'd had planned for Erich and me. What did you have planned?"

He let out a slow sigh. "I should never have contemplated it anyway. It's too risky."

"The castle is not just a castle," he elaborated. "It's a portal to the realm some call Faerie. The dryads have all...retired there, so to speak. I'd hoped you both might find a cure for Nussknacker's condition there."

She smiled ruefully. "Well, if that's what you made the castle for, you could have made the entrance a little bigger," she suggested, gesturing to her body.

"I don't think the castle would have fit in this house, then," Drosselmeier remarked dryly. "That's why I made the Clara doll."

"I don't follow," Marie admitted.

"How familiar are you with astral projection...?"

"I've heard of it," Marie said warily. "In one of the books you gave me, if memory serves. It's
when a person's soul leaves the body without the person actually dying...." And suddenly, she understood. "You want me to astral-project my soul into the doll of Clara! But how do I do that? I mean, assuming I wanted to?"

He shrugged. "Erich's done it without conscious effort, even; it's why he's in a coma now. And you've faer folk blood in you; I suspect all you need do is think about it, like when you control a dream."

She almost laughed at that—she wasn't having a whole lot of luck controlling this one!

"As a doll, you could fit into the castle," he went on. "As for the real reason why I made the portal so small in the first place...portals into the other realm are hard to come by, and it takes a lot of magic to make one—a sort of magic that's frowned upon. This was about the best I could do without attracting unwanted notice. And I figure it's safer this way—it would be awfully difficult for any humans to accidentally stumble into it," he added with a smile.

"So...why didn't you do this yourself, all those years ago, to find Nussknacker's cure?"

She thought he couldn't look more pained if she'd stabbed him. "I'm not...welcome where you're going."

Marie would have asked him more about his past, but the haunted look in his eyes convinced her to skirt around the subject. "So why send me?" she asked instead. "I saw the nutcracker fight—surely he could handle the journey himself?"

If anything, Drosselmeier looked even more miserable. "When the Elementals, the dryads and such, went into the Otherworld, they made veil between worlds impassible save for through seven Gates—four in Faerie and three in this world, all connected to each other. Unfortunately, in the years since, the Gates in this realm have either been lost or rendered unusable, so you can't just go through one here to get to there."

Marie was a bit confused. "What about your portal, then?"

"The portals must be attuned to the Gates—they can't go just anywhere in the Otherworld. You can go through a Gate by way of a portal—"

"But since the Gates are only attuned to each other, and the gates to here are missing, the portals are now one-way. So basically I would be trapped there," she said flatly.

He nodded, contrite. "That was partly why I never took the time and effort to make a portal large enough for the original Clara to go through with Nussknacker: I couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again. I wouldn't even be asking this of you, but...I never should have denied Clara her chance in the first place. I thought you deserved that same chance with Erich, now, if you choose. And I owe Nussknacker's soul that much."

Marie shook her head, not in negation so much as more confusion. "But the doll you made was never really Clara, right? Not changed from a girl to a doll the way Nussknacker was, anyway. Nussknacker might be restored to his real self over there, but what would happen to me? I'd be a doll—forever!"

"And I admit, the journey is not without risks; that's another reason I didn't want to send Clara herself. There are elves living with the dryad near the Gate that the portal leads to. They might not welcome you or believe your story—and as they have a permanent guard around the Gate, there's no avoiding them. Even if they allowed you passage to the dryad, there's a chance it won't reverse the spell on either of you. But an Elemental's powers are stronger than mine, Marie; I do believe a
dryad could make your doll body into that of a real girl. I'm just not certain."

"But why go through this trouble at all?" she asked. "Couldn't we just find a way to put Nussknacker's soul back into Erich?"

"Directing a soul somewhere is harder than you think," he told her wearily. "You either have to set a deliberate trap—which I would never do to Nussknacker—or it has to want to go there. And I believe what Nussknacker wants is his old body back, so that he can return to his people—otherwise, I think he would have just woken up as Erich by now.

"As for you...I thought you might wish to join the faer folk there as well. I mean, you don't seem happy here, Marie. If you can't marry Erich, what would you do? Do you believe there are many men out there who would tolerate such whimsy in a wife, or would allow you to pursue a career? I assure you that a woman of your means is destined to a life comprised of running a household, raising children, and arranging grand parties! Your husband certainly wouldn't approve of you playing with dolls, even at midnight."

"And if I should...'retreat' into this realm of Faerie? What about my parents?"

He was silent for a long moment. "I would end the life of your body here. They would think your injury killed you. And then I would end Erich's, so that his parents wouldn't suffer anymore."

He made a certain amount of sense, but it still turned her stomach to hear him say such things. But it's just a dream, Marie! Don't confuse this Drosselmeier with the real one; don't blame the poor old man for what his figment twin says in your sleep!

"Well, you don't have to decide right now," he told her. "Get some rest." He gave her a grandfatherly kiss on the brow.

Suddenly, she felt very sleepy. How can I be tired when I'm already asleep? she wondered, before she wasn't wondering anything anymore.
Chapter Summary

Marie and Erich meet.

When Marie awoke, she was seated in what at first amounted to entirely unfamiliar surroundings. Still groggy, she eventually realised she was in her own sitting room—she was just looking at it from an angle she didn’t remember ever seeing it from before. She looked down and, though there was little light in the room, managed to make out the details of her clothes: silk with huge glass beads and thick silver thread. When had she gotten that? When had she put it on, for that matter? She raised her head, and noted that it seemed oddly stiff. She looked to her left, and found a strange girl sitting beside her.

"Hello?" she asked tentatively.

No answer.

Irritated at being ignored, she shook the other girl's shoulder gently. When she let go, the girl fell over.

"Ahh! Are you all right?!" she struggled to her feet, finding her legs a bit numb. "I'm so sorry!" she told the girl as she tumbled to her knees beside her.

And then she recognised the girl.

"Brigitte?" she whispered. It wasn’t a real girl at all: it was her first doll. Life-sized.

Marie looked about, and found that she also recognised the other figures that were lined up along the wall. All of them were toys, faces she had known for years. And they were all huge.

She looked at her own hand, flexing the fingers: she couldn't really feel them. They didn’t tingle, though, like they would if she had slept on them. She tapped them gently against the wall. They made a clunking sound, but she couldn't really feel the wall. She wasn't truly surprised; she'd guessed the truth of her condition the moment she'd realised that the "girl" was really Brigitte.

Marie's consciousness was inside the Clara-doll, in the cabinet.

So much for the dream being over.

She faced the glass doors and tentatively pushed, almost falling when the door swung open. Whoever had cleared up the floor apparently hadn’t closed the cabinet door completely after putting the toy soldiers away—lucky for her, or she wouldn't have been able to get out. It was also lucky that she had put the Clara-doll on the bottom shelf; she was easily able to let herself down to the floor, despite the stiffness of her limbs.

**Clara??**

She jumped, startled, and almost fell, but was caught from behind. Her rescuer made sure she was
steady on her feet, then came around to stand before her. She took an involuntary step backwards.

She loved her nutcracker, had never thought him ugly, but seeing his bizarre features in such large proportions was more than a little unsettling!

**Are you all right?** the nutcracker asked her.

She tried to speak, but her mouth was immobile—carved and painted, not hinged. Then it occurred to her that the nutcracker’s mouth hadn’t moved either, despite the fact that his was hinged. She remembered what her Uncle Drosselmeier—or whoever he was—had said about how brownies communicated mind-to-mind. Perhaps dolls did as well?

**Can you hear me?** she asked tentatively.

He nodded, which made his whole upper torso bob.

**I'm Marie,** she told him, **Are you Erich?**

He nodded again, and seemed to smile wider than ever, though she knew that was impossible.

**I'm not so sure about me being Clara,** she admitted, **but Uncle seems to think I might be.**

**I think you are, too,** he replied earnestly. **I remember you as Marie, from when I was Erich, and now that I also remember my life as Nussknacker, you do remind me of Clara!**

He looked towards the castle, and she followed his gaze. It suddenly lit up, with pieces moving about just as they had on Midwinter's Eve. She found herself hoping the noisy thing didn't wake up her parents....

**I can't stay like this, Marie,** Nussknacker told her pleadingly. **This isn't life! And yet, neither will the existence I had as Erich be a life before long. My father expects me to take over the family business someday, but I want nothing of sitting in an office, poring over papers. I want to make amazing things, like Huginn does. I want to show people magic—even if they won't really believe in it! And if Erich can't do that, then I'll gladly give up this world for the magic one. I heard you the other night, just before Huginn started telling our story. You said you wanted to see the inside of the castle. Well...now's your chance, right?**

She would have bit her lip if she could. Nussknacker might remember their previous life together, might love her because of that, and she might be fond of Erich, might never find someone else who cared for her just as she was, but how could she break her parents' hearts to be with him?

**Look, even if you don't come with me through the portal,** Nussknacker continued, **you can at least go with me through the castle, can't you?**

Well, certainly there was no harm in that! In fact...as it was all a dream anyway, was there really any harm in going through the portal? But what if it's not a dream? She shook her head at herself. She could just see her mother now, chiding her for letting her imagination run away with her like this.

Nussknacker, apparently thinking she was shaking her head “no” in reply to him, somehow looked crestfallen, despite his rictus.

**Come on, then,** she told him, holding out her hand. He took it, and she wished she could actually feel his hand in hers.
Inside the toy castle ....

It took them a while to climb the tree; Marie had never really been any good at climbing as a human, much less as a doll. Despite having a much stiffer form, Nussknacker had an easier time of it, and did his best to help Marie along. He also stopped to get a new ornament-sword along the way. When they were high enough, they leapt onto the castle roof. Nussknacker lowered Marie to the tabletop, then scampered down as best as his stiff body could. They went around to the front of the castle, crossed the drawbridge, and came to stand before the dolls of the king and queen, who in turn blocked the entrance.

**They look like your—like Clara's parents! Greta and Machtgier,** Nussknacker remarked.  
**But why did Uncle put them in front of the door like this?** Marie wondered. **How are we supposed to—**

The Greta-doll suddenly turned and headed back into the castle.  
**Maybe she's meant to lead us to the portal?** Nussknacker wondered.  
**Could be. Might as well follow anyway. Even if she doesn’t go to it, we might find it on the way.**

So Nussknacker and Marie followed the automaton, walking hand-in-hand. They marveled at all the details; despite the fact that no humans outside the castle could see some of the interior décor, even through the windows, Drosselmeier had still furnished every hall and room.

**It's the Baron's castle!** Nussknacker told her.  
And indeed, even if he hadn’t told her, there was something familiar about it all. But that was silly, of course.

*Dreams are so often like that,* she thought. *When you wake up, you always find yourself scratching your head, wondering why you thought you recognised everything in the dream when it all seems so foreign when you're awake.*

**You think this all a dream?** Nussknacker remarked, his thoughts conveying both amusement and disappointment.

Oops! She should have been more guarded with her thoughts!

**I'm sorry, Nussknacker—Erich? But...yes. I think I'll wake up tomorrow, and have a lovely little story to tell Uncle Drosselmeier.**

**Erich is fine,** he laughed. **And maybe you will—but I think the circumstances will be a bit different that you think.** She had the sense that, if he could move his eyes, he would have winked.
Greta stopped before a room, then moved to the side, opened the door, and gestured for them to enter.

**“This was Clara’s room,” Erich-Nussknacker told her, then stepped inside.**

Marie-Clara hesitated, but not because she didn’t want to enter. She felt like something was watching her, but when she turned, she couldn’t see anything but the Greta-doll. Did the doll have a soul inside it too? Looking at its vacant gaze, she didn’t think so. Erich called her name, and she went in.

The room was exactly as she’d pictured it while Drosselmeier was telling his tale, right down to a looking-glass against one wall. Except the reflection in the mirror was all wrong—rather than showing them and the room they were in, it showed a lovely forest clearing lit by bright sunlight. Unlike the trees and fields outside the Stahlbaum home, these were free of snow.

**“That’s it! That’s the portal!”** He turned to her, and she had the feeling he had an anxious look in his eyes. **“Are you coming?”** he asked, and there was both hopefulness and fear behind his question.

She had planned on going with him, but now a sense of despair washed over her, holding her back. She just couldn’t shake the sense that this was a real choice, with real consequences: if she went with him, she might never see her family again. Her brother Fritz might drive her crazy, and she and her mother might butt heads more often than not, but she still loved them, and couldn’t imagine life without them. And she treasured what little time she was able to spend with her father during his ever-busy days.

But looking at the nutcracker, she knew she would miss Erich terribly if she stayed in her world. She’d never realised until now just how much Erich had come to mean to her. When had he gone from someone she wouldn’t mind marrying to someone she really wanted to marry?

*Stop it! It’s just a dream! Nothing will happen if you go with him. You’ll either wake up or go into another dream!*

But she couldn’t shake the fear, even as she slipped her hand into his and held it tight. Erich had a spring in his step, though, as he stepped through the mirror.
"What do you think they are, Mirabelle?" a figure whispered as he eyed the newcomers from behind some bushes.

"One looks like a tiny little human female, and the other...I wouldn’t even begin to guess. It looks...scary. Those teeth! Why is it smiling like that?"

"Is it smiling? I thought it was in pain..."

"It will be if you shoot it, Yven," Mirabelle pointed out with a smirk, tapping one of the shafts in Yven's quiver with her tiny faerie hand.

"My, aren't we bloodthirsty today?"

The tiny figure shrugged. "They have something to do with humans. We came here to get away from humans, but now these things have come through the Gate. They have to have been sent by the human folk!"

"So what if they have been? Not all humans are bad," he pointed out. "We used to live with them!"

"Used to. Do I have to remind you of why the faer folk left? How the humans turned on us, killed many of us?"

"Even so, we don't know for sure that these newcomers aren't faer folk, or at least sent by our kin."

"The female certainly isn't a brownie, or a faerie, or a dwarf, either! And I dunno what that other thing is!"

Yven rolled his eyes. "So your response is 'Shoot it'? Mirabelle, you sound like a human yourself..." He grinned when he said it, but she still swatted him—for all the good it did her, being a tiny creature hitting one a hundred times her size.

Then Yven noticed something tickling at the back of his mind, something vaguely familiar. As the strange duo from beyond the Gate came unknowingly closer, the sensation grew stronger. He suddenly had a notion what the feeling was, and the nearer the pair got, the surer he became. When he was absolutely certain, he followed through on Mirabelle's suggestion, letting an arrow fly.
An arrow struck Erich squarely in the chest, knocking him backwards. Marie threw herself over him (well, as best she could with the arrow's shaft in her way).

A tall, angry man came out of the woods and stormed towards them, bow in hand. At first, she thought he was one of the "Indians" from America, or maybe a mixed-blood: his skin was a coppery-brown, his hair yellow-gold. His eyes and ears, though, were shaped like Huginn's, save that the colour was a myriad of greens, as changeable as the leaves around them. So here was another elf....

Marie then noted a hand-sized, purple creature flitting around the head of the elf. Its vaguely-humanoid form was encased in a hard, insect-like shell, graced with a pair of butterfly wings and sporting a pair of antennae on its brow. A faerie then, Marie assumed.

**Don’t hurt him anymore!** Marie demanded after her initial shock. **We came here looking for help, not to bring harm!**

**I'm all right, Marie!** Erich assured her. **I'm made of wood—this arrow can't kill me any more than the Mouse King's sword could.**

As if Erich's words had conjured him, the Mouse King came running through the portal, burning candle in paw. Marie scrambled to her feet as best she could, then helped Erich up. Erich regained his own footing just in time to step between Marie and the mouse—and get singed by the rodent's candle. Thankfully, contact was too short for the wooden figure to catch fire. The manoeuvre even worked to the former squirrel prince's advantage: it brought the mouse in close enough for Erich to draw his sword and bury it in his opponent's ribs, this time dealing the monster a killing blow through the heart. The rodent fell on top of him as the king finally died—with the burning candle caught between them.

It was a good thing for Marie that, as a doll, she could not smell the creature's singed fur. Still, she worried that the candle might not have been smothered enough to be extinguished, that it might still be burning Erich's wooden body. She struggled to lift the excessively large mouse-corpse off her friend, when suddenly the corpse seemed to just...fly away! She stumbled forward and fell across the nutcracker, who was, thankfully, only slightly singed himself—the candle had indeed been fully extinguished by the mouse's body. She turned her head and found the elf kneeling over her, holding the mouse by the tail. A drop of its blood hit her, and the elf winced apologetically, tossing the remains aside.

"And here I thought it was that strange thing—" the elf pointed to Erich, who was now sitting upright and eyeing the elf warily, ":—that was the source of the mage's magic that I had sensed. But it was you!" he told Marie. "...And that thing," he added, thumbing towards the mouse. "I sense our dryad's magic in this one," he went on, tapping the nutcracker's chest. "But you aided him, rather than helping that other beast that your master created!" He shook his head, looking baffled. It seemed he wasn't really talking to Marie so much as trying to puzzle it all out, aloud.
The purple faerie landed in the elf's hair. **You could try asking them, Yven,** Marie heard someone say, and reckoned it was coming from the faerie.

Yven rolled his eyes. "This coming from the faerie who demanded I shoot first and ask questions later."

**Well, you *did* shoot first. And now it's later, so *ask* already!** She cuffed his ear for emphasis.

While the two bickered, Erich and Marie got back to their feet. Marie hoped no-one knocked them down again: it was hard to move in this body!

"If I heard you correctly," Yven began finally, "you said you needed our help. Did you mean in killing that thing? Or was its arrival just an unhappy coincidence? Should we be expecting more unexpected guests?"

When the elf finally shut up, Erich began their tale.
Marie and Erich are brought before the dryad, and decisions are made....

Half an hour later found them on their way to meet Yven and Mirabelle's dryad friend, Walnussheim—the very same dryad from whence the nut that had turned Nussknacker human and cured Pirlipat had come from. Yven seemed convinced now that Marie was a victim of circumstance rather than an ally to Huginn, apparently refusing to believe that the mage was a good man. Marie sensed an old enmity there, but as she was more concerned with restoring herself and Erich to human bodies than the elf's opinions about her godfather, she didn't press the issue, nor did the nutcracker.

The beings of Walnussheim's forest—the elves, brownies, faeries, half-breeds, and waerfolk—were celebrating the Winter Solstice when Marie and her companions arrived. The various creatures were dancing, singing, and feasting, but all activity came to a halt when they espied the newcomers. Smiling, they parted the way, allowing the small couple to approach Walnussheim unimpeded.

The walnut tree had a kind and gentle face in its trunk, one that looked to have been formed naturally, rather than carved. Moreover, its face, despite the obvious sturdiness of the tree itself, was malleable. It smiled at them.

"Hold still, my boy, and I'll have you back to your old self faster than you could crack a nut!"

A branch reached down and touched the nutcracker on the head. In seconds, Erich—or rather, Nussknacker—had gone from a toy man made of wood into a squirrel made of flesh and bone.

Marie would have let out a cry of dismay if the surprise of the transformation hadn't left her speechless. She'd expected him to go back to being human! She immediately felt bad for the thought; this was the prince's original form, after all.

"Well, it looks like my old friend knew what he was doing when he crafted that body of yours for the journey over here, child," Walnussheim said to Marie, oblivious to her distress. "That hair of yours is human hair," he said, as is lowered its branch to her head.

Marie realised then whom the hair belonged to—and what the dryad was going to turn her into. **WAIT!!** she begged. **Don't make me into Clara! Turn me into a squirrel, please!!**

Walnussheim blinked in surprise. **But my dear, whyever for??**

**I...** She stopped short. She realised she'd never been so certain in her life that she wasn't dreaming. And that meant....

She couldn't cry, so she just bowed her head in despair.

A thin branch lifted her chin to meet the dryad's strange eyes. **What's the matter, child??**

**If you make me human, I cannot marry Nussknacker! But...if you make me a squirrel, I must...**
give up all hope of ever being with my family again. I know Uncle said there would probably be no way back, but....**

The dryad laughed. **Is that all that troubles you? I'm sorry, I guess some explanations are in order. First of all, the matter of the transformation is not so fixed as you seem to think. Nussknacker, would you mind...?**

Nussknacker shot up like a tree grown from seed to sapling in mere moments, the leaves around him disappearing—or adding mass. His fur and tail sank into his skin, and the bones in his face moved until he was a human. Not quite the same as Erich, but shockingly close.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, Cla—Marie," Not-Quite-Erich told her. "Having spent my life as a brownie surrounded by magic, it didn’t occur to me that you might not know how this sort of transformation works. While the power of something like a dryad’s nut is limited, the power of the dryad itself isn’t a one-time affair—'Once-Blessed, always-Blessed,' as we Gaiankind say. When you're touched directly with its power, you will become what we call a Firstborn. After that, you'll be able to change without the dryad's help, into the form of any species you consume something of—even just a hair. So you can stay a human girl, or—" he blushed "—become a squirrel, if and when it suits you."

**But this gift does not come without a price,** the dryad warned her, and she trembled a little at the fierce look it now gave her. **I don't give this to just anyone—I wouldn't even be doing this for you, if not for your faer blood. But once you become a Firstborn, it will be your duty to serve the forces of Good as best you can, to use your gift to protect and guide those in need. And if I come to find you unworthy of this gift, it will be taken from you—and perhaps your life along with it!** Its face softened. **But I doubt very much that I'll need to worry with you.** It smiled, which only served to make her more nervous. **Are you ready?** it asked.

She nodded, wishing she could close her eyes. She felt its branch on her head again—

—and suddenly her eyes were on level with its own. She thought maybe the spell hadn't fully worked, for it seemed like her stomach was still near the ground. The dress, she was relieved to find, had also been changed, to fit her new, human-sized body.

She felt a breeze brush against her cheek, and gasped. She laughed as the wind tickled her arms and swirled her skirts. It was so good to be able to feel again!

Especially when Erich's hand gently cupped her cheek. She closed her eyes, laying a hand over his and leaning into his touch. She felt his lips brush against hers—and suddenly her stomach had dropped to the forest floor again. She remembered this. She remembered all of it: dancing in the garden with Nussknacker, delighting at Huginn's wonderful creations, visiting with the other brownies out in the village and fields. But most of all, she remembered how their first—and until now, only—kiss had made her realise that there had been something missing from their friendship, something neither of them had ever considered; it had simply never occurred to them, being different species as they'd been.

"I love you," she told him, her eyes were full of wonder; it was as much a realisation as it was a declaration. She really had loved Erich all that time she'd known him, during her lifetime as Marie, because she'd loved him before that time, even if she'd had no memory of it.

His own eyes told her that he didn't question her devotion in the slightest. "And I, you," he replied, with a gentle, amused smile.

Their words held the magic of an eternal vow; everyone in the grove could feel it. They were now wed, marking, as Huginn had predicted, a renewed bond between Gaiankind and humankind.
Their faer audience cheered, throwing petals and seeds at the couple in blessing.

**Dance! DANCE!** the spectators demanded, and with a grin, the newlyweds complied.

When they grew weary, they were given seats of honor, and a myriad of creatures danced and sang for their pleasure; even Mirabelle performed, alongside her handmaidens. Members of the former barony and their descendants presented themselves, including the current squirrel queen and her children. Nussknacker might not be the Crown Prince anymore, but he still would always be a prince amongst his people—which made Marie a squirrel princess, the queen told them.

For a while, Marie was happier than she could ever remember being—and between two lives' worth of memories, that was saying a lot!

But as the celebration wore on, she also remembered that Walnussheim had never addressed her other concern: namely, the possibility of returning to the "real" world.

Yven sat next to Marie, munching on a hot pasty. "Why the long face?" he asked.

Erich turned his eyes to her, concerned.

Self-conscious, Marie fiddled with the beads on her dress. "I was just thinking...I was just wishing that I could share this with my family. But Uncle Dros—Huginn said that the Gates in our world were lost to us, and that the one we came through here, on this side, wouldn't work without them...."

A dark look fell over Yven’s face, and he looked at his boots. "They were," he confirmed curtly. "And for good reason! Think no more of them. They would not return you home, exactly, anyway, but rather somewhere else in your world." He rose to his feet and wandered off into the night.

Erich laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know how you feel," he told her. "I didn’t want to take over the family business, but...well, I might not have had to: our fathers are still fairly young, and Fritz seems eager to follow in his father's footsteps. Perhaps I could have worked with Uncle after all. Or, if father insisted on me becoming a partner, perhaps he would have been content to let me do more of the traveling, since he seems to complain more and more about it every year."

Marie nodded. "And now that I know I would have you at my side, I needn't have feared getting lost in the drudgery of being 'Lady of the House'. You would have let me write, wouldn’t you? And you wouldn't have minded my dolls?" she asked, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Nay," he said softly. "Indeed, many of your dolls are my dear friends now!" he laughed.

She laughed too, but sobered quickly. "You would never have treated me like a trophy, expecting me to be polished and perfect. You would never have treated me like I was less than you...." Not that her father had ever treated her or her mother that way, but she'd met enough of her father's business associates and dealt with enough shopkeepers to know it happened often.

"Never," he assured her. "No man would have been welcome past our stoop who would dare make demands of you. They would see you as my goddess, a woman to be obeyed and adored. We would have shared the work, all of it—the business, the household.... You would have gone with me on business trips, and we would have spent long days at home together. I would never have ignored you in favor of work."

"Responsibility wouldn’t have been such a bad thing then, having someone to share the burden with," she mused. "Especially if I knew the responsibilities were worthwhile, and not just a
collection of silly expectations and rules where no one even remembers why we follow them. I would have been content to grow up if I knew I could still play at least once in a while."

*I'm glad to hear you say that,* came Walnussheim's smiling voice in their minds. *Because I have another gift of sorts for you. Do you remember how your soul came to inhabit the doll, Marie?*

"*Huginn said that I need only think of where I wanted my soul to go, like in a dream,"* Marie replied, curious and suddenly excited.

*And he's right,* the dryad replied. *In sleep, a soul can leave the body, even travel between worlds, going where flesh cannot. If you concentrate, every time you sleep here, you can be back in your body in the mortal realm, and when you sleep there, you can be back here. In a way, you will always be dreaming, yet always be awake! And when you go back now, your souls will take my magic with you, into your other bodies; you will each become a Firstborn there, too, as you are here. The first such in that world in generations....*"

Marie bolted to her feet. "Can we go now?" she asked, an edge of panic to her voice.

The dryad seemed surprised. *I think you're a little too awake right now,* it pointed out.

"Then is there a sleeping draught we can take?"

"Marie...?" Erich asked, starting to worry.

Marie grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. "Uncle said he would put our bodies to rest —permanently—if we went through the portal and took too long coming back!"

"And yet you consider him a friend?" Yven drawled from the shadows.

"He didn’t think we could come back," she snapped, "and he didn’t want our parents to wait around forever for us to wake up!"

*Please, children!* Walnussheim broke in. *This isn’t the time to argue about it. Yven! Get them some sleeping potion.*

Yven did as he was told, though they could hear him muttering as he departed. In a few moments, he returned with two decorative vials made from hollowed-out walnuts. He handed one to each of the newlyweds.

Mirabelle flew in front of them and landed on Marie's hand. *We've a spare room; if you like, you can stay with us,* she offered. *We'll keep an eye on you while you sleep.*

Marie smiled and nodded. Mirabelle led them to a place under the dryad's roots, an earthen room lined with soft blankets and silken pillows. Marie and Erich settled down in each other's arms. Suddenly, Marie was very tired; she wasn't sure she even needed the potion anymore.

"I'll come to you as quick as I can," Erich told her, then kissed her hair.

She nodded, feeling warm and contented. They opened their vials and drank the contents like a shot.

They were out in seconds.
Chapter Summary

Marie wakes up.

When Marie opened her eyes, she found Drosselmeier once again sleeping by her chair. For a moment, she feared she'd dreamt it all. But then she remembered Walnussheim's words about how they would always be dreaming yet always be awake. This time, she was confident that her current body was conscious.

"Good morning, Marie," Margaret said quietly from the other side of the bed. "You've worn out your poor Uncle! After you went to sleep, you didn’t wake up again for the rest of the day. He refused to leave your side!" From the looks of her wrinkled gown, it looked like her mother hadn’t left in a while either.

"Your Papa had to run to the office for a bit," Margaret told her, looking a bit guilty, as if she had made him go. "He didn’t want to—he wanted to sit with you too, and did for a while—but there was a mix-up with work that had to be fixed right away. You know how hectic the holidays can be!"

Marie sat up and smiled. "It's all right, Mama, I understand." Not everyone had the luxury of living two lives, being awake in some way all the time!

Drosselmeier finally heard them and woke with a start.

"Good morning, Uncle!" Marie beamed at him. "I'm sorry to have worried you so!"

He hugged her like she'd been gone a long, long time.

"Easy, Drosselmeier," Margaret laughed. "She's not one of your sturdy clockworks!"

Marie and Drosselmeier shared a secret smile.
Chapter Summary

Erich and Marie meet in the flesh.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Erich woke up, he convinced his parents that it was Marie's love for him that brought him back, and that he had to see her right away. At first they thought him still addled, and insisted he remain abed a few more days, but he got so excitable, they worried that he might collapse again. The doctor agreed that perhaps seeing his lady-love might do Erich some good, adding that the lad, miraculously, even seemed well enough to travel, despite his convalescence. Pondering just when Erich and Marie had gotten so close, his parents finally relented. They reached the Stahlbaum home by late evening.

Marie insisted on being allowed to sit in the window-seat of the family room. Margaret agreed, provided that the girl stay put, well-covered, with a cup of hot tea in her hands at all times. Marie even remained seated when her father came home, rather than running over and greeting with a fierce hug, as she wished to—not long ago, she had feared never seeing him again, after all. But despite her laudable restraint during most of the day, Marie forgot her promise to her mother completely when Erich arrived, racing to the door and throwing her arms around him before he'd even stepped inside.

Both sets of parents were very confused and more than a little flustered at having such a display of affection on the front stoop, but given how happy they were to have their children up and about, and figuring perhaps the pair really had missed each other while Erich was suffering from his condition, they let it slide—for a few moments. The rest of the evening, they were careful to keep the two teens separated by either a table or a parental unit. Of course, that didn’t bother the teens in the slightest; they would have plenty of time to be together in their dreams. Meanwhile, no one could see their feet touching under the table.

Drosselmeier didn’t have to feign joy at seeing his "nephew" alive and well. Still, it drove him mad knowing that they wouldn’t get a chance to tell him anything just yet. Maybe not even for days! He consoled himself with the knowledge that they were together again at last, whatever the circumstances. He did at least, by pretense of simply wishing to marvel at his own handiwork, get to show them a change he'd made to the castle: while the Greta-doll had looked a bit like Margaret, now it resembled her exactly—and Machtgier now looked like Marie's father, smiling kindly. Drosselmeier had initially made the king look like the old Baron in order to jog Clara's memories within Marie's mind; now Machtgier could safely—and happily—be forgotten in favor of a much more worthy man.

Eventually, of course, Marie and Erich were able to tell their elven friend everything that had led to their current joyous circumstance. They didn’t pressure Huginn for answers as to why Yven hated him so, nor did they bother Yven about it when they returned to the Otherworld. If the dryad wouldn't interfere, neither would they.

In the Otherworld, they went by the identities of Nussknacker and Clara. They had many grand adventures, before and after having a son there, whom they named Jack. In the mortal realm, they
eventually married by the laws of that world, and had a daughter, Alice; Marie and Clara had carried at the same time, making their children twins of sorts. Several years later, Alice found a way to travel to the other realm and return, bringing her brother back with her; to the world at large, he was a former street urchin that the Drosselmeiers had adopted.

Marie and Erich helped their fathers and Fritz with their merchant business—which thankfully didn't require their presence terribly often—and spent other days in Drosselmeier's shop. They made toys for poor children. They wrote stories together based on their adventures in the Otherworld and taught children to read. They even found time to volunteer with various charities and crusade against cruelty to animals. Marie had been right: responsibility became easier to handle—even enjoyable—when one performed the tasks with those one loved. Marie and Erich took their promises to teach and protect very seriously, and did their best to instill a sense of whimsy and magic in everyone they met.

Though it saddened them when "Uncle Drosselmeier" finally "died," they saw Huginn just as often after, in other guises. They found faking their own deaths the first time to be a bit tricky, but Huginn was there to help them through it—just as they all helped their children when the time came. And while it broke their hearts to watch their mortal kin die, they consoled themselves with the knowledge that those humans had lived longer and better lives than most—and had, in the meantime, helped others to do the same.

To this day, Erich and Marie—or Nussknacker and Clara, if you prefer—continue to teach and protect others in both realms, just as Walnussheim charged them to.

And they still see Huginn on a regular basis.

~FINIS~

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading so far! This story may be over, but the book isn't! The adventures of Drosselmeier, Marie, and Erich continue in the next chapter, which starts Jacob Marley's story!
Chapter Summary

The ghost of Jacob Marley meets three strange beings whilst watching over Scrooge.

The ghost of Jacob Marley stood, unseen, in the corner of his old workplace, watching a shabby-looking Bob Cratchit sit huddled in two coats under an old, stained duvet. The clerk attempted to write with hands that trembled minutely with cold. It looked as though candle flame was the only warmth to be had in the room, besides the heat within the living man's own blood. But Jacob couldn't tell through his own senses whether or not this was true.

In the ghost's own world, a half-step from reality, there were only three tactile sensations that he experienced: unending, biting cold; a dull, pounding ache in his jaw; and an immense sense of weight. The latter sensation stemmed from the chains that were wrapped around the spectre, and trailed off endlessly into piles around the room. The chains themselves were adorned with countless trappings of the material world: cash boxes, money purses, deeds, keys, locks, and more, all adding to the ponderous nature of his bonds.

If the ghost had been as visible to the mortal eye as Cratchit was, then when gazing upon Jacob's form, the potential viewer would have found, besides the chains, a man grizzled more than his years on earth had warranted, his frayed hair bound in the practical pigtail that had been his fashion in life, loose strands stirred by an unearthly breeze. His skin was the gray of the dreariest winter sky, yet glowed like moonlight. His eyes were the only colourful thing about him, burning with an eerie blue fire, yet they were somehow lifeless-seeming all the same; Jacob knew this because he had seen other ghosts, and found them all similarly afflicted, save for that their fires were sometimes green or amber, and a scattered few had eyes like black pits. A kerchief was tied around Jacob's head, under his jaw; in life, it had offered a small bit of comfort from the infection in a molar, an infection which had ultimately spread and killed him. And all of him, body and clothes and chains alike, was somewhat transparent—like a watercolour, only devoid of pigment.

If any of the clients that had visited throughout the day could have seen the ghost, then besides all those things, they also would have noted him wearing a sad frown of sympathy while he studied Cratchit. This visage would have changed only slightly as he moved his eyes over to his dear old partner, Ebenezer Scrooge, the change being from sympathy to guilt. Scrooge was a man rich in money alone; he was poor in love and kindness, and Jacob was to blame.

With a heart heavier than his chains, the ghost watched Cratchit fail to coax another coal for the fire from his heartless taskmaster. Watched Scrooge's young nephew fail to coax some holiday cheer and an acceptance to a dinner invitation from an emotionally distant uncle. Watched two generous souls fail to coax a penny from Jacob's old partner's wallet. Watched a caroling child fail to coax a treat from Scrooge with a song, getting menaced with a ruler instead. There was nothing else for Jacob to do but watch; as a ghost, he could no more appeal to Scrooge's better nature than he could sneak a lump of coal into the fire. Of course, even if he had flesh, he was convinced that Scrooge had no better nature left to be appealed to.

Not long after, Cratchit was let off for the night, with the hard-won promise of a paid day off on the morrow. Scrooge likely would never have granted that promise if not for being half-afraid that
the clerk's faith and love for his family would then require the man to quit work entirely. Finding another man who would work as well for so little would be an enormous undertaking. If only Jacob could tell Cratchit as much! Then the man might at least strong-arm himself some better work conditions....

Scrooge made his way to a local tavern, the same one that he and Jacob had often supped at years ago, and Jacob followed. The serving wenches, though none of them were familiar to Jacob, were apparently long used to Old Man Scrooge's habits, and therefore required a minimum of contact, bringing the man his food and drink without a word. Doubtless this arrangement was a blessing to both sides of the transaction; why should the girls be pleasant or outgoing to a man who never tipped? Jacob sat unnoticed on the empty chair across from Scrooge. The old banker sat with his back to the room, so this at least afforded Jacob the advantage of watching the crowd. It was a much easier thing to do here, where everyone was relatively happy but not overbearingly so. It was vastly unlike the happy family scenes which had become a torture to him, or the equally-abhorrent despair of street-life; it was a pleasant sort of middle-ground, mediocre and numb.

Jacob wasn't sure why he was here—why now: this was the first day he'd seen Ebenezer since his own burial. Scrooge had made an especially shrewd business deal that day, taking advantage of a poor, desperate man, just before the funeral. Marley had even complimented Scrooge for his craft, but of course the man hadn't been able to hear him. No, Scrooge had just walked away, deaf to Marley. The ghost had, in that moment, suddenly fathomed just how alone he was—and how he had dug his own grave, so to speak.

And now, seven years later, Jacob had found himself walking into his old office that morning, discovering a crusty old man in place of the one he'd loved. It was only then that he'd realised that the chains he'd carried for so long were connected to Ebenezer, as if they had sprung out of the man's own body. He'd watched Scrooge throughout the day, had seen how very unloving, how cruel the man was, and came to understand: Jacob himself was to blame for Ebenezer's fall, having paved the way and guided the somewhat-younger man. As soon as he realised this, it also became clear to Jacob that Ebenezer's soul would suffer the same lonely fate as his own—if not worse, for Scrooge had had years longer to forge his own chains, years more for his own soul to grow further tarnished. And there was nothing Jacob could do to stop it.

Jacob also didn't dare to hope that, when Ebenezer passed on, they might spend eternity together. After all, Jacob had proved to have little control over his own ghostly meanderings, and seldom found himself able to speak to others of his kind—not that he wanted to talk to such miserable spirits anyway. He was most certainly being punished, as Scrooge was to be; there would be no comfort of each other's company when Ebenezer finally crossed into Jacob's current realm.

So Jacob spent his time now torn between gazing at Ebenezer, memorising the much-changed face of the man he loved, and, at moments when he was unable to bear the guilt of Scrooge's deterioration any longer, studying the crowd as a respite. Truthfully, he was surprised that he was able to look away at all, that the forces that, for so long, had kept his sight trained on so many things that had made him heart-sick did not also force him to suffer so now! He looked around, taking advantage of the ability while he could manage it, and it was in doing so that he came to notice a trio of strange newcomers.

He hadn't seen them come in, having been focused on Ebenezer at that time, but there was no missing them, no looking away again, once his eyes had finally come across them. Two men and a woman—at least by gender, although he wasn't so sure of their humanity, as the sight of them flickered like candle-flames before his eyes.

One seemed like a very old man with an eye-patch one moment, then like some fantastical being from a faerytale another! When he was the faer being, his long face was sharper, and inhumanly
beautiful, his skin pale and vaguely translucent, the envy of any porcelain doll. He was missing
the eye-patch then, and both eyes were considerably larger, the colour of the irises changing from
the old man's brilliant blue to silver. The faer version seemed both much younger than his aged
self, though his long hair stayed silvery-white, yet somehow ancient at the same time. From
amongst the pale strands poked the tips of pointed ears, like those found in legends of mischievous
spirits. And while the human was beardless, a thin line of hair traced the faer man's jaw and lip,
and a slightly fuller goatee graced his chin. The faer man seemed luminous, lit from the inside.

The second man, dark-haired, had three forms: one a dark-haired, clean-shaven man in his early
thirties, one a russet-haired, late teen/early-twenty-something version of the elder man, and one,
inexplicably, a squirrel. In comparison, the woman was almost boring, simply vacillating betwixt a
chestnut-maned thirty-something and a young-adult, blonde version of herself. They too seemed to
glow with an inner light in their younger forms, as did the squirrel-self of the young man.

Jacob would have thought them ghosts, but they picked up the glasses a serving-wench placed
before them with no difficulty, and people moved around them in a way that suggested that
everyone could indeed see them. Yet no one seemed the slightest bit disconcerted by their
changeable nature!

The woman was smiling as she talked with her companions, but her smile faltered a little, and her
brow furrowed in puzzlement when she happened to look Jacob and Ebenezer's way. If Jacob had
had a heart, it would have skipped a beat; this strange being could see him! Or was she simply
perplexed by Ebenezer for some reason? Either way, he was nervous about her attention. A
moment later, things grew worse: she'd directed the gazes of her companions his way as well. The
two men drew up in astonishment. They looked towards their female companion, and for a long,
unsettling moment, the three just stared at each other, unspeaking, occasionally throwing looks his
way as well. Finally, the faer one beckoned Jacob with a finger. As if compelled, Jacob found
himself floating, in his ghostly way, towards the strange trio.

**Wh-who are you?** he asked in the faint, hollow voice of spirits, wondering if they would be
able to hear him.

**I am Drosselmeier; this is my great-nephew Erich and his wife Marie,** the eldest one, the
sometimes-faer being, said; his old lips did not move, but his faer ones did, and his voice had a
spectral quality much like Jacob's own ghostly intonations. When he gestured in introduction to
his companions, it was with the more youthful hand.

**What are you? And how is it that you can see me?** Jacob asked.

Drosselmeier cocked his head in curiosity. **What do you see when you look at us?** he asked
in turn.

**Your shape...flickers, like that Horner fellow's Daedalum,** Jacob had seen the amazing device
—in which a sequence of images were spun around in a drum and seemed to come to life—
shortly before he'd died.

**Daedalum—the 'Devil's Wheel'?** Erich remarked with a bemused tilt of one brow. **An apt
description!** Like Drosselmeier, only Erich's more youthful lips moved, his voice equally
ghostly.

**Erich!** the youthful Marie gently chided, in the same otherworldly way. Despite her
admonition, she bore a grin of amusement, though her elder self was serene.

**Are you three all devils, then?** Jacob asked. He thought he should fly, but his chains
weighted him to the spot, as they often did when he was confronted with a scene he didn't wish to
**Some might call us that,** Drosselmeier remarked wryly. **We've never named *ourselves* such, though—and frankly, if half of what I've heard is true, then I dare say that man you're supping with is more deserving of the name.**

**He wasn't always that way!** Jacob protested desperately, suddenly forgetting his fear for his own safety in favour of fear for Ebenezer's. **If there is punishment to be had, let *me* take it in his stead!**

**Oh-ho! I sense a story here!** Drosselmeier said, both the faer set of eyes and the single human one gleaming with interest. **But our work is never done, so let us take this conversation elsewhere, where the telling won't steal any of our time—or keep us overlong from your children,** he added to Erich and Marie, rising to his feet. Or rather, the faer form rose, while the old man remained sitting.

The youthful forms of his companions rose too, then, the girl grabbing hold of Jacob's arm. As she touched him—and for the first time since his death—Jacob felt a sense of warmth.

And suddenly, the world changed.

They were outside now—without even having taken a step! But they weren't out on the cold, white, desolate street, either: they were in a sunny, green meadow.

A *warm* meadow.

Granted, it wasn't as warm as the sun had been in his life, more of a bright memory, but still far better than the cold he'd felt in the years since his death. Moreover, he could feel the ground beneath him, the grass brushing against his slippers, the warm wind on his skin. Not as real as life, but realer than death. Jacob stood in stunned silence, and his companions let him be, let him get over his shock.

Once composed, Jacob looked to Marie and found kindness waiting there, tinged with pity. He quickly looked away, unable to bear what he most certainly didn't deserve. He then found Drosselmeier grinning at him, amused but also benevolent. He noted that neither of them, nor Erich either, had the strange, unearthly glow about them anymore; indeed, saved for Drosselmeier's inhuman features, they seemed like ordinary mortals now, the husband and wife now locked in their younger forms.

"Wha....Where are we?" Jacob asked, and quickly realised that his voice had lost its spectral quality—and his jaw its ache. He looked at his body, and saw that it was a healthy colour, without an unnatural glow.

He knelt and reached out to touch a vibrant orange flower; while there was a certain lack of substance to it, his hand didn't pass through it.

"You're in a realm of our making, my two companions and I," Drosselmeier replied; his voice, too, had far more weight to it. "A dreamland of sorts, an echo of Faerie. Feels pretty real for unreality, doesn't it?" he added proudly.

Jacob nodded, awed. Were these gods, then, that they could make worlds? "Why did you bring me here?" he asked them, though he was more than a little terrified of their answer.

"Well, time flows differently here, slower, and I wager your story isn't a short one."

"Story?" Jacob asked, perplexed.
Drosselmeier sighed dramatically. "You said that Scrooge wasn't always a crusty old goat! So I'm curious: what made him that way? If we knew, maybe we could remedy things. It sure would make our jobs a lot easier," he finished, that last comment aimed at Erich, who nodded.

"Jobs?" Jacob asked. If he'd had a heart still, it would have been pounding; now maybe he would find out just what these beings were!

"Erich and I have been charged, by one who granted us great power, with the task of using that power to make the world a better place," Marie explained offhandedly, as if such were a common, everyday notion. "Our Uncle Drosselmeier here has great powers of his own, and uses them to help us."

"But Scrooge makes the task much more difficult when he puts the poor out on the streets," Erich added gravely.

"So you're angels, then?" Jacob whispered.

"No," Erich told him firmly.

"Eh, close enough," Drosselmeier argued, waving a hand dismissively. "We have magic and we serve others as best we are able. We don't typically have wings, but we could get them if we wanted them. That's the definition of an angel, more or less, is it not?" He crossed his arms and shot Erich a triumphant look.

"Uncle!" Marie said, exasperated, rolling her eyes along with Erich.

"Look, it doesn't really matter much what we're called," Erich insisted. "Just tell us what you meant in the tavern, please. It has something to do with why you're still bound to the Earth, with all those chains, doesn't it?" Erich's voice was gentle as it prodded.

"I-it does," Jacob replied hesitantly, casting his eyes to the ground, unable to bear their scrutiny. "I made Ebenezer what he is today. It's my fault."

"You might bear some culpability in shaping the man—that remains to be seen—but in the end, your Ebenezer is ultimately responsible for his own choices," Drosselmeier pointed out, his tone, while not unkind, brooking no argument.

His Ebenezer. If only that had been true....

"You're not helping, Uncle!" Marie hissed before addressing Jacob again. "How is it that you see yourself as responsible, Mr..."

"Uh...M-Marley, my lady. Jacob Marley."

"Marley!" she remarked, astonished—and, Jacob guessed, repulsed, though she hid it well. "Why, you're his old partner! The one whose name is still on that sign!"

Oh, how he wanted to believe that it was out of some lingering affection that Ebenezer had left the name "Marley" on the sign, and not a simple desire to not spend unnecessary pennies on a new placard.... "I am him. I died seven years ago tonight."

"Seven!" Drosselmeier exclaimed, his eyes bright and his manner delighted. "Seven is a most fortuitous number! I dare say that is why our dear Marie spotted our new friend here in the first place!" he remarked to Erich, then turned to Jacob. "Normally one has to make an effort to focus in a special way to see the disincarnate," he revealed conspiratorially. "Otherwise, we'd go mad,
exposed to streets twice as flooded with desperate souls as usual! But I'm sure you'd know all about that."

Jacob nodded; he might not converse much with his fellow ghosts, but he saw them, all the same.

"So, now. We've established that you feel responsible for Scrooge's current state of being—indeed, the chains we saw leading from your person to his would suggest as much. And now we know that you yourself were not a terribly nice person in life. Did you abuse Scrooge, then? Is that what drove him to become so heartless?"

"Heavens, no! I would never have harmed him! I lo—" As if he still had it, Jacob felt blood rush from his face in horror at his own near confession. But his pause did not save him.

"Love him?" Marie asked quietly, laying a comforting hand on Jacob's arm.

Jacob pulled away, unable to bear her pity; it was somehow worse than if she had shown disgust. He knew he should deny it, but also suspected that it was pointless to try with these three. He had an inkling that some sort of judgement was to be passed on him this night. Well, he was determined to receive any punishment he deserved, so he resigned himself to be entirely truthful. He nodded, tight-lipped.

"Curious that Love should create such greedy and heartless creatures," Drosselmeier remarked, squinting speculatively at Jacob.

"Do not blame Love for it," Jacob said softly, sadly. "Blame my handling of Love, the Jealousy that followed Love and whose whim I too heartily obeyed."

"I think we need to hear more of the background if we are to fully comprehend this narrative," Erich said, settling himself on the ground. "Pray, tell us of your youth, sir, for I believe we are all most malleable and best shaped in our childhood."

"I hope that isn't always true, Shakespeare," Drosselmeier commented with a droll smile as he sat beside the young man. "If it is, then Scrooge is beyond hope already."

"He said 'most malleable', not 'the only time it is malleable'," Marie reminded him, settling her skirts around her. "We're living proof that magic can effect great changes in even the most seemingly immutable things."

Jacob eased himself to the ground beside them, feeling as if he had truly aged another seven years. "If there is a chance at all that it will save Eb, then I shall tell you any and everything, although I'm not sure if my own history can help."

"Let us be the judges of that," Erich said, sending a shiver down Jacob's back. So this was a trial of sorts, then....
"If I was ever a happy child, I do not remember it," Jacob began. "My father was a drunkard who flitted from job to job like a butterfly. Thankfully, we owned our home, which was my father's inheritance, and for a long while, mother managed to keep enough of his wages to pay taxes and for food, to keep us from the workhouses. Still, my father spent more money on drink than mother did on food. Things got so bad that one night, after my mother and I hadn't eaten in three days, she had to beg our neighbors for a little dinner."

And suddenly Jacob was back there, standing now in his old home, seeing his child-self looking on while his mother unpacked a basket holding a little bread, cheese, and meat, all of which that looked to be on the verge of spoiling. Jacob reached out to his younger self, his hand reaching right through the younger child.

"We are as phantoms to them," Drosselmeier said in his ear, startling him. His voice was as a spectre's again, and he bore the unearthly glow once more.

"What witchery is this?" Jacob hissed, backing away a step and gesturing to the scene.

"Why, the contents of your own mind, friend," Drosselmeier replied with a lazy smile.

Marie smacked Drosselmeier on the arm, but her smile to the elf was affectionate. "In the world of dreams, we can walk through thoughts as easily as a living man can walk along the street. Memories are always tainted by the feelings of the rememberer, so being able to see them, rather than just be told them, gives us a somewhat greater sense of the truth of things."

Just then, a savage-looking man burst through the door. Jacob shrank back, his fear of the newcomer as great as it had been years ago, when the memory was first being forged.

"Your father?" Drosselmeier asked, not the slightest bit shaken by the image; indeed, he seemed nothing more than intensely curious.

"Aye," Jacob replied, nodding weakly. He lost his voice then, unable to speak as they watched events unfold. His father went into a rage upon discovering that his wife had gone begging, as doing so revealed to the world just how terrible their financial state had become. She crumbled under his fists, but he kept up the pounding, relentless. Terrified, the eleven-year-old Jacob nevertheless tried to stop his father, and found himself being tossed across the room. The scene went dark for a few moments—because, the ghostly Jacob knew, his young self had lost consciousness. When the image returned, it was clear to the elder, ghost-Jacob that his mother was lifeless; despite this, his father kept up his vicious attack, the man's fists covered in blood. Little Jacob, though, didn't understand that his mother had perished; he ran out the door, sliding across the icy streets in search of the authorities. The ghostly Jacob felt no need to follow his younger self.

Jacob's father sat unmoving, staring at his blood-stained hands, the scene frozen until the boy returned with two constables in tow—though whether it was because Jacob had not witnessed
these moments or his father had really sat like that, the ghost was unsure. His father didn't struggle as the police, making a quick assessment, put him in irons.

"It's prison for you, my friend," one of the police told Jacob's father with a sneer.

Jacob's father began to laugh hysterically then. "Best take my boy, too—you'll have to take him anyway, soon enough. He stands no chance now; I have ruined him."

Jacob thought he remembered his father's words as being harsher, angrier, than they seemed now....

"It would save us some trouble," the sneering constable agreed.

"We don't arrest people without cause," the other constable reminded his companion coldly. He turned a sad smile on the boy, resting a hand on the child's shoulder. "Have you anyone you can go stay with?"

The boy simply shook his head, lip trembling and eyes brimming with tears he was obviously trying not to shed. Jacob remembered how angry his father often got when Jacob cried.

"Then we'll have to take you to an orphanage," the man continued, taking the boy by the hand.

"Phah. No orphanage will take 'im—they're overcrowded as it is these days, 'e'll just end up on the streets anyway," the first constable protested.

"You own the house, do you not, sir?" the second constable asked Jacob's father, who nodded in reply. "And you have no outstanding debts?" His father shook his head no. "Then the house should be enough to buy your son a space in an orphanage, at least."

Jacob's father nodded, and was led out the door, throwing a final look over his shoulder at the broken body of his wife.

**How horrible!** Marie whispered. **The poor man!**

Jacob stared at her in shock and outrage. **Poor—! That monster beat us day after day and murdered my mother, and your sympathy is for him?**

**Do not mistake me,** Marie warned. **Truly, it was a terrible thing, and I feel still more pity for your child-self and your mother—such a sentiment should be considered a given. But we know something of how the mind works, my companions and I. There is more to this story than you know; I'm certain of it.**

Marie closed her eyes then, and her ghostly glow seemed to increase. Her light expanded outward, blindingly, and encompassed the room.

The scene changed, the room becoming much brighter, more cheerful. Jacob's father was unrecognisable as he smiled, putting his arms lovingly around his healthy, pretty, pregnant wife and whispered sweet nothings in her ear, earning a smile in return.

**I thought we walked in my own memories?** Jacob asked, suspicious now.

**While it's easier to just walk through your own memories, it is by no means the only method open to us,** Marie explained. **All of history is recorded in the Akashic Library; I used your own memories to orient us and find those of your parents.**

The scene changed again; this time his father sat with his elbows on the table, head in his hands,
while his wife rubbed his shoulders. Baby Jacob began to cry in the bassinet. Jacob's father winced at the sound, and his wife hurried over to coo at her child, calming the babe. "This is serious, Anna! There are well-nigh a hundred other men out of work now too, thanks to the fire, and we're all competing for the same jobs!"

"Yes, well, you're the best of them. I have every confidence that you'll win out over them," his wife said, rocking her child in her arms. "Besides, we're already a sight better off than many of them: we own our home and have no debts!"

"And I intend to keep it that way. I will not lose the home my forefathers worked so hard to gain, nor wind up in debtors' prison. We have enough money to last us a little while, if we invest wisely," he tried to assure himself.

The scene changed again and again. They saw Jacob's mother too wound up in her new baby to offer her husband much comfort, using her child to distract herself from their troubles. Jacob's father spent more and more time with his friends, out drinking. As the years went on, Jacob's father spent less and less time sober, a factor which made it difficult to get hired in the first place, much less keep the jobs he managed to get. He trusted the wrong men—his friends again—to invest his money in, and though he kept his promise of remaining debt-free, their fortunes did dwindle, slowly but steadily. And then, finally, Jacob and his companions found themselves back at the point where Jacob's father had been arrested for murder. The scene paused.

**Drink can be a slow poison,** Erich posed. **It killed your father as surely as his fists killed your mother, and drove him to madness as it did so. He was a victim of his own biology, I fear, which made him crave the very thing that was killing him, with a thirst like that of a man in the desert. It does not fully excuse his actions, no, but can you not see the horror in his eyes over what he's done, his remorse? Yes, friend, I do grieve for him, for the good heart that came to be lost within that poisoned body, through ill-fortunes that were not originally of his own making. Had your father remained gainfully employed at his original workplace, I am confident your own lot would have turned out happier, and then, if your own guilt is justified, possibly Scrooge's as well. Small ills have a way of spreading misery to others like a plague; we might just as easily blame whoever caused the fire for Scrooge’s lot as your own actions. But no, you're right, that doesn't change the wrongness of what your father did—or the wrongness of your or Scrooge's own actions. No one could blame you for hating your father after that. Just be glad that we can show compassion to those who commit even the worst offences—so long as they show a true remorse and desire to atone. Otherwise, if we felt that there was no chance for your friend to change for the better, we would leave your Scrooge to share your miserable fate.**

**Then...you think you can save him?** Jacob asked, hopeful.

**I think he can save himself, if he has a mind to,** Erich corrected. **True change must come honestly, not be forced upon one by others. Still, we can set things in motion which may increase his chances, and in turn better the fortunes of the poor.**

**Ah, I see you have plans much like my own,** Drosselmeier remarked to the man with a sly smile.

**I dare say we all have similar thoughts in mind; are we not already on that path, after all?** Marie asked, waving to the scene around them.

**Hah! So we are!** Drosselmeier returned. **So let us travel on!**

The scene changed, with Jacob's mind still dizzy from the conversation. It took him a few moments to realise that they were now watching a moment a handful of years later in his life, when he was living at an orphanage—a place, he thought ruefully, that was hardly any better than
a prison after all. They saw a man, somewhere in his early thirties, introduce himself as Mr Rhys Foxworth to Mrs Harding, the woman who ran the orphanage. Foxworth revealed that he was a banker, and that he was in need of an errand boy, his previous one having left him. Mrs Harding promptly handed Jacob over for a small sum; Jacob came to live as an indentured servant in Foxworth's household.

Foxworth was not a cruel man, but neither was he an exceptionally outgoing or kind one: the man's whole world seemed comprised of his ledgers and the stock exchange.

One night, as Jacob kept his master company, Foxworth realised that something was wrong with the books, and suspected that someone in his employ was guilty of embezzlement. Bored, Jacob started to look over a stack of ledgers and, to his master's astonishment, found the discrepancies which proved who was the thief. Pleased, Rhys tested Jacob on a few more problems. Once satisfied with the boy's ability, he used Jacob to fill the place of the traitorous clerk. Jacob flourished with pride in his new position, as Rhys grew moderately warmer, friendlier, even affectionate at times—though never truly fatherly. When Jacob reached adulthood, he was made Foxworth's business partner, and spent as much time at the Stock exchange as their office, having shown himself to have an almost precognitive ability there.

**And so I proved my father wrong,** Jacob remarked to his companions. **He had not ruined me.**

**That may be,** Eric agreed. **But it seems to me that you did not stay quite so unspoiled as you'd like to think.**

Jacob couldn't argue; he knew the story unfolding before them would prove Erich right soon enough.

Despite their good fortunes, Foxworth was not an overly-generous man. When his protégé would offer a coin to a beggar, Foxworth would gently chide the lad, saying that he was only delaying the inevitable end of the poor soul for a few more hours. Helping the poor, the man insisted, was better done by bettering the economy and the educational system, nipping the problem in the bud, curing the illness rather than treating the symptoms. Foxworth considered those on the street to be already too far gone, and a waste of resources. And Jacob took every word of the man that had saved him from such a possible fate to heart.

In fact, he took more than the man's words to heart. One night, when Jacob was just past twenty years of age, Rhys had indulged a little overmuch when they had celebrated a sizable success. Though Jacob was, by then, no longer a manservant but rather an equal partner, he still preferred to act the part of manservant when they were at home; their current errand boy at the office was a local lad who had a home of his own, and therefore had no need to live at theirs, and they had never felt the need to hire a second boy for the household. That night, though, in the process of putting Rhys to bed, Jacob ended up in the bed himself, at the behest of Rhys, who quickly revealed himself to not be so drunk anymore.

It was long hours before either man finally slept.

As the scene unfolded before them, ghost-Jacob looked to his companions, expecting to find disgust. Instead, he found them looking at him thoughtfully, as if this revelation had actually improved their judgement of him—or at least granted him sympathy.

**Are...are you not sickened by what you see?**

**Phah. Do not impose upon us the morals of others,** Drosselmeier sniffed, crossing his arms.
**I have never understood why one man loving another is considered something to be ashamed of,** Erich remarked with a shrug. **One might as well fault the stars for shining!**

**But...this is one of the things for which I'm being punished for all eternity!** Jacob protested.

**According to whom?** Erich asked, cocking his head in a puzzled expression.

**Himself, I'd wager,** Drosselmeier offered before Jacob could collect his thoughts enough to reply.

And before Jacob could ask the man what he meant, Marie interrupted, **Can we get back to the narrative, please? We haven't even gotten to how Scrooge figures into all of this yet!**

**So sayeth our little authoress,** chuckled Drosselmeier, earning him a glare from the woman. **She just can't stand for a story to be told out of turn,** he added to Jacob with a wink.

**Pray, please continue,** Erich encouraged Jacob wearily.

**Well...my happiness with Rhys was short-lived. I lost him four years later, after he fell ill and never recovered. He died Christmas Eve, in fact.***

The scene before them, of Jacob sleeping entwined with his lover, dissolved into that of a cemetery in winter. Memory-Jacob stood mourning with the household servants and the other clerks of the counting-house; seeing the fresh grave, the ghostly Jacob suddenly found that his own grief just as fresh. The image blurred; at first he thought that there was something going on with the memory, but as a hot tear grazed his cheek, he quickly realised that it was his own vision that was to blame. Marie laid a hand on his arm; instead of feeling embarrassed, he was heartened by her kind, understanding smile. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he calmed himself and concentrated on the memory.

As Jacob was the surviving partner and heir to the Foxworth estate, their fellow bankers and merchants went to him to offer their sympathies after paying their respects to the casket. A number of them were rather cold, though, perhaps suspecting the illicit relationship the two men had shared, or perhaps just jealous of Jacob's genius or position. But there was a party of men there whose sympathy seemed genuine: Mr Fezziwig and his two clerks, Dick Wilkins and Ebenezer Scrooge.

After the funeral, Fezziwig and his compatriots went with Jacob to his home, the Foxworth house, which was now his in name, rather than just in heart. He didn't want it anymore, didn't want the constant memories, and yet he couldn't bear the thought of parting with it. He didn't drink that night—he never did, not after seeing what it had done to his father—but as Rhys had, on occasion, the wet bar was well-stocked. Jacob, therefore, could hardly refuse his guests as much as drink as they wanted, not when the bottles and decanters were sitting right there, in the open—particularly with Fezziwig insisting that Rhys must be honored with toast after toast. Or at least, that was the excuse ghost-Jacob remembered giving himself, refusing at the time to acknowledge that he simply wasn't ready to be left alone in the house, and would do anything to get his guests to stay longer.

Memory-Jacob noted, with detached curiosity, how besotted Dick was with Ebenezer; Ebenezer, in turn, was certainly fond of Dick, but not, Jacob wagered, in the way Dick wanted, nor did he think Ebenezer was even aware himself of the depth of Dick's affections. The young Jacob wondered if Old Fezziwig had noted Dick's feelings for his fellow clerk. For that matter, Jacob wondered if Fezziwig knew about himself and Rhys, wondered if the man had any inkling of what their true relationship had been.
The old man confused the issue all the more when he suggested that a now-much-inebriated Ebenezer stay the night at Jacob's home, to sleep it off—and then added, suddenly inspired, that perhaps the eighteen-year-old lad should stay even longer, help get Foxworth's affairs in order and pick up the slack at "Foxworth and Marley's". Surely the old man wouldn't have suggested such a thing if he knew what sort of relationship Jacob and Rhys had shared? No, perhaps the old man was simply trying to give Ebenezer a break from Dick's attentions—in which case, that was all the more reason to think the old man didn't have the first clue about the truth of the matter.

Young Jacob suffered a massive dose of déjà vu as he helped the young man to bed that night—his own bed, in fact, or at least the one he'd used before he'd begun to share the master bed with Rhys. He felt himself the worst sort of sinner, not only being a lover of men, but aching to touch this stranger even more intimately, despite having just lost his first love. Yet despite his shame, there he sat, watching Ebenezer sleep in the candlelight for a few hours, while trying to sort out his tangled thoughts. The more he tried, the more of a Gordian Knot they became. There was no question that he'd loved Rhys—loved him still, really—but this new attraction felt different. By the time the candle had begun to dim, the younger Jacob had to admit to himself that his love for Rhys stemmed largely from gratitude, respect for the man's wisdom and intelligence, and a fierce need to be loved, to be cherished. Meanwhile, though Ebenezer was a kind and charming young man probably quite worthy of any and all affections, what Jacob was feeling towards the man in his bed was just a matter of lust, born of loneliness, and it disgusted him. Had he become his father after all, addicted to the vice of sex rather than drink? He eventually roused himself from his contemplative stupor and went to the room he'd shared with Rhys. There he wept himself senseless, perhaps as much over the new comprehension of his own true nature as for his loss.

The ghostly Jacob could swear he felt tears in his eyes, reliving the anguish of that night. **Can you not see here what a beast I am?** he asked his three companions. **First I loved a man, which, regardless of what you say about Heaven, is nevertheless considered a crime in the world of the living. And then, with my supposed beloved just days gone, I contemplated sinning again with a man I barely knew, and whom I had purposefully led into senselessness with scotch!**

He started in surprise when Marie laid a hand on his shoulder.

**I see a man who was simply trying to deal with a complicated situation that was thrust upon him. You did nothing to be ashamed of that night—or do I believe you would have, though you were near-senseless yourself with grief. Trust that I speak from experience when I say this: we cannot control when, how, or why love comes into our lives, nor the precise nature of it,** she told him, glancing at Erich, who nodded in agreement. **We can only control whether we accept it or not, and it seems to me that to cast it out without any consideration is a great loss! I can’t imagine Rhys would want you to suffer loneliness for even one second, if it was within anyone’s power to spare you from it. Just because you met Ebenezer so soon after Rhys died doesn’t lessen the love you had for Rhys, nor does the differing natures of your affections for either of them. There are many kinds of love, I think, and an infinite space for them in our hearts.**

Jacob didn't know what to make of her words; he'd made excuses for himself before, but never considered the possibility that he'd actually been doing nothing wrong. Had he been right about his new companions in the first place, then? Were these demons, fallen angels who sought to lead him into greater temptation, despite his already being dead? Did they somehow plan to use him to lead Ebenezer thusly? But Ebenezer was already well on the road to his own destruction, and the threesome had spoken of wanting to save those whose lives Ebenezer had put in peril. None of it made sense! All he knew for certain was that these three were determined to have some effect on Ebenezer's fate; he would have to stay with them to either help them save Ebenezer or save Ebenezer from them. There was nothing for it other than to finish his story, then....

**Ebenezer never did return to Fezziwig's, instead deciding to permanently join the staff at my
own counting house.** Jacob recalled with a small smile that Ebenezer almost never touched any liquor after that night either, save for a single glass of mulled wine with dinner. **Fezziwig wasn't at all bitter about it, declaring that it was an excellent opportunity for the young man, and that it left him more time to train other youths in the world of banking, something he seemed to consider a calling.**

They saw time pass with the two men working together, laughing and smiling. They heard Jacob pass along the wisdom Rhys had imparted to him about how it was a waste to help the poor on the street, about how it was better to invest in institutions that might keep people from reaching such a state in the first place. He stressed, as Rhys had taught, that a business that ran itself as a charity first and foremost was doomed to fail, and then wouldn't be able to help anyone anymore. He explained that it had to be a business first, to concentrate on its own prosperity, saying that charity began at home, and they could not help others if they made themselves destitute in the process.

**You and your man Rhys weren't entirely wrong, I don't think,** Drosselmeier remarked, earning a wary look from Jacob.

**Isn't that why we're here?** Jacob asked. **Is that not the kind of thinking that led to this?** He held up his chains for emphasis.

**You just took the sentiment too far in one direction,** Drosselmeier elaborated. **But being charitable to the point of beggaring yourself means you're not still there to help tomorrow, and then everyone loses. Even charity needs moderation. And Rhys was right about Education being a better weapon against Poverty than Charity. Remember the proverb: Give a man a fish, and you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish, and you have fed him for a lifetime....**

**But on the other hand, sometimes it pays to accept things other than money for payment;** Erich weighed in. **If you have to eat anyway, take that money you would have used at the tavern and pay someone's rent, and then let them give you eggs every morning in lieu of dollars. Or take the money you would have spent fixing your roof and wave the rent once or twice of a tenant who can fix it for you. As for the beggars, would parting with your pocket change really harm you so much that you couldn't give the poor a moment's relief? Especially if, for that one day, with enough food in their belly, they have enough strength to take a job that ensures they eat again on the morrow? And helping the poor doesn't always require money, anyway. Sometimes it involves things that cost little or nothing, save maybe time—offering a night's shelter in your house, splitting a meal in half, sharing your knowledge.... **

**Even just giving a smile and a kind word can sometimes lift a person's spirit enough to give see them through another day, stave them off desperate actions against themselves or others,** Marie offered. **To at least treat the poor as worthy beings rather than trash costs one nothing at all, save perhaps the energy of a smile. We all need to know that people care if we live or die; a little love can go a long way, methinks. Ebenezer seems to have been your only real friend in those days, and Rhys before him; think how much poorer your life would have been if you'd never had them in it at all! Rhys only shared with you what he had, and gained by it rather than lost; perhaps Ebenezer never gave you anything that cost him something in turn, but still you profited both in pocket and in heart through your association.**

**I did at that,** Jacob said thoughtfully. **All this time, I've thought my worst crime was that I had been stingy with my gold when I should have shared with the poor, but...while that's certainly true, I was stingier with my heart, wasn't I?**

**Well, I can hardly blame you for that, myself; everyone you'd ever loved, save Ebenezer, was lost to you, it seems,** Drosselmeier observed.

**Ebenezer too, in some ways,** Jacob replied sadly. **And I don't just mean by my own death,
which I suppose was me leaving him rather than him leaving me. No, like with Dick, he never
loved me the way I loved him. Someone else owned his heart, and she took it with her when she
left. And that, too, was my own fault.**

They saw Ebenezer disappear, and then a pretty young woman came into Jacob's office. "Where
is Eb?" she asked. "We were supposed to take tea together."

"He's at the exchange, where he should be," Jacob snapped, his dislike of the woman obvious.
She pursed her lips. "He has to eat."

"He can take it on the floor, like I do; in fact, he does, and he seems just fine to me."

"Well, it seemed to me that he did his job just fine for my uncle Fezziwig without running himself
into the ground with work! Honestly, Jake, it's like you want to make sure he never sees me!"

It didn't show in the younger Jacob's face, but Jacob's ghost remembered all too well how terrified
of discovery he'd been at that moment. "More like he's making sure he never sees you," the
memory replied shrewdly to the woman.

"And what's that supposed to mean? He hasn't said anything!"

Jacob looked up from his work with an annoyed sigh. "I don't think the poor boy even realises it,
truth be told."

"Realises what, exactly?"

"How much distance has sprung up between you!" Jacob observed. "He's grown up, my dear
Isabelle, learned the ways of the world, and you're still an idealist. While that's charming in a
younger girl, it becomes grating in an older one. But Eb has gotten so used to the idea that you
two will be married, that he hadn't considered any other future. He wants to do right by you, no
matter what it costs him."

Isabelle's eyes grew wide in angry shock. "Costs him? What about what you've cost him? What
good is endless wealth in place of love? You can't take the gold with you!"

The spectre of Jacob laughed a harsh, bitter laugh at this, looking mournfully at the countless lock
boxes and purses weighing down his chains.

"You hold him back, woman!" his past self insisted. "You restrain his potential by demanding so
much of his attention! The more he earns now, the more people we can help later! But you're
selfish! Time is money, and you'd rather he spend it all on you!"

Isabelle slapped him with every ounce of fury she had, leaving his cheek to swell as she stormed
out the door. Rubbing his face, the past's Jacob's own fury melted into a satisfied grin.

**And thus I ruined Ebenezer's life,** the ghostly Jacob whispered sadly. **She informed him
shortly after that she didn't care to see him anymore. But driving her away didn't serve me any; he
didn't replace his affection for her with affection for me, though we worked together for many
more years. No, Isabelle was right; Ebenezer's long association with me twisted and warped him.
Unfortunately, I didn't truly see it until it was too late to do anything about it: I was already
dead.**

**So what caused your change of heart?** Marie asked gently.

He didn't need to answer, the memories replying for him. They saw Scrooge standing by Marley's
grave as it was being filled with earth; only Scrooge was there. No one else had mourned Marley at all, not even just in show, not like they had Rhys. But that wasn't the worst of it; Jacob could have lived with no mourners, knowing that at least Ebenezer cared. Indeed, another ghost of Marley stood beside Scrooge, complimenting the man on the business deal Scrooge had made that morning, before coming to the funeral. Of course Scrooge didn't hear that ghost, back then, any more than he heard the current ghost and his companions.

As Scrooge left the cemetery, a young child had pleaded for help. Scrooge just walked past, as deaf to the pleas of the living as to the dead. Jacob, at the time, had thought the child familiar, and upon closer inspection, this had proved to be true: the child was the daughter of a tenant whose mortgage Marley himself had foreclosed on. A closer look had revealed the child's mother dead beside her in the snow. The memory-ghost, embraced anew by a sentimental impulse he'd long forgotten, reached out to the child, forgetting that he was no longer tangible himself. His hand went through the child's head.

**When my ghostly self did that, all those years ago, I suddenly found the girl's whole short history in my mind,** the current Jacob revealed to his fellow spectres. **The child's father, a gambler and an abusive drunkard, had abandoned his wife and daughter after having squandered their meager fortune, including the woman's own hard-earned wages. Before leaving them, though, he'd also offered the services of his wife's own body to his bookie. The bookie had accepted the offer, brutally, but had not considered it enough to wipe the debt clean. After having been so abused, and weakened from starvation after she gave every scrap of food to her daughter, the destitute woman had died. I...I felt a kinship with the child then. But there was no way to say as much to Ebenezer, no way to get my partner to hand the girl any of the money I'd left him in my will.**

Scrooge had passed still more destitute beings as he'd made his way home, the newly made ghost of Marley following.

**Though I floated above the ground, my ghostly steps had felt heavier and heavier with each poor soul Ebenezer ignored—several of whom I recognised as former clients upon whose property I had foreclosed. I soon realised that this was the legacy I'd left behind: misery born of my own greed. Worse, in building that legacy, in chaining myself as a voluntary slave to money in life, I'd also forged a chain of guilt that it seems will weigh me down for the whole of my afterlife.** Jacob held a section of chain up in emphasis. **That guilt is all that's left to me—that, and the ghost of my riches, locked away in the lock-boxes that ornament these chains, wealth that's no help anyone now.**

As he spoke, the scene changed again, from the city streets to Ebenezer's room, where Jacob watched him fall asleep, much as he had done the night of Foxworth's funeral.

**After Ebenezer fell asleep, contrary to my expectation that I would watch him through the night, watch over him always, I suddenly felt compelled to wander the streets, to revisit those who were now suffering when he could have spared them. But as I did this, I also, in passing warm windows, become privy to such joys among the populace as I'd barely ever known in life, save for maybe when I'd spent time with Rhys or Ebenezer. People I’d laughed at for their seemingly-foolish generosity had apparently been well-rewarded in ways I hadn't fathomed before. I could hardly bear watching the one treasure that I had been denied in life: familial bliss. Yet I seemed chained to such scenes for hours, unable to look away, much less leave, until the happy families went to sleep. And thus I came to understand that greed was not my only sin, that my love for Rhys and Ebenezer were sins as well. After all, in shunning matrimony to a woman, all three of us came to be denied the happy family hearth.**

**Oh, Jacob! Why would you think that?*** Marie asked, her spectral voice full of pity and
dismay. **You had your bliss with Rhys, did you not, when you were alone and could show your affections? And you found joy with Ebenezer, even if it wasn't the kind you had with Rhys, for he was your dearest friend and showed it! I should think it was a sin of your fellow man to deny you the same happiness they had for themselves! Now, thought you that Fezziwig was a sinner?**

**Nay, he was as kind a fellow as there ever was!** Jacob answered, perplexed by this turn in conversation.

**If that is so, then perhaps this bit of history will convince you of your own innocence, as Fezziwig was as much a free-thinker as he was a kind man!**

Once again, Marie shone brightly, encompassing the scene and changing it. They saw Fezziwig come home, walked there by Dick, and bid his apprentice good night even as he greeted his wife.

"But where is Ebenezer?" Mrs Fezziwig asked her husband after closing the door behind them.
"And why did Dick look so sour? Had they a falling out?"

"Nay, good wife. Eb drank a bit more than was sensible, and we left him there to sleep it off. Longer, even; I have suggested that Ebenezer work at 'Foxworth and Marley' for a while."

"Oh? You would so readily part with your most prodigious employee?"

"Given young Marley's current state, I did not think it would do him good to be alone. More, I sensed the seed of a good friendship germinating betwixt him and Eb; given time, it might flourish into something even richer...."

"Ah, poor Dick!" Mrs Fezziwig said with a knowing smile.

"Phah, Dick's suit was always a lost cause."

"Aye, but what of your niece, Isabelle? I had assumed she and Ebenezer were betrothed?"

"Near enough in thought, but not in deed. She is too young yet; when she sees Eb, she sees a god, not a man. Whilst he is a good lad—nay, a great lad, one I would heartily welcome into the family—he, like all of us, is not a perfect being. Moreover, he matures by leaps and bounds before her."

Mrs Fezziwig laughed as she helped her husband out of his coat and shoes. "Well, that would bring him closer to her perceived perfection, would it not?"

"Nay, nay. Remember: with manhood comes man's flaws; he will fall in her eyes sooner or later, before she is actually ready for such a calamity, and she will harden her heart towards him. Fickle as her mother, she is; even if they did wed, it would end in divorce ere long. Besides, she wants too much attention, and he is too dedicated to his work."

"But if Ebenezer wasn't responsive to Dick's attentions, what makes you think he would be to Marley's?"

"Oh, you did not see them together, my dear! There was a spark there that I never saw betwixt Eb and Belle; Eb plays at being in love with her because he thinks it's as it should be, what the world expects. I fear those expectations may rob him of true happiness, if he cannot rebel against it."

**But Fezziwig was wrong!** the ghostly Jacob protested. **Ebenezer never felt that way for me!***

**Never felt that way? Or never acted on it?** Drosselmeier asked with a mischievous grin.
Perhaps never realised it,** Erich suggested. **Perhaps he was so focused on societal expectations that the very possibility of walking another path never even crossed his mind. Some people are content with peanuts, peanuts, peanuts, because that's all they know—they think walnut trees are pretty, but they have no idea that there's something they can partake of from the tree. But if they found out, they'd give up peanuts forever,** he winked at Marie, who giggled; it took her some moments to compose herself.

Clearly, these demons were quite insane, Jacob decided.

Drosselmeier rolled his eyes, chuckling. **Enough. Let the poor fellow finish his tale. I know we have infinite time here, but I don't really want to be here forever!**

The faer man waved a hand, and they were back on the streets again. The sun was setting.

**Worry not; there's not much left to tell,** Jacob assured him, just as eager for this experience to be over. **Night brought a new misery, as I walked among the poor and destitute, their pleas for help often heard only by myself, who no longer had the means to aid them, though I'd had it in plenty when I'd still been alive. This torment would continue through the morning into evening, until I was drawn for a short while to the happy domestic scenes again, pulled by my chains. I traversed the world in this way, spying on the joys and miseries of others everywhere I went—although the misery, it seemed, was always more plentiful, and the joys made me just as sorrowful. And then, without my realising it, my travels had brought me full circle, tonight.**

They stood before the office of "Scrooge and Marley" now, as Jacob had seen it that morning.

**His name is above yours on the sign,** Erich observed. **Were you not the senior partner?**

**I was,** Jacob confirmed. "But I had the sign-maker make it that way as a small way to show my affection, though I suppose Ebenezer probably never realised it. When he asked me about it, I said it simply sounded better that way."

**Interesting, then, that he used it to show his affection for you, as well,** Erich said. **You've been gone for years, yet he never took the sign down, never acknowledged that you were gone. He still sees you as his partner.**

Jacob felt the ghosts of tears sting his eyes. So he was not the only one to interpret the sign in this way! Could it be...? **Nay, I think he simply didn't want to go to the expense of changing it.**

**Suit yourself,** Erich shrugged. **In all things, in belief and in action, the choice is yours, how to perceive and how to proceed. It seems to me that such is certainly the case with your eternal damnation as well.**

**How do you mean?**

**These chains—you forged them, you believe?**

Jacob nodded.

**And you believe it is your fate to carry them, so you do. You believe it's your fate to bear witness to happiness you cannot have, and witness the woes you believe you caused. But if you'd spent your afterlife watching Scrooge, you would think that your doom, your penance for the wrongs you'd done him, I'd wager.**

Jacob didn't know what to say about that.

**You feel guilt, and it colours all your perceptions. Had you lived what you felt was a pious life,
your soul would have gravitated towards another plane of existence, or at least felt joy in hanging around the Earthly plane. Instead, you bound yourself to this world, to punish *yourself*. There is no hell—nor heaven—that is not of our own making, *each* of us,** Erich finished, waving his hand. The shop and slush-covered streets were replaced by the sunlit meadow. **As I shape my own world, so you shape yours.**

**You're saying that I only suffer because I *feel* I deserve it? That I could cast all these woes aside if I wished?**

The threesome nodded.

**Well...even if you're right, then, it changes nothing, I *don't* wish it; I *do* deserve my lot.**

Drosselmeier rolled his eyes, Erich shook his head, and Marie sighed, tightlipped.

**You said you would help me save *Ebenezer*; this isn't about *me*,** Jacob reminded them pointedly.

**Quite right, quite right!** Drosselmeier replied, rubbing his hands together with a sense of purpose. **So let's decide now how to go about this...**
A Conspiracy of Spirits, Stave 3: A Long-Awaited Conversation

Chapter Summary

Jacob gets to talk with Ebenezer....

Note: all dialogue between Jacob and Ebenezer is from the original story, "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens, which is in the common domain. I have, however, made a few slight edits regarding punctuation.

Their plans made, Jacob suddenly found himself back in the tavern. The dizzying flickering of the sight of his companions resumed as they sat, once again, at their table. Jacob took some advice that Marie had imparted just before they'd departed the meadow, and concentrated on their elder forms. To his relief, it worked; henceforth, they remained in those visages alone.

Drosselmeier called over a serving wench, and he and his companions ordered a few drinks; whilst they did so, Jacob returned to his seat by Ebenezer, who wasn't any further into his meal than when Jacob had left him. Watching the man make his ponderous way through the meal, Jacob stirring restlessly, anxious for the night to move on. After a bit, a barmaid left a cup of mulled wine at Eb's side. "On the 'ouse, sir, an' a Merry Christmas to yeh," she told Scrooge when he protested that he hadn't ordered it. She winked at Jacob, and he understood then that the barmaid was really Marie in disguise, that this was part of the faer man's plan.

When Scrooge left, Jacob trailed him, the others followed moments after. The journey was quite short. The path was familiar, but it wasn't the one expected, Scrooge's course taking him to Jacob's own former home rather than the one Ebenezer had lived in when Jacob was still alive. The realisation warmed Jacob deeply for a moment, but he then dismissed it, figuring Scrooge had simply chosen to live in the nicer home after Jacob had left it to him. Then he shook all such thoughts from his phantom mind and concentrated on the task at hand.

Following the instructions his strange companions had given him, Jacob situated himself so that, facing the street and standing within the front door itself, his face was in line with the doorknocker, a point where Scrooge would hopefully focus. Jacob, meanwhile, was to concentrate his thoughts on the chains that bound him to Ebenezer, on making the man see him.

From his position in the doorway, Jacob could see Drosselmeier over Scrooge's shoulder, standing a few yards back, and wondered where Marie and Erich had gotten to.

And then he forgot all about them.

Ebenezer was staring at him, wearing an expression of deep shock. It had worked! Jacob was both elated and disturbed; while Jacob had been watching his old partner all day, it had been so very long since Ebenezer had actually seen him. Jacob struggled hard not to look at Eb in turn. Drosselmeier had warned that he would likely lose concentration if he met the man's eyes, but it was already too late: Scrooge shook his head and went back to opening his door. Even without meeting the man's eyes, Jacob had become too distracted, and so Scrooge had indeed lost sight of him.

This was going to be even harder than he'd thought....

He followed Scrooge inside the house and, as the man began to go up the stairs, saw something
that gave both him and Scrooge pause: the momentary vision of a hearse going up the steps. The image shook Jacob greatly, but didn't seem to have nearly so much effect on Scrooge, who went up the stairs anyway a moment later.

**Tough old bird, isn't he?** Erich asked, looking youthful and glowing again.

Jacob tried to look at Erich in that way that would allow him to see the man's "Earthly" form, as the others had called it, but when he did, he saw nothing. Momentarily panicked, he went back to looking at the youthful form.

Erich seemed to notice his confusion, and pointed downwards. Jacob saw a rat at the youth's feet.

**That's me. Marie is upstairs already, likewise disguised. Be grateful; we have no great love of this form, but it's the most convenient one for this sort of thing—well, save for roaches, which are altogether difficult forms to control, too alien in their thinking. Duplicating a pet would have been preferred, but it seems Scrooge doesn't own even a cat for ratting!**

**So...you can be other animals besides a squirrel?** Jacob asked hesitantly, not entirely certain he really wanted to know.

Erich looked at Jacob in surprise. **How did you know?** Then his eyes lit up in understanding and he laughed. **I, uh, was sort of...born a squirrel, at least the first time out. But yes, I can now be any creature that I consume something of.**

**Consume?** Jacob asked, suddenly fearing his companions might intend Scrooge for their next meal.

**Oh, it's not as bad as it sounds—it doesn't have to be flesh or blood. A hair will do. Look, it's a lot to explain, and I will someday, if you want, but for now, let's concentrate on helping Scrooge, all right?**

Erich slapped Jacob companionably on the shoulder and headed up the stairs. Jacob felt a lingering warmth on his shoulder from the touch, one that spread across his skin, tingling. It reminded him slightly of what he'd felt around Rhys and Ebenezer, yet was also markedly different. As the phantom-Erich and his rat-self climbed the stairs, Jacob watched the spectre, trying to give words to how he felt. Erich paused and stared down at him, looking puzzled.

**Come, friend,** Erich beckoned with a smile.

*Friend...* Was this what simple friendship felt like? Jacob was astonished to find he had no idea. Attempting a return smile, he followed after Erich.

When Jacob and Erich reached Scrooge's rooms—Jacob's own old suite, the one he'd shared with Rhys—they found Scrooge poking about as if hunting for something. The ghostly Marie looked on with an expression of fond amusement.

**It's working like a charm—he's making sure there's no one else here. He's quite spooked!** She grinned.

**Let's be careful not to spook him into the grave,** Erich warned, and Marie nodded soberly, chastened.

They watched Scrooge double-lock himself in; Jacob wondered if Scrooge was always so paranoid, or if he and his companions had driven him to it this night. Scrooge headed over to the low fire, barely feeding it but poking at it for a goodly while. Remembering how cold the rooms got, Jacob wondered how the man didn't freeze to death. The fellow was even further gone on the path of greed than Jacob had thought, if Scrooge wouldn't even spend a few pennies to keep
himself warm!

**See how he studies the images on the tiles around the fireplace?** Erick observed.

**I always hated those things,** Jacob commented.

**Well, tonight, they are your friends. Place yourself within...that one,** he suggested, pointing to a tile in the middle. **And do with it what you did with the knocker.**

Jacob did as asked.

**That's it,** Marie encouraged. **Focus. And don't look at Scrooge.** She waved a hand.

Looking up from his fire-tending, Scrooge did a double-take at the fireplace tiles, and shook his head. "Humbug!" he muttered, turning away. He rose to his feet and began to pace.

**Nice work, both of you,** Erich complimented them.

**What did you do?** Jacob asked Marie.

**She made every face on the tiles look like yours,** Erich said, proud.

**Well, Uncle's little mixture certainly helped,** Marie admitted.

**Mixture? Ah, the mulled wine!** Jacob realised.

**Yes, Uncle is something of a chemist,** Erich revealed. **At the tavern, he slipped Scrooge a concoction that will make him more...receptive to any visions we send him.**

**Where is Drosselmeier?** Jacob asked, looking about as if expecting the man to pop out of a shadow when named, like a demon.

**Casting spells around the perimeter, to make sure nothing disturbs us, and then he'll need to get some supplies,** Marie replied. **Worry not; he'll join us soon enough, and for now we can speak to him mind-to-mind, over the distance.**

Once again, Jacob wondered if these strange beings were truly allies or secretly foes, but it didn't matter; he had to stay for Ebenezer's sake, regardless. He just hoped he wasn't making a grave error in assisting them....

They waited a long while for Scrooge, who had sat down to read (and kept glancing at the fireplace, shaking his head), to start to nod off.

**I think he's gotten in the right frame of mind, now,** Erich decided finally. **The drugs have had time to work. What say ye to a grand entrance?** he asked Jacob.

**I say nothing! I don't want to frighten him to death!**

**Nor do we, I assure you! Did you not hear me say as much to Marie? We're not murderers, and you've convinced us that this man is not beyond help. If we wanted him dead, he would be already.**

Jacob could swear he felt a chill go down his spine, despite his feeling perpetually cold already. **How do I know you aren't simply amusing yourselves, like a cat before a kill?**

**You don't,** Marie replied. **But if you think you deserve your own fate, could you rightly argue against Scrooge deserving anything we might do to him? I don't see as you have much of a
choice either way—we will do this thing with or without you, if it will save lives down the road. You can choose to believe and aide us, or you can choose not to and either leave us be or try to fight us off. Do you think you would succeed with that last course?** Her eyes flashed, and she seemed to catch on fire without actually burning.

**N-no,** Jacob admitted, terrified.

He wouldn't abandon Ebenezer, but it had become clear that he was powerless here: the only thing he could do, other than observe, was obey them. He looked at his companions, including Ebenezer, one after another. Nothing about the strangers' words to him in the other world had suggested that they were anything but sincere. Even now, he could see a greater purpose in their torment of Scrooge: they were trying to help the man to see Jacob, so that he, in turn, could give his Ebenezer a warning of what lay in store for the man. Marie had made it clear, when Drosselmeier had laid out their plans, that none of them could force Scrooge to change, but they could help guide him in a better direction by helping him to examine his past, demonstrating how others lived more favourably, and warning him of the consequences of his current path. Then, with all the evidence presented for their case, it would be up to Scrooge as to whether he would stay his course or alter it. They could help Jacob help Eb, and he could not help Ebenezer without them. That decided him: helping them was worth the risk.

**Tell me what you would have me do,** he told them, resigned.

After Erich explained, Jacob went down the staircase, following it all the way down to the cellar, and waited for a signal: a great cacophony of bells. When they sounded, he waited for them to settle, then started up the stairs, clanging his chains as loudly as he could, thinking hard of the mortal man they were connected to. He went slowly, ponderously, eventually stomping his way through the door to his former suite. The fire in the fireplace rose up brightly with a loud roar, as if announcing his arrival; Marie's work, Jacob reckoned. For his part, Jacob trained his eyes squarely ahead; meeting Ebenezer's gaze would undo his concentration for certain! And anyway, Erich had suggested that a blank stare would be all the more effective in unsettling the mortal.

Scrooge had changed into his nightclothes and thrown a dressing gown over that; Jacob was mildly amused that Erich had left the man time enough to do that. Well, perhaps the shock would be more effectual after having let him get comfortable first.

Then again, maybe not.

"How, now! What do you want with me?" Scrooge asked irritably, as if a ghost coming in unexpectedly was not an unusual occurrence, just annoying.

Jacob almost let out a sob then—a joyful one, for being addressed by Ebenezer after so long, and a sorrowful one, for how much bitterness was in the man's voice.

**Much!** Jacob managed, barely, wondering for a moment if the man would even be able to hear him.

Scrooge did. "Who are you?"

Jacob's heart sank—could Ebenezer have forgotten him, truly? **Ask me who I was,** he suggested, a bit bitter and irritated himself.

"Who were you then? You're particular, for a shade."

**In life, I was your partner, Jacob Marley.** It was agony in his non-existent gut, having to say it.
Gesturing to the chair across from his, Scrooge asked uncertainly if Jacob could sit. Almost smiling, Jacob confirmed that he could, but didn't actually do so, wanting any and every excuse to hear Ebenezer speak to him, even if it was just to ask him to take a seat. Scrooge did indeed bid him do so, and Jacob obliged; for a fleeting moment, he felt normal, sitting in his old chair like this. The problem was, since Scrooge was now directly across from him, their eyes were in danger of meeting at any moment. Jacob tried his best not to focus on Eb's features, but rather on the weight of the chains connecting them.

"You don't believe in me," Jacob said after a long silence; Ebenezer had always been too practical for thoughts of the supernatural. Truth be told, so had Jacob!

Scrooge admitted that he didn't. Frustrated and desperate, Jacob did his best to remain stoic as he asked what it would take to convince him, but Scrooge did not know the answer any more than Jacob did. Jacob then asked why Scrooge doubted his senses in the first place—though really, he supposed he would have felt the same in the man's place. Scrooge insisted that a bad bit of food could have him seeing things, and Jacob almost laughed at that: technically it was a tainted bit of wine, not beef or potato, but he didn't confess it. He pondered how to convince his friend—though Scrooge seemed frightened enough that Jacob reckoned the man must believe it at least some already, despite Scrooge's insistence to the contrary.

"You see this toothpick?" Scrooge asked, holding one out to the side.

"I do," Jacob confirmed, fighting the urge to focus on it and get some relief from looking Ebenezer in the face.

"You're not looking at it!" Scrooge complained.

"But I see it, notwithstanding," Jacob insisted, still struggling.

"Well! I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my days persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug, I tell you! Humbug!"

Scrooge's words hit a little too close to home; indeed, his fate would be of his own making, just as Jacob's was, if Jacob couldn't get him to believe in him! He jumped to his feet, howling in frustration, shaking his fists and, by that, his chains. As if he couldn't howl loud enough, he found himself ripping his handkerchief off, and was startled when his lower jaw dropped to his chest. He could certainly scream louder now! He immediately regretted it, though, seeing Scrooge first cower in his chair, then fall upon his hands and knees before him, asking why such a dreadful apparition as he should trouble him. Stung by his love having come to see him in such a way, Jacob wanted desperately to raise his dear friend back up to his feet and soothe him, but he saw Erich and Marie in his peripheral, urging him to keep going. Fighting back tears, he kept his eyes dead, staring straight ahead still as he went back to his task.

"Man of the worldly mind, do you believe in me or not?" Jacob asked, barely holding onto his patience.

"I do," Scrooge replied, and Jacob almost breathed a sigh of relief. "I must," Scrooge continued. "But why do spirits walk the Earth, and why do they come to me?"

Jacob recited what he and the others had decided on, based in part on his own conclusions about the nature of his existence—or rather, the ones he'd made before the others had come to convince him lately that his punishments were actually of his own making. However misguided his original thoughts might prove to be, those conclusions had helped him to change his heart seven years ago, after all, and he still felt there was some truth to them. Whether there was or wasn't, he hoped they might prove as soul-changing for Ebenezer.
It is required of every man, Jacob began, that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow men, and travel far and wide—and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world—oh, woe is me!—and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!

Swept up in his own pretty speech and prompted by his companions—whom Scrooge apparently could not see—Jacob began wailing and shaking his chains again.

"You are fettered," Scrooge noted, showing some concern for Jacob, which made the ghost's phantom heart swell a moment. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life," Jacob explained, feeling a pang of guilt for how the man trembled before him. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you? Or would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it since. It is a ponderous chain!" Jacob fancied he could half see it wrapped about Scrooge already, and wondered if the man could see it himself as he looked about him.

"Jacob," Ebenezer said, beseechingly, and the ghost's heart swelled to hear his name spoken again by his love with such affection. "Old Jacob Marley, tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob!" the man begged, still kneeling before him with hands clasped beseechingly.

"I have none to give," Jacob replied, and he might as well have cut out his own heart with the words, for all that he was dead already. Still he persevered not to look at his friend, not to reach out to him, and not to weep, neither with joy at hearing Ebenezer seek comfort from him nor at sorrow at not being able to give it. "It comes from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, he said instead, "and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men. Nor can I tell you what I would. A very little more, is all permitted to me. I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot linger anywhere. My spirit never walked beyond our counting-house—mark me!—in life, my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole; and weary journeys lie before me!" Even if his strange companions were right, and no one but himself forced him on that journey, he would make it all the same: it was all he deserved! And he feared Ebenezer would feel the same, when the man's own time came.

In his peripheral, Jacob saw Scrooge, still on the floor. Scrooge put his hands in his pockets, eyes downcast in thought; Jacob fondly remembered the habit and permitted himself a small, momentary smile.

"You must have been very slow about it, Jacob," Scrooge observed. Although his tone was tinged with humility and deference, it had also become business-like, cold.

"Slow!" Jacob echoed, wounded by the sudden loss of affection.

"Seven years dead, and travelling all the time?"

"The whole time. No rest, no peace. Incessant torture of remorse."

"You travel fast?"

"On the wings of the wind," Jacob confirmed. Well, he might not do it, but he had discovered that he could travel so, when he wasn't rooted to the spot by the sights before him. It didn't matter how quickly or slow he went, for he encountered the same sorts of landscapes, great joy and great pain, wherever he ended up.
"You might have got over a great quantity of ground in seven years...."

Jacob could tell that Scrooge was affecting jealousy over the notion that Jacob would go a-travelling rather than visit him, but had no patience for comforting the man over a petty vanity, knowing as he did that his journeys were actually no pleasure-trip. It seemed that all of the scenes Jacob had taken in, in those long years, came to him now in a flood, unnecessarily reminding him of that fact. He cried out in agony, drowning in memories worse, it seemed, than his recent recollections amongst the three strange spirits!

**Oh! Captive, bound, and double-ironed,** Jacob wailed. **Not to know, that ages of incessant labour, by immortal creatures, for this earth must pass into eternity before the good of which it is susceptible is all developed. Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused! Yet such was I! Oh, such was I!***

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge.

**Business!** Jacob snapped, sensing that Ebenezer was really trying to excuse his own behavior. Jacob wouldn’t tolerate the excuse-making from his dear one any more than he would accept it from his younger self, no matter what Erich and Marie said. **Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all. My Business! The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!***

He held up his chain at arm's length, the reminder of all his sins, in demonstration of just what he meant; seeing that Scrooge did not fathom his meaning, he dashed it to the ground in frustration.

**At this time of the rolling year, I suffer most,** Jacob said warily, the fight finally gone out of him. **Why did I walk through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me?**

Jacob saw Erich motioning to him to hurry. **Hear me! My time is nearly gone!** Jacob commanded.

"I will, but don't be hard upon me! Don't be flowery, Jacob, pray!" Scrooge pleaded, his eyes still on the ground.

**How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell; I have sat invisible beside you many and many a day.** It was an outright lie, but Drosselmeier had impressed upon him, when they were planning what he would say, that it was a most unsettling thought that might work wonders on the man: if Scrooge were to think his old friend were watching him all the time, it might at least spur him to think twice about his actions. **That is no light part of my penance,** Jacob continued; that much was true. Even just seeing Scrooge now, seeing what his dear friend had become in part because of Jacob himself, was a torment. Erich had been right when he'd suggested that he would have found himself just as sorely punished if he'd stayed to watch Scrooge as he'd been in his wanderings. **I am here tonight to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer,** he added softly. He'd *had* to work that in, no matter what Erich or Marie or Drosselmeier thought of it, had to let the man know that he did all for love of him, even if Ebenezer never would understand the true nature of it.

"You were always a good friend to me! Thank 'ee!"
Scrooge seemed earnest, not just flattering, or so Jacob told himself. It warmed him a little, the way the sun in the meadow had. Marie had to remind him of his task with a whisper in his ear. Steeling himself, he returned to his recitation.

"You will be haunted by three spirits," he informed Scrooge, doing his best not to show how sorry about it that he was, when he saw how dismayed the man grew at the news.

"Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob?"

"It is," Jacob told him, hardening his heart against the fear that cracked Scrooge's voice. This was for the man's own good, after all.

"I...I think I'd rather not."

Jacob almost screamed in aggravation. "Without their visits, you cannot hope to shun the path I tread," he replied firmly. "Expect the first tomorrow, when the bell tolls One."

"Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over, Jacob?" Scrooge wheedled.

With Scrooge's eyes still on the floor, Jacob took a chance and glanced beseechingly at his companions; couldn't they come all at once? Erich and Marie apparently understood, mirroring each other as they crossed their arms in a definite "no", each giving him a hard look.

Sighing inwardly, Jacob didn't even acknowledge his friend's heartfelt request, resuming his speech. "Expect the second on the next night at the same hour, the third upon the next night when the last stroke of Twelve has ceased to vibrate. Look to see me no more—his heart ached with that thought—and look that, for your own sake, you remember what has passed between us!"

Jacob replaced the kerchief around his head, wrapped the chain around his arm, and composed himself. Scrooge finally looked up at him, but Jacob kept his expression vacant. He backed away to the window, beckoning for Scrooge to follow, as per the plan. As he went, he saw Erich wave his spectral hand, and wondered what the man was doing. When Jacob reached the window, he paused, as he had been commanded. As if on cue, the wails of other ghosts, which had been little more than background noise to Jacob, grew to a roar; Jacob could see that Scrooge could hear them too and was terrified.

Somehow, amidst it all, Jacob could hear Marie, too. "Scream with them, and then depart!" she commanded.

Jacob hesitated, not wanting to frighten his dear Eb any further—and being quite reluctant to leave him, probably never to be seen by Ebenezer again.

"You can come right back, unseen," Marie pointed out, sounding exasperated. "Look, we have to keep going with this, if we've any chance of helping him! Trust me; theatrics are something of a specialty of mine!"

And Jacob obeyed, wailing as he hastily departed, allowing himself to give voice again to his anguish in service of the performance. As he joined the traffic of tormented spirits, he saw Ebenezer look out the window in horrified wonder. Jacob looked away from his love, and in doing so saw that he was surrounded by other souls that they had both known. It was an odd sort of comfort, knowing that he was not the only one who had failed so abysmally in his life. He even found himself wishing that he might aid these poor souls just as he was trying to aid Ebenezer's own. Surely there should be salvation for the dead? What worth was it to have souls suffer for all eternity, and not become better? Well, if his strange companions were right, mayhap it was
possible! If so, then Jacob resolved to do his best for those spirits, the only existences save
Ebenezer's that it seemed still within his power to affect....

**Down here!** Jacob heard Drosselmeier call out; the ghost looked where he was bade to and
found the old man standing still on Scrooge's porch, his faer, phantom self waving his hands at
Jacob. The ghost focused on the faer form this time, instead of the elder one, as he flew over to
Drosselmeier.

**Marie says it went brilliantly!** Drosselmeier informed him. **When Scrooge goes to sleep,
she'll let me in, and we'll get to work.** He held up a bag.

**What's that?** Jacob asked.

**An assortment of herbs certain to keep old Scrooge asleep for the duration.** Drosselmeier
studied him. **You're not happy about this,** he remarked.

**About drugging my best friend and violating his mind? Oh, don't be silly! I'm happy as a
lark!**

**I wouldn't call it violating—you gained us his permission, after all.**

**How do you figure that?**

**You told him that three spirits were coming, and that he should accept them, and he did!**

Jacob stared at the man; the fellow seemed to have lost his mind. **He didn't seem too thrilled; I
didn't basically forced him into it! And he never actually said that he was welcoming them, for that
matter!**

**Eh, semantics. We'll find out soon enough which of us was right; my companions and I
wouldn't force ourselves into his mind, I promise you.**

Jacob wasn't too sure of that. All the same, if they were going in, so was he; he wasn't about to
leave Ebenezer's mind unprotected. He told Drosselmeier as much.

The faer man laughed. **Of course not! And we need you, anyway, to help us suss out what we
find! Ah, there she is!** he added, looking towards the door, where Marie peeked out at them.

**He went out like a light, poor man!** she said, waving them in. **Didn't even take off his
dressing gown! I think that scene in the sitting room was all a little too much for him.**

Jacob ignored a guilty twinge, set on his course.

They found Erich building the fire up in Scrooge's bedchambers. Drosselmeier patted his nephew
on the back, smiling, then wrapped his scarf around his face and dumped some of the contents of
the bag into the fire.

**That's my most potent incense for sleep. You'd best wait in the sitting room until it's your turn,
so you can wake us when the time is right,** Drosselmeier told Erich. **Crack a window out
there too, just in case.**

Erich nodded and left. Marie sat at the foot of Scrooge's bed, with a candleholder in her hand.

**What's that for?** Drosselmeier asked.

**Just a little bit of candle-magic for my part,** Marie replied with a knowing smile. **I could do
without it, I suppose, but you know how I like my props. Helps me focus.**

Drosselmeier shrugged, then sat at the head of the bed, on Scrooge's left. With his living, elder form seated, Drosselmeier reached out with his spectral, faer hand for Jacob. The ghost took it, and Drosselmeier stuck both their ghostly hands into Scrooge's head! The world tilted crazily....
A Conspiracy of Spirits, Stave 4: Ebenezer's Salvation

Chapter Summary

Scrooge is visited by three Spirits.

Note: the lines by the Ghost of Christmas Present to Scrooge are from the original text, "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens.

As quickly as it went wrong, the world righted itself. They were still in Scrooge's bedchamber, but it was changed, dark now, and Marie was gone. Drosselmeier still clung to Jacob's hand, but they were only standing beside Scrooge now, not sticking phantom appendages into the man's brain, and Drosselmeier was just his faer self, with no sign of the elder.

Better able to see in the dark than human eyes, Jacob saw Scrooge awaken. Jacob jerked back reflexively, expecting to need to hide; Drosselmeier held fast.

**Worry not: he can neither see nor hear us,** the faer man revealed.

**How did he wake so quickly? I thought he would be sleeping for hours with your herbs aiding the cause!**

Drosselmeier laughed. **He is not awake, my friend! With my influence, he dreams of his own chambers!**

**You said you would not force him!** Jacob snapped, enraged. He tried to pull free from the faer man's grip and found himself frozen in place.

**Calm yourself,** Drosselmeier commanded. **I have not forced my way in. If we were unwelcome here, we would not have been able to get in, plain and simple. Our ghostly hands would have touched his brow as if we were flesh and blood like him, our way into his mind impeded.**

Once again, Jacob found himself trusting his companion. Drosselmeier squeezed his hand a moment, reassuringly, and Jacob was then able to move again.

Church bells chimed; a clock followed suit. According to the clock, it was the witching hour. They head Scrooge mutter about the impossibility of it, trying to decide if the clock was off—as it had been past two when he went to bed—or if he had somehow slept an entire day. They saw him check the window, then secure himself in his bed again, with the curtains drawn. Happily, being ghosts, they simply glided through the fabric and settled beside the fretful fellow, invisible to him.

**Where is Marie?** Jacob asked.

**She'll come when, by Scrooge's reckoning in this world, it's One O'Clock; the stage must be properly set, she would insist. She really can be such a showman, quite particular about the proper way to unfold a tale! Still, I'm not a shabby storyteller myself....**

And so Drosselmeier did a passable job distracting Jacob as they waited with a story of one of his adventures. The desired hour finally arrived, with the wait, despite the distraction, having made
Jacob as anxious as Scrooge. A bright light drew Jacob's eye skyward, as the bed's canopy parted as easily as the curtains on the sides could have.

**Ah, here she is!** Drosselmeier announced. **So that's what she meant by candle-magic—and here I thought she meant to do some sort of meditation! Well, Fire is her strongest element; it suits that she would use it to create her vision for Scrooge.**

The figure that approached through them was the strangest thing Jacob has seen yet. It was as if Marie had somehow become the candle, small and white and glowing, with a snuffer held under her arm, like a cap. Yet she retained something of a human semblance—albeit, at times, her limbs seemed to multiply and shift like dancing flames. Like Drosselmeier's faer form, she seemed ageless, both young and old. A belt that sparkled in sequence, rather than all at once, completed her strange ensemble.

**A little over-the-top, my dear,** Drosselmeier remarked.

**I learned from the best, master toymaker,** she replied with a smile in her voice, though her new form's lips did not move; Jacob suspected that Scrooge couldn't hear her words to them.

As Jacob stared at her, he felt as though he was looking at her through the wrong end of a telescope, like she was far away even as she was actually up close. He remarked as much to Drosselmeier.

**Well, the past is not easily seen or examined, is it?** the faer man replied. **It always seems diminished in our sight, growing ever older yet somehow never aging.**

Her lips moving now, Marie introduced herself to Scrooge as the Ghost of Christmas Past—specifically, Scrooge's. Her voice sounded as distant as she appeared.

Scrooge, shielding his eyes against her distant but no less bright brilliance, asked her to douse her light a bit.

"What? Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made this cap, and force me through whole trains of years to wear it low upon my brow?"

Drosselmeier rolled his eyes at her theatrics. **She's just annoyed that he isn't appreciating her little show.**

Jacob, though not happy about fooling Scrooge like this, found himself chuckling. **Well, I believe it serves us if she gets into the role, does it not?**

**That it does,** Drosselmeier agreed, grinning.

Marie touched Scrooge's chest, above his heart, with her hand. Drosselmeier, still holding Jacob's hand, grabbed hold of Marie's other hand with his free one.

Suddenly, they were outside, on a country road. Jacob was astonished to see the effect this change in locale had upon Ebenezer, spying a tear rolling down the man's cheek, and felt an echo of it on his own face. The three ghosts followed Scrooge to the boarding school that had been Eb's home in childhood. Along the way, Marie warned Scrooge that what he was seeing were just memories, that none in them could see or hear him. As they approached, the building quickly emptied of happy young boys, off on holiday. Marie revealed that the building was not entirely empty, though; to Jacob's shock, Ebenezer then broke down in tears as she led him to where his younger self sat alone within, the characters of the books around him his only friends.
**Why is he here?** Drosselmeier asked.

**He told me once that his father had sent him off as soon as he could, apparently blaming Ebenezer for his mother's death in childbirth.**

Jacob was gladdened to see Drosselmeier look upon the mortal man with new pity. And then he was pleasantly surprised, as Scrooge became joyfully excited whilst looking over his younger self's shoulder at the books the child held. The joy didn't last, though, and Scrooge soon wept again over the memory. Ebenezer then admitted to Marie that he wished he'd given something to the lone young caroler than had come to see him.

**Hah!** Drosselmeier crowed. **Oh, well done, Marie! This is surely proof that the man still has a heart that can be reached and brought out into the light again!** He squeezed Jacob's hand in triumph.

Jacob shook with relief, his chains rattling. He laughed, hope warming him—even as he cried over the lonely childhood his beloved had suffered through. He feared the warring emotions might rend him in two before long....

Marie, talking with Scrooge, waved her hand, and the scene changed some: little Ebenezer was slightly older. A girl came upon the scene, younger than the boy Ebenezer; Scrooge told Marie that the girl was Fanny, his sister. Fanny told young Ebenezer that their father had had a change of heart and was bringing him home, never to be sent away again.

**I thought you'd said his father had sent him away because his mother had died bearing him,** Drosselmeier remarked.

**Fan was Ebenezer's half-sister, by another mother,** Jacob explained.

They listened to Scrooge speak of his sister to Marie; it was clear Ebenezer had loved her dearly, had never resented her for the love their father showed her even as the man had denied it to Ebenezer. When Scrooge revealed that she'd died giving birth to his nephew, the grief he felt was undeniably evident in his voice and eyes, as fresh as if it had just happened.

**As that little girl changed her father for the better, so too her loss changed Ebenezer for the worse, it seems,** Drosselmeier posed. **You are not the only one who has had a dark effect on the state of Scrooge's soul, then—I dare say her part, however unintended, was just as large, if not more so. I think maybe you have made yourself into a much greater villain than you actually are,** he finished with a suspicious glance.

Jacob remembered when the woman had died, how devastated Ebenezer had been—and how the man come to be less affectionate, less kind, when she was gone. Ebenezer had then treated his nephew just as his father had treated him in his youth, but for far longer. Had Jacob really been so strangely keen to blame himself that he'd forgotten that?

**Why would I do that?** he sputtered in protest. **I loved him—why would I have convinced myself I'd hurt him if I hadn't done so?**

**Because it might mean he loved you back if you could affect him that much,** Drosselmeier suggested, his eyes kind despite the accusation.

Jacob turned his eyes and his thoughts to the events unfolding before him, unable to decide whether it was worse to be a genuinely bad influence, or just so egocentric as to that believe he was one when he wasn't.

They followed Marie and Scrooge to a party at Fezziwig's, where Jacob ran into another set of
dizzying emotions. On the one hand, it was wonderful to watch Ebenezer being so happy, both his youthful self and the elder, modern version of him that smiled upon reliving those cheerful times. On the other hand, it was so very hard to watch young Ebenezer dance with Belle and even laugh with Dick. Jealousy warred with hope in Jacob's breast. Hope won out, at least for a moment, when Scrooge proclaimed to Marie how wonderful Fezziwig had been, how the man had the power to make his employee's lives a joy or a misery and chose joy, and that he wished he could say a kind word or two to his own clerk just then. It gave Jacob hope for not just Ebenezer's soul, but Cratchit's fortunes as well.

And then Marie had to go and show Scrooge the day Belle had broken up with the man. Every moment Scrooge yelled at his younger self for not fighting for her, going after her, was a twist of a double-edged knife in Jacob's gut. Not only was it proof of Scrooge's great love for Isabelle, but it was also a reminder of how Jacob himself had betrayed his friend by talking Belle out of the betrothal.

**Why is she dressed in mourning garb?** Drosselmeier asked, jarring Jacob out of his dark thoughts.

**Wha—? Oh! That wasn't long after Fezziwig died, if I'm not mistaken.**

**So not only did Isabelle break things off with Scrooge here—after being rather easily swayed by you for a woman supposedly in love—but one of the men Scrooge admired most in the world had just died? It's starting to look more and more like a convergence of unfortunate factors that aided in the spoiling of his character, rather than your fault alone, sir,** Drosselmeier remarked, nudging him with an elbow.

**I can't fault her for leaving him; every word she said was true!** Jacob protested. **He was going sour before she broke it off, and before Fezziwig died!**

**But that didn't stop you from loving him,** Drosselmeier pointed out. **Quite the opposite, since you helped spur Belle onto a path that led her away from him. You fought for him, even if you did play dirty; she didn't fight hardly at all, but rather simply expected Scrooge to bow to her whims or be left behind! And I dare guess she was as much an extreme of idealism here as Scrooge eventually became an extreme of miserliness. But you're right, Scrooge is still culpable for his own choices; maybe one can help a man dig his own grave, but one can't force the fellow to jump in. Not everyone who is handed a bad life turns out bad themselves, to be sure. Still... we can't help but feel sorry for those that do, 'ey? At any rate, our plan is working fine, don't you think? We're helping Scrooge to remember what it was like to feel kind and generous, setting good examples for him with the likes of Fan and Fezziwig, pointing out the places in his life where he made arguably bad turns—and it all seems to be working beautifully. So stop worrying about how Scrooge went bad, whether it was by your hand or his, and just be glad that he seems to be sorting it out now!**

Jacob nodded and managed half a smile. Unfortunately, lessening his guilt some left him more room for jealousy. It didn't help that, as a parting thought of sorts, Marie showed Scrooge a scene he never would have otherwise been privy to: Belle's happy home life, after she was married.

**See?** Drosselmeier said, ignoring Scrooge's begging Marie to spare him any more painful sights. **Thanks to you, Belle had a happy future!**

**She might have had one with Ebenezer just as easily!** Jacob insisted. Scrooge's distress over the scene, his regret over what was lost, once again cut Jacob two ways.

**I very much doubt that,** Drosselmeier replied, matter-of-factly. **I don't think what you told her was false, whatever your reasons for saying it; they would probably have made each other
miserable. You just helped her to face reality, even if you did go about it a bit harshly. She chose this path because she knew you were right.**

**So why does Marie show him this, if this life could never have been his in any case?** Jacob snapped.

**He doesn't know that it could never have been his, but believing it could have been might encourage him to think about how much less lonely his life would have been if he'd made different choices, couldn't it? Which in turn could lead him to think about ways to better himself all around, and that's the result we're after tonight, is it not? So stop complaining!** Drosselmeier then eyed him speculatively. **That's not quite your issue though, is it?**

Jacob didn't answer; his teeth were clenched so tight that his faulty jaw was in agony, but he didn't care, latching onto the distraction.

**Ahhhh, you're jealous!** Drosselmeier concluded, beaming. He quickly sobered, though. **Sorry, old man, I didn't mean to make light of the situation. And it was hard to tell, what with how you keep insisting your Ebenezer should have been with Belle and all....**

**You mean with me putting the notion of his happiness before mine, for a change?**

**Did you see what he just did?** Marie sputtered, interrupting. She was back to looking like her usual younger self.

**What?** Drosselmeier and Jacob asked in tandem.

**He tried to squash me with the candle-snuffer!**

Drosselmeier laughed merrily, and Marie smacked his arm with the back of her hand. Jacob was startled to discover that they were back in Scrooge's bedchamber, the old fellow slumped, exhausted and unconscious, in his bed.

**Are we back in the waking world or still in the land of dreams?** Jacob asked. It was getting hard to keep track!

**Dreams, still,** Marie answered. **Scrooge himself sleeps a deep, dreamless sleep at the moment, though, hence his being unconscious even here. Erich should be by soon to trade off with me. I'll take you back, if you like—there are only the Christmases of the present and the future to cover now, and I can't see as you'd be of any help with those. Thanks for your assistance back there, though—I could hear you as you talked to Drosselmeier, and your insights helped me choose what threads of thought to follow, as well as pick out memories from the Akashic Library that proved to be of use,**

**I noticed,** Jacob replied a tad bitterly, still unhappy about that last vision of Belle and her family and its effect on Ebenezer—although he wasn't sure if he was unhappier because of the simple fact that it had upset his friend so, or because of why the scene had upset the man.

Marie raised a curious brow. **I don't think you have any reason to be jealous, you know.**

Jacob thought for a moment, stupidly, that she must be psychic—forgetting that he already knew she was. He shook his head in disbelief. **The man I love wishes he hadn't let the woman of her dream get away, and you don't think I should be a little stung? Even if he never did love me that way in the first place....**

Marie let out a huff of annoyance. **You loved Rhys once, did you not?**
Aye.... Jacob replied warily.

So you can have loved two people in your life, and Ebenezer cannot?

Not at the same time!

That's a matter of opinion, Drosselmeier chuckled.

And a moot point anyway, Marie said, glaring at her Uncle.

He chose you over her, didn't he? she reminded Jacob.

No, Jacob stressed, exasperated. He just chose not to be with her, that's all!

He chose not to be with her, and then spent the rest of his days with you, until your death. And after you were gone, he came to live in your home—

Because it was bigger than his!

—and only spent his time outside of that home either in the tavern where he supped with you, or in the counting house, where he worked with you for so long, and where he preserves the memory of you with that sign!

In case you forgot, I spent all my days there too, for more than half of my life! Jacob saw the error in his logic the moment he said it.

Yeah. First with Rhys, and then with Ebenezer, Marie pointed out with a knowing grin. Truly, she was a demoness! An evil, evil woman! So it sounds to me more like he just never fully understood why he didn't care enough for Belle to fight to keep her in the first place. He was raised in a world where men are expected to love women, and she was the closest he ever came to fulfilling that expectation. And yet you never gave him a real reason to explore his feelings for you. Sad, really, she added, granting the sleeping Scrooge a pitying glance.

What would you have had me do, ravish him?

I think a conversation would have sufficed, she replied with a wry smile. One where you actually said something, I mean, she added when Jacob would have protested that he and Ebenezer had conversed daily.

And then what? Jacob asked, pacing. If he was mortified by the idea, it would have ruined our friendship, at the very least!

Ah! Marie's eyes lit with understanding. You mean something like how it ruined Belle and Scrooge's friendship when they broke up?

I... I suppose similarly, yes. Friendship was better than nothing.

And jail, Drosselmeier quipped. Let's face it, Marie, the current moral climate has had much to do with their misery as anything. And it's a little late to worry about it anyway.

Maybe not..., Marie said, looking thoughtfully at Scrooge. And then she disappeared without an explanation, presumably woken by Erich.

Your niece is incorrigible, Jacob complained to Drosselmeier.

The faer man just laughed heartily.

As if awoken by the sound, Scrooge let out an especially loud snore, then jerked awake—or
As if awoken by the sound, Scrooge let out an especially loud snore, then jerked awake—or rather, his consciousness came back into the dream they had created for him. Nervously, the man set about opening the curtains to his bed, and waited for his next ghostly visitor—unaware, of course that he already had two.

The bell marked the change of the hour to One again. Jacob tensed himself for Erich’s arrival, wondering what strange form he would take.

Nothing happened. Scrooge looked as perplexed as Jacob felt.

**Where is Erich?** Jacob asked Drosselmeier.

**Worry not; he is just in the other room,** Drosselmeier assured him, pointing to the door; Jacob could see a light shining through the seams in it. **I wonder how long it will take the old bird to work up the nerve to investigate. Honestly, this is the most fun I’ve had during the holidays since the year Clara and Nussknacker were reunited!** the faer man added with a chuckle.

**Who?** But Drosselmeier just shushed him, squeezing his hand, and watched Scrooge with the intense concentration of a cat watching a mouse. It made Jacob uneasy.

Before doubt could settle overmuch in Jacob's heart again, though, Scrooge roused himself out of bed and made his way towards the door. Just as the man touched the lock, a booming voice beckoned him into the adjoining room.

**Who was that?** Jacob asked, befuddled.

**Erich, of course. Sounds like he's borrowed the form of one of his giant friends.**

**Giant?!**

**Come and see!** And Drosselmeier drew him forwards, following Ebenezer into the sitting room.

The place was stunningly transformed! The walls were festooned with greenery, the hearth a veritable inferno, and every surface that wasn't covered in vines was laid out with a feast for both eyes and belly. Jacob did not think the room had ever looked so alive, so welcoming, not even when he and Rhys were in their happiest days! And Erich, too, had undergone a shocking metamorphosis: he was such a giant that he filled the room even whilst sitting, and bore a great brown beard on his chin. He held a torch, the handle of which was shaped like a horn-of-plenty, and introduced himself as the Ghost of Christmas Present.

**I would have thought Father Christmas, if not for the colour of his beard,** Jacob remarked.

**Or Wodan, before he lost an eye,** Drosselmeier replied; Jacob had no idea what he meant.

The Ghost began a teasing little exchange then, asking if Scrooge had never seen the likes of him nor his 1800 and some older brothers.

Scrooge muttered that such was a tremendous family to provide for.

**T'would be a great many more than that, if the family surname were Solstice,** Drosselmeier mused.

Again, Jacob had no idea what the man was going on about, but he noticed Erich look in their direction for a moment with a twinkle in his eye.

Despite his muttering, Scrooge humbly asked the Ghost to lead and teach him. Jacob felt like he
was, as they say, "glowing with pride" for his friend—and then realised he really was, his ghostly light having gone from pale and sickly to a warm gold.

**Love suits you,** Drosselmeier noted approvingly, before dragging him off to follow Erich and Scrooge.

Erich brought Scrooge out amongst the streets, down which Christmas cheer flowed like rivers of wine—invisible perhaps, but still palpable. Erich blessed the parcels of food of everyone he passed, calling the blessings his own special flavour, and remarking to Scrooge that the meals of the poor were those most in need of it. This prompted Scrooge to ask why it was, then, that the Spirit and his brothers would require that the means for the poor to cook their meals, the bakeries, be closed on Sundays.

"There are some upon this Earth of yours," explained the Ghost, rather heatedly, "who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who as are strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on *themselves,* not *us."

Drosselmeier chuckled at that. **Don't forget your true agenda, Erich; we're not here to change the man's religion, only his disposition!***

**He started it!** Erich protested, unbeknownst to Scrooge.

**Only because he thinks you a servant of a different deity than you actually are!***

**The sentiment's true regardless of the deity involved! It's not fair of humans to blame supernatural kind for the laws they write themselves!***

**Be that as it may, it's not the time for a theology debate! Get back on task!***

Jacob glanced at Drosselmeier thoughtfully. **That has something to do with what you were all saying earlier, about these, doesn't it?** he asked, holding up his chains. **These are basically like those laws, then—something that comes from within Man, as opposed to being a declaration delivered from on high?***

**In my experience, yes. But no amount of proof on my part can save you or Scrooge from those chains, Jacob—you have to come to believe *yourself* that you deserve to be free. The best I can do is ask you: was your existence more worthwhile before you met us, before you came to believe you had a chance to do Scrooge or anyone else some good, or now, after having changed your mind on that point? You have seen already the changes in your friend, like the tines of a bent fork being brought back into their original shape—this comes as much from *your* efforts, in revealing the truth to us and in convincing him to listen to us, as our efforts in appealing to his better nature! So would you go back to feeling as powerless as you did not long ago? Or will you believe now that you *can* bring about change in the mortal world, even as a spirit? Who has the greater potential to make the world a better place: the prisoner or the free man? Either way, I think the only one you can rest your fate on is yourself, not an outside force, deity or otherwise. Even if you think a deity holds the key to your freedom, you still have to be willing to *take* it, to *use* it.***

Jacob stood silent, somewhat shocked. This night had been about saving Ebenezer, not himself—even when they'd told him earlier that he was the one who forced himself to wear the chains, he had not contemplated being free, feeling he hadn't deserved to be. But what if he'd only felt that way because, deep down, he been afraid to take on the responsibility of helping others? Felt he wasn't up to the task, wasn't worthy of the responsibility?

He again thought of his fellow spirits, and his wish that night to help them; if there was some way,
any way, to help others, be they living or dead, even while in his current state, shouldn't he try? Even if Drosselmeier was wrong and God was punishing him, wouldn't God prefer him to help others, to be useful, than to just stand by, idle, all in the name of suffering? For the first time that night, Jacob felt hope for himself. Still, he was so long used to the chains, he wasn't sure he knew how to be without them. But maybe he could still work to help others, as he was somewhat doing now, in spite of his shackles....

He put such thoughts carefully aside, for later retrieval, as Erich led them onward. They came upon the home of Bob Cratchit, his wife, and their six children (three daughters and three sons). They watched the sweet and merry antics of the family for a good while, with Jacob experiencing an eerie feeling of familiarity in regards to the youngest daughter.

For his part, Scrooge, took a particular interest in Bob's small and sickly son, Tiny Tim, asking Erich if the boy would live; Erich warned that if things for the family remained unchanged, the boy would die before the next Christmas.

"If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population," the giant added cuttingly, and Jacob remembered that Scrooge himself had said something similar just that morning, to the men who were seeking funds for the poor.

"That was a little much, Erich!" Drosselmeier complained, looking about. "There is a bit of surplus here—not that they should strike Tim dead, of course, but I'd say there's some argument for not bringing so many children into the world when you know you can't actually care for them adequately—should Cratchit therefore not bear some culpability of his own for all this?"

"That's not exactly a lesson Scrooge needs to learn, though—and there's more to this situation than you realise. Besides, if Scrooge paid a proper wage—one he could easily afford, I might add—they would probably all be fine," Erich replied. He then directed his next words, as the Ghost, to Scrooge. "Man, if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked can't until you have discovered what the surplus is—and where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man's child. Oh God, to hear the Insect on the leaf pronouncing on the too much life among his hungry brothers in the dust...."

And that's when it hit Jacob, to his horror, why the youngest girl looked so familiar. "She's the child I saw on the day of my burial, the one whose mother had died because I'd put them out on the street!"

"Yes," Erich confirmed, again without Scrooge hearing. "None of these children here are the product of Mr and Mrs Cratchit's union—nothing could ever come of that. Martha, their eldest, is actually the daughter of Bob's brother, who died with his wife in a carriage accident. Each of the latter children has been rescued from the street."

Drosselmeier looked chagrined for a moment, then brightened a little as he turned to Jacob. "Well, then! If Scrooge changes his ways and pays Cratchit more, you'll have helped that girl after all!"

It didn't make Jacob feel any better, though—it would not restore the lost woman to life or reunite her with her child. Nor, obviously, did the harsh words Mrs Cratchit later spoke of Scrooge help Jacob's mood any, though he could not blame her for her sentiments.

"You know none of this is actually happening, don't you?" Drosselmeier asked. "This is all an illusion, a dream, based on what might happen. We said it would take three days, but only here, in this world—considerably less time will have passed in the waking world when all is done, enough to give the man a good night's sleep. Therefore, your Scrooge still has the power to change even
this much, to divert time's river in another direction.**

That did cheer Jacob a little, but the stricken look on his dear Ebenezer's worn and weary face kept his phantom heart in pieces. He dearly wished he could comfort his friend now, part of him even going so far as to wish that he'd never brought all this, the visitations, upon the man, even if it was for Eb's own good.

And then he was distracted by talk of Cratchit looking to procure work for his eldest boy. That broke Jacob's heart in a different way. While it was good for the boy and Martha to contribute to their family's well-being, and he knew it would instill a good work ethic in them that might serve them all their lives, at the same time, remembering his own work-heavy childhood, Jacob wished they didn't have to do so, that they could be just children a while longer. There would be plenty of time for them to work the rest of their lives. Watching Scrooge watch the Cratchit children, he hoped the man was coming to feel that way himself.

Erich took Scrooge onward to many more celebrations, even under the earth and out on the sea. Scrooge enjoyed the scenes, and Jacob revelled in his friend's smile. And then Erich showed Scrooge the celebration of his own nephew, Fred, who spoke pityingly of Scrooge despite the ill welcome the man had showed him, saying how he knew his uncle was missing out, keeping himself from good company. He also said that he felt it worth the effort to be kind and inviting to his uncle if it meant the man might in turn show some kindness to his clerk.

**I think we would do well to recruit Scrooge's nephew into our merry circle after this,** Drosselmeier remarked. **He has the very spirit of what we seek to do.**

**Then this is not your only such endeavour?** Jacob asked, surprised.

**Mercy me, no, although it is the first time we have gone to such lengths. Remember I said that our work is never done, and that we'd ushered you to the meadow so that your story would steal none of our time in the Earthly realm? We only have so much power amongst the three of us, of course, but we still put it to as much use as possible, traversing the world something like your Father Christmas, like Wodan, and bringing what small joys and health we can. Granted, we do it all the year round, yes, but we do have more power, can do more, on this night of the year, drawing on the love mankind manifests and magnifies this night, and directing it to those who are most in need of it. We can't be everywhere at once, though, so this year we have chosen to focus on London for this night.**

A seed of an idea planted itself in Jacob's mind just then, but he didn't let himself shine the light of hope on it, didn't dare try to cultivate it just yet. The soil it was planted in—his phantom mind, or the heart of his soul—was, he felt, perhaps still too hard for new thoughts to grow. Instead, he focused on Ebenezer; if ever there was something, someone that might soften his heart enough, it was Eb.

He saw the man yearn, unmistakably, to join the festivities. Jacob might have been sad for Eb, if he hadn't known that the man could indeed join in on the morrow, when the party was to actually happen. Instead, the ghost felt a smile of pride tug at his lips as Scrooge made enthusiastic guesses during the party games—and proved to be right more often than not. Ebenezer had always been bright and learned. With that observation in mind, it suddenly occurred to Jacob that Ebenezer was probably so smart because he'd spent so much time alone, reading, as a child. Suddenly Jacob did feel sad.

When Erich said it was time to go, Jacob was mightily pleased to hear Ebenezer beg the Ghost, like a child, to be allowed to stay for one more game. After how Scrooge had treated the caroler, it was an extraordinary transformation! It was as though Eb's old curmudgeon of a soul had been swapped for that of his child-self, seeking the happiness and fun he'd oft been denied when he
was truly young. And after Fred drank a toast to his uncle, Jacob nearly wept with joy at Eb's heartfelt attempt to thank the party for their kindness despite knowing full well that he could not be seen or heard.

Unfortunately, Erich chose just that moment to whisk Scrooge away again.

The Ghost showed Ebenezer more of the season's joys—the same sorts of joys Jacob had become privy to during his own spectral travels. Yet, despite the fact that Ebenezer was just as cut off from the revelers as the ghostly Jacob had been, Eb somehow managed to share in those joys—and, through his friend, so did Jacob, finally. When Erich showed Ebenezer instances of two men in love—not just once, but seven times!—Jacob uttered a thank-you each time, for Eb showed no sign of revulsion. Rather, the man smiled thoughtfully.

"Most men would look askance at such a scene," the Ghost of Christmas Present remarked to Scrooge at the last such scene of beyond-brotherly love. "I think it is even illegal, is it not?"

"Under laws made by men who act with hatred and ill-will, not your kind, if I am not mistaken," Scrooge replied, echoing the Ghost's earlier complaint.

"You are not," the Ghost replied, pleased.

"Then for myself, I would see people take love wherever they can find it. I made the mistake of turning it aside once." Scrooge pursed his lips a moment. "Nay, twice, if truth be told."

Jacob's heart raced. He pondered what Eb meant, but a short moment later they were off again, and other scenes occupied Ebenezer's mind if not Jacob's. The whole journey took an almost full day, or so it seemed—Jacob remembered what the others had told him of how time passed differently in the world of dreams, and wondered how much time actually passed in the waking world. And then, just like that, the dream-day was over, the bells telling Jacob that, at least in that realm, the time was three-quarters past Eleven at night.

They were stopped in an empty, foggy street. Erich's visage had aged immensely by then; he explained to Scrooge that he lived only during the holiday season. Jacob was oddly pleased to find that this news distressed Ebenezer, who seemed to have become as fond of the character that Erich played as Jacob had become of the real Erich.

Scrooge then noticed something peeking out from under the hem of under Erich's robes. The Ghost of Christmas Present revealed two warped young children there, explaining that they were children of Man, calling the boy Ignorance and the girl Want. The Ghost warned that the boy was the more dangerous of the two, and might bring about the world's Doom

Drosselmeier chuckled. "In truth, the boy is Jack and the girl Alice—they are Erich and Marie's twins, just eight years old and very precocious," he revealed. "Isn't past your bedtime, little ones?"

"Papa stopped by our dreams and asked if we would like to play," Alice replied cheerfully with her spirit-voice; for a moment, Jacob could see the phantom of a sweet, happy child. In direct contrast to her apparent true nature, her Want-self whimpered and held out her hands to Scrooge in supplication, getting into her role.

"We figure the sooner they partake of our work, the better off the world will be," Erich elaborated, his mind-voice sounding fond even as he scowled at Scrooge

Unaware of course of the ghostly conversation, Scrooge spoke over them, asking the giant pleadingly, "Have they no refuge or resource?"
"Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?" the Ghost retorted, throwing the man's own words to the charity-seekers back at him once more.

Jacob remembered again what Rhys had taught (and these "spirits" had lately agreed with): that Education was the best weapon against Poverty. It seemed Erich had thought the lesson worth imparting to Ebenezer. Though Jacob had certainly worked to impress the ideals of Rhys upon Ebenezer, he thought Erich did a better job of it—particularly in adding the notion that the more immediate wants of the poor still needed to be addressed, even while one used Education for the long-term. As much as Jacob had loved Rhys, he could not deny that the man had never taken that factor, the Present, into account.

Drosselmeier wasn't so impressed, it seemed. **Getting as melodramatic as his wife....** the faer man grumbled.

Erich's mouth quirked in a small smile then—and disappeared as the clock struck twelve, his children vanishing with him

**Well, I'm up. Stay or go as ye like,** Drosselmeier told Jacob, letting go of his hand.

Erich reappeared in his normal state (well, *one* of them) at Jacob's other side then, taking up Jacob's hand. As they watched, a tall figure in a black, hooded robed approached Scrooge, ominous and phantom-like, from the fog.

**What was that about melodrama?** Erich asked the figure with a grin.

Jacob realised then that it was indeed Drosselmeier, as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, that stood before Ebenezer, not actually the Grim Reaper.

Then again, for all Jacob knew, Drosselmeier could very well *be* the Grim Reaper....

As cheerful of a journey as the one Erich had lead Scrooge on had been, the now-silent Drosselmeier's tour was the opposite in every respect. They witnessed Scrooge's business acquaintances speaking laughingly, in quite poor taste, of an associate's funeral—Scrooge's, obviously, though neither they nor the voiceless Ghost ever said. Jacob, forgetting that this was just Drosselmeier spinning a tale, thought angrily that these men could use a dose of ghostly haunting themselves! He knew Ebenezer had endeavoured to make these men think well of him, but apparently failed most abysmally—much as Jacob had done. Jacob realised then that the lesson to be had was that *their* esteem wasn't worth the attempt! Better, he thought, to be kind and earn the respect of the likes of Bob Cratchit and Frederick Scrooge—he only hoped Ebenezer had come to this conclusion as well.

From there, they went on to a run-down beetling shop, where three vulturine individuals who had robbed the house of a dead man sought to hawk their somewhat-ill-gotten goods (including the curtains off the bed, complete with rings!) to a fourth, while laughing at the pathetic-ness of the corpse the items had belonged to. Ebenezer seemed to recognise those aspects of his life at least—though, bewilderingly, he did not reach the conclusion that he himself was the corpse whom was being spoken of.

**We don't always want to see what's plain as the noses on our faces,** Erich offered, seeming to sense Jacob's confusion. **One's own Death is not an easy thing to look in the face, I'd wager....** He said it like it wasn't actually a concern of his own; Jacob reckoned it probably wasn't.

In answer to Scrooge's question about to whom the gruesome foursome were referring, the Ghost led him, and his unseen companions, to the place where the body of the departed in question was
kept shrouded in darkness, alone, with no mourners to be had. Scrooge, still not realising who it was, then asked his Ghost to show him one fellow who cared whether the late man in question had lived or died. So the Ghost showed him a poor couple who were joyous at the man's demise, feeling that any other creditor that would replace him would have to be better than he had been.

**Well, I would mourn you,** Jacob whispered, free hand reaching instinctively for his friend.

Erich stayed him. **Do that, and your emotions would doubtless reveal you to him with the contact. I dare say the suggestion of his lonely death would have less of an impact if he were reminded now that he might see you again, don't you think?**

Jacob nodded, lowering his arm and curling his fingers into a frustrated fist. He should have taken comfort in the reminder that he might see Ebenezer again after the man passed on, but he couldn't—not if it meant Ebenezer were damned as well, stuck in this limbo. Mayhap his companions were correct in their suggestion that Jacob and Eb could find happiness in the afterlife together, but Jacob found that he would rather not take the risk in the effort to prove them right.

Scrooge, unaware of dead Jacob's own feelings for him, begged to see some tenderness associated with a death. The Ghost brought him to the Cratchits, who were, as the previous Ghost had promised they would be, mourning Tiny Tim. Jacob's heart broke for them now, especially when Bob lay, grief-stricken, over his adoptive son's body, the Cratchit patriarch as thoroughly shattered as he could possibly be if the child had been of his own flesh and blood.

**Worry not; Tim is one of the errands we have planned when this is done,** Erich assured Jacob. **Walking in dreams is not our only skill.**

They heard a brave-faced Mr Cratchit tell his family of the kind condolences Fred Scrooge had offered, and of how he thought the man might help young Peter to get a job.

**I agree with you, Uncle,** Erich said. **This Fred would make a most welcome companion in our work—as would Cratchit. It just becomes a matter of how to engage them in it. Not too far, for all their humanity, but I think they could do much—particularly with Scrooge's help!**

**Then you think Ebenezer will be changed so far by all this?** Jacob asked, grabbing Erich's arm in a desperate grip.

**I do not doubt it in the slightest,** Erich confirmed, smiling. **He has come much farther than I'd dared even dream!**

Scrooge, still watching the Cratchits, said hesitantly that he sensed that his time with the Ghost was at an end, and begged again to know who the dead man was.

The spirit ushered him wordlessly to the street outside his office. Looking in the window, they saw that the place was now owned by someone else. The Ghost then silently directed Scrooge to a churchyard, where they found a newly-dug grave.

Rather than immediately looking at the tombstone, Scrooge tried to ask if the visions were immutable, or if a man could change his path and thus his future.

And so Jacob finally understood why Ebenezer had apparently not realised from the beginning that he was the dead man the people of this vision had spoken so harshly of: Ebenezer had already decided he would be a good person henceforth, and therefore had no reason to think people would speak ill of him in death or be so glad to see him gone! If not for the man's distress, Jacob would have been dancing for joy at their plan's success!

**Well, there's a factor I hadn't counted on,** Drosselmeier said, the Ghost remaining silent for
Scrooge. **Now what?**

**Tell him he can! Say something!** Jacob demanded. **You’ll drive him to suicide, at this rate, if he thinks he’s doomed to this future despite his change of heart!** Jacob protested.

**Have more faith,** Erich replied. **He's more different from you than you think—just as you say he learned his business from you for all those years, there are things that you could stand to learn about life from him, it seems. Uncle, I think your best course is to simply verify his fear, that the path he was on would have led to this terrible end, so that he is never tempted to drift back onto it.**

Taking his nephew's advice, Drosselmeier pointed the Ghost's finger towards the grave. Scrooge finally read the words upon the tombstone.

Unsurprisingly, he didn't take the confirmation that it belonged to him very well.

Still, the realisation, rather than making all seem hopeless, only seemed to strengthen the man's desperation to alter his course. As if to prove Erich's words, Scrooge got on his knees and vowed to remember all that the spirits had taught him, to live with all three in himself henceforth, begging the Ghost to tell him that the words on his tombstone might be sponged away.

**I can't tell him he's never going to die!** Drosselmeier said to Erich and Jacob, exasperated, as Scrooge latched onto him; he tried to shake the man off, but Scrooge was like a dog with a bone!

**I don't think that's actually what he's looking for, Uncle, just a change in the circumstances around his demise!** Erich replied, laughing. **And well, maybe a few extra years... At any rate, just end it. He's gotten the point.**
A Conspiracy of Spirits, Stave 5: Ebenezer's Re-Awakening

Chapter Summary

The morning after Scrooge's adventure provides new beginnings for more than just himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And so the Ghost pulled free of Scrooge's grip, only to abruptly become—a bedpost! They were back in Ebenezer's bedchambers

“I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The spirits of all three shall strive within me,” Ebenezer declared to the world, repeating his promises to the final Ghost.

As Ebenezer hurried out of bed, he stumbled to the floor, ending up at Jacob's feet, looking Jacob in the eye—or so it seemed, especially when the next words left his lips. "Oh, Jacob Marley, Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees!”

**You can see me?** Jacob whispered, deeply moved by his friend's words.

Jacob reached out—but Erich stayed his hand. **He cannot see or hear you, save perhaps subconsciously. He simply speaks to the air, as one does in speaking to their god and the dead, in hopes that his words will reach you. Let us observe him, judge the measure of his change a while without him knowing that he is observed, please.**

Jacob reluctantly agreed, seeing the sense of Erich's words. One only knew the truth of a man's heart when the man thought no one else was there to witness it.

Ebenezer cried joyous tears now, relieved to find his bed still intact, his curtains still hanging from the frame. He wasn't dreaming anymore! Better, he wasn't dead!

**Is he truly awake, though?** Jacob asked; Erich nodded. **Where is Drosselmeier's body, then?**

**Under the bed,** Erich replied cheerfully, pointing to the floor.

Jacob looked down and saw the rat again at the spectral Erich's feet, apparently looking at Drosselmeier.

**Yes, thanks so much for that,** Drosselmeier said, unseen from Jacob's vantage, if not the rat's.

**Well, I had to stow you somewhere, in case he woke up before we were through! Really, you should have thought of that!**

**I had more faith in my herbalism,** Drosselmeier grumbled.

Meanwhile, Ebenezer was still flinging himself joyously about the room, raving like a lunatic: it was the best sight Jacob had seen in a long while.
**Well, it's a good thing I didn't, or you'd be in a pickle now!** Erich chirped, oblivious to the mortal's ravings.

Ebenezer, just as oblivious to the rat, hurled himself through his door, into his sitting-room.

**Oh, hush and tell me what the old bird does now! I'm old, and tired, and don't feel like astral-projecting or shapeshifting!** Drosselmeier complained.

Jacob was already floating out after his friend at that point.

**He stands panting in the centre of the room now, quite exhausted but giddy,** Marie reported from the other room. Jacob found his dear Ebenezer just as Marie described him; Marie herself sat unnoticed, both as a rat and a spectre, atop the chair Jacob had sat in the night before. "He's quite certain that everything was real, and wonders how long it's been since we abducted him."

**How long was it?** Jacob asked, noting the bright light streaming into the room from the windows, suddenly worried that it might not be the day he thought, and Scrooge had indeed missed Fred's party.

Church bells began pealing then, before anyone could reply. Ebenezer raced to the window and asked someone below what day it was. Jacob hurried over, peering over Ebenezer's shoulder, and saw a boy dressed for church. Bewildered, the boy revealed that it was Christmas Day.

Jacob let out a sigh of relief; Ebenezer shivered just then, and Jacob told himself it was just from the cold of the window, and not his ghostly breathe. He watched and listened, gleeful, as Ebenezer made arrangements for a surprise turkey to be sent to the Cratchits.

He listened with only half an ear as Marie reported all to Drosselmeier. Jacob followed Ebenezer down below, scarce aware if Marie or Erich followed or not.

Ebenezer paused at the door, taking a good look at the knocker. On a whim, Jacob stood as he had the night before. He wasn't trying to be seen, though, just to remember what it had been like to be seen. "I shall love it, as long as I live!" Ebenezer proclaimed. "I scarcely ever looked at it before. What an honest expression it has in its face. It's a wonderful knocker!" the man said with great affection, stroking it, unknowingly stroking Jacob's cheek as he did so. Jacob's cheek felt warm with the touch.

Jacob wept.

And then Ebenezer was distracted by the arrival of the turkey. Joyous and laughing, he paid the poulterer's man, adding extra money for a cab to take the late bird to its final destination, then paid the boy for his trouble. Ebenezer was still laughing when he went back up the stairs and sat down in the sitting room.

**Well, I'd say our work is done,** Marie declared with a smile; Erich grinned back at her.

**I hope he leaves soon, so I can get out of here,** Drosselmeier grumbled. **Why don't you two get a move on, at least—there's certainly plenty to do!**

**As you wish, Uncle,** Erich said pleasantly, turning then to Jacob with his spectral hand extended. **It was a true pleasure to meet you, Jacob. I feel we have done more good in the last night than the whole of the season!**

Jacob took the hand and shook it heartily, noting as he did that it felt warm, like Ebenezer's hand. Had the heat of the land of dreams lingered somehow?
I'm sure I can never thank you enough for all your help! Jacob replied with deep sincerity.

Oh, I know a way, Marie said. Two ways, actually.

You have but to name it!

Firstly, keep those as they are, she said, pointing.

Jacob was astonished to find his heavy chains gone, along with all their ornamentation. He was still bound, though: ribbons of rainbow light with sweet bows now tied him to Ebenezer.

Some fetters should be kept, Marie explained, holding up her wrist; Jacob saw now that similar ribbons tied her to Erich, and to Drosselmeier, and to others unseen. Now it seems you understand that your astral ties, to Ebenezer and to others—she pointed to more strands that fell from him and went off in other directions—are a gift, rather than a punishment. I am pleased for you. She kissed him on the cheek, her touch warm and tingling like cinnamon. Heed those ties and answer when they are tugged upon. For example, we may need you to assist us in similar endeavours, from time to time.

Jacob realised then that those other strands led to Marie, Erich, Drosselmeier, and even the second-youngest Cratchit girl. He could sense them all, could find them anywhere if he chose to. Henceforth, he could see Eb whenever he wished, and would no longer be dragged about in torment, ever separated from his love. Looking at Marie, Jacob could hardly see her for the tears in his eyes. Consider it done, he managed, his voice rough. And your other request?

Just that you don't forget the lessons learned this night—and that you don't let him forget, either.

Jacob cocked his head quizzically. Gladly, lady, but...how can I remind him without you to assist me?

Nothing you have done this past night was anything you could not do on your own—not showing yourself to the living nor walking in dreams. It just takes practice; it gets easier the more you try. Indeed, for the latter, you need nothing more than that to guide you, Marie explained, gently taking hold of a ribbon of light. Eb's ribbon.

Jacob stared at the strand in wonder. Was it really so easy?

Love suits you, Marie remarked, studying him. Especially when it's not so tainted by guilt!

Eh?

She waved a hand, and a mirror appeared before him. Jacob saw himself as a young man again, in his prime. He glowed gold, much like Marie and Erich did, no trace of his sickly pallor left. Gone, too, was the kerchief. He raised his hand to touch his cheek, which held a lingering warmth from Marie's kiss—or Eb's touch—and saw his reflection do the same, erasing his doubt as to whether it was really himself that he was looking at. Marie waved her hand again, and the mirror vanished.

Fare you well, Jacob Marley, Marie said, touching his hand in goodbye, then heading for the window, her rat-form climbing to the sill. The window was still open a crack, enough for her to squeeze through.

And fare well your beloved, Erich added, squeezing Jacob's shoulder. Merry Meet, Merry Part, and Merry Meet Again! And with that, he was out the window too.
**Your Ebenezer is occupied enough with his toiletries; I think it's safe for me to leave,**

Drosselmeier said from the other room. A moment later, Jacob saw him, an old man again, slipping into the sitting room. Drosselmeier paused a moment, startled no doubt by Jacob's younger look. He gave a broad grin, then hurried over to the door. Jacob followed the man to the foot of the stair, where Drosselmeier paused. The man became faer again, holding out his hand.

**Thank you for your help, Jacob Marley,** he said, eyes surprisingly solemn and kind.

**No, I am the one who needs to thank you!** Jacob insisted, shaking the hand firmly.

**Well, it's right that we should be grateful to each other,** Drosselmeier chuckled, becoming old again. **Love and light, Jacob. Till we meet again—and as the Drosselmeiers do business here from time to time, I don't doubt we will!** And he quietly slipped out the door.

Jacob waited for Ebenezer, his thoughts a whirl. He accompanied the man, unseen, as Eb ventured out into the world. Jacob watched with pride as his beloved gave a small fortune to the men who had come looking for charitable donations the day before. And he, Jacob, was the happy observer this time at the home of Fred Scrooge and his wife, as Ebenezer became a boisterous, solid participant. Although Ebenezer still bore his age in body, in vitality he was as young as Jacob had seemed when he'd looked in Marie's mirror. Ebenezer made merry long into the night, before finally begging off and going home, promising to return again, in a few days' time, for another dinner.

Jacob spent the night watching Ebenezer sleep, much as he had all those years ago, trying to work up the nerve to speak to him but also telling himself that the man needed rest. Ebenezer bore a contented smile on his lips the whole while.

Jacob was astonished when Ebenezer got up early the next morning. He was worried, too: had the man forgotten everything already? Would Eb slip back into old habits, now that Christmas was over? He grew all the more anxious when Scrooge greeted Bob Cratchit with more than his usual gruffness, sounding for all the world as if he were about to terminate the man's employment.

And then Ebenezer raised the man's salary.

If Jacob had been alive, he would have fainted dead away. Bob, too, looked like his poor heart was about to give out with shock. And the world just got stranger and stranger for the poor little clerk: Ebenezer promised to help his family as well, insisting on discussing the matter that very afternoon over drinks, and told the man to buy another coal-scuttle before settling to work. Jacob watched them all day, beaming and laughing at Ebenezer's antics even as Cratchit squirmed uneasily.

The men went to the tavern that afternoon, and Jacob was thrilled to spot his three new friends when they arrived soon after.

"Why, it's Herr Drosselmeier!" Cratchit observed.

"So it is!" Ebenezer confirmed. "I remember him from a stockholder's meeting. But how do you know him, Cratchit?"

"I ran into this gentleman and his fine young boy on the street yesterday," Drosselmeier answered for Cratchit as he came over, his nephew and niece-in-law following; the three, unbeknownst to Ebenezer or Cratchit, each said hello to Jacob with their astral selves. "I told them that I knew of a doctor who should be able to set Tim to rights," Drosselmeier continued with his elder body. "It's fortuitous that I should meet you gentlemen here, Scrooge, for I have heard fine things about your establishment and should like to open an account there!"
And so they all talked well into the evening, talking about business, talking about Tim's health and the doctor—which Marie explained, astrally, was actually another guise of Drosselmeier's—and exchanging fond family stories. Finally, Bob left to go home to his wife and children, his step palpably lighter than it had been the day before—perhaps even than it had been in a decade! The Drosselmeiers soon begged off, and Ebenezer set out for huis own abode, seeming satisfied, as Jacob thought he well should be.

Doubtless readers have heard this story before, albeit from Ebenezer's somewhat clouded point of view. There is one other detail that chronicler got absolutely wrong: namely, that Ebenezer never had intercourse with spirits again. Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course, as spirits are as unavoidable as air. In fact, that very night, when Ebenezer's head hit the pillow, he then found himself sitting, suddenly and inexplicably, in his own sitting room instead of lying in his bed. Jacob sat across from him, in the same chair as the night before, although, Jacob mused, the appearance of that old ghost and that of his new spirit-self could not have been further apart. Then again, Jacob noted, the same could be said for Ebenezer, who sat there looking as youthful as he had on the day Jacob had first met him.

"Jacob!" Ebenezer greeted him, beaming and tearful. "You have saved me—am I to take it that have you saved yourself as well?"

"You saved yourself, Ebenezer—I only gave you a key for the lock. But yes, in helping you, it seems I—unwittingly—helped myself." Jacob realised with a start that his voice sounded normal, alive, as it had in the sunlit meadow. Looking at his hand, he discovered that it looked like any other mortal hand, neither transparent nor glowing.

"I am glad for that," Ebenezer said gently, oblivious to Jacob's discovery. "What happens to you now? Do you go on to Heaven?"

"I suppose I might, someday. For now, I have been charged to watch over you for the rest of your days."

"Charged? By the spirits?"

Jacob smiled fondly. "By myself, it seems, though they agreed."

Ebenezer studied him thoughtfully. "You must love me well, to go through such trouble for me, even now that you are free."

"I am not free, Ebenezer. My heart has always fettered me to you, in one way or another. And I would never see it free, for I would lose that which matters most in the whole of three worlds if I did."

There. It was said. If Ebenezer should turn away from him for this, Jacob resolved to keep his promise to watch over the man still, just unseen. But Jacob would not spend another day hiding his heart.

"Then...the love that made you procure this chance for me...i-it was not just that of one friend for another?"

"No," Jacob confirmed. He wondered if he could read Ebenezer's feelings through his bond to the man, but was afraid to try, not sure he wanted to know anymore.

Ebenezer straightened in his seat, meeting Jacob's eyes uncertainly. Suddenly he stood, as if having come to a decision. With a gentle smile, he knelt before Jacob, and settled a shaking hand on Jacob's knee. "I fear I am not worthy of your love, Jacob. When I realised I was falling out of
love with Isabelle, I sometimes thought maybe it was because you were replacing her in my heart, but I wouldn’t admit it. Not even when it was thoughts of you that had held me back from chasing after her when she said goodbye!”

Jacob felt a heart beating fiercely in his chest then, and knew he had never felt more alive—not even back when he hadn't been dead.

"I listened too much to those who preached the wrongness of such a thing, feared what would happen if anyone found out," Ebenezer continued, eyes askance as he stroked Jacob's knee with his thumb, gently. "And more than that, I...I suspected that you'd been too in love with Rhys to ever be able feel that way for me."

Jacob gaped at Ebenezer. Of all the reasons that they'd never gotten together, that was one he had never considered!

"So I contended myself with just working with you every day," Eb went on, "and convinced myself that my love for you was just the sort that one feels for a very good friend, not more. Can you..." he choked, then looked up, eyes full of tears. "Can you forgive me? For all the time that we've lost?"

Jacob sank to the floor beside Ebenezer, feeling tears of his own sting his eyes—but joyfully! He reached out to stroke his beloved's cheek, just the way Ebenezer had unknowingly done to him the morning before, when Jacob had been imitating the doorknocker again.

"I'm as guilty," Jacob assured Eb. "We neither of us spoke our minds when we could have, out of so many fears. But the time isn't lost to us, my love—time here, in the world of dreams, is as endless as we make it!" Or so Drosselmeier had explained to him in the tavern that night. "So...what say we make every day spent here be worth an hour in the waking world? And we'll spend a day in the waking world for every week spent here, in turn." That way they wouldn't be tempted to neglect the waking world entirely, if they committed to a schedule. "But no time will pass here whilst we're away," he added.

"We?" Ebenezer asked, staring at Jacob wonderingly. "You'll be in the waking world too?"

"Well, it stands to reason that, in thanks for the second chance I've been granted, I should do what I can to help other souls gain the same, while you do what you can for the living. But even when I'm off helping my fellow spirits, I'll never be more than a thought away, my heart. I am forever bound to you by love," Jacob assured him, manifesting and holding up the rainbow ribbon for emphasis, then sealing the promise with their first kiss.

Church bells rang and the fire in the fireplace blazed with a roar, and yet Jacob could hear a faint, feminine chuckle. **A little melodramatic, isn't that, Marie?** Jacob teased silently, his lips busy making up for lost time with his lover.

~FINIS~

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed these stories, please consider leaving a review at Goodreads, sharing the link to this story, and / or purchasing the paperback through Lulu! Thanks for reading!
I've been working on my own fantasy storyverse, what eventually became Gaiankind, for many years. In college (circa 1993), I got the idea to incorporate various folklore, faerytales, myths, and legends into the world I’d created, retooling them to fit my concepts. I decided to have some of those stories be past lives of my two main characters. "The Nutcracker" was one of the stories I considered for a past-life, but it stayed on the backburner for a long time: the tale just didn’t fit into the timeline I’d set up.

Then in late 2004, as I was working on a novel set in the pre-Gaiankind version of the storyverse, I was inspired by the holiday season to finally take a stab at my own version of "The Nutcracker"—not as a past-life of my leads, but still as a part of the series. One of my other characters, an immortal elven inventor and mage (and who was initially created by my friend Sara—thanks, sis, for letting me have him!), seemed a perfect match for Drosselmeier. He was my key to getting the story going, and tying it into Gaiankind. With him to guide me, everything else just sort of fell into place. I posted the initial version in December 2005. In 2008, I found myself missing the Drosselmeier trio, and toyed with how they might interact with other famous Victorian tales. In particular, I wanted to do another holiday story, and as "A Christmas Carol" has long been a favourite, that seemed a natural choice for the basis of the next Drosselmeier story. I've reworked both stories a few times since—especially most recently, as I've made some major changes to the Gaiankind universe. Now, I feel they're finally ready to meet the world at large; I hope you've enjoyed these, the final versions.

If you did, you may be happy to know that I have several more Drosselmeier tales in the works, including adaptations of Alice in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass, Peter Pan, and Pinocchio. Visit http://gk.wolfenm.com for updates! I hope to see you again soon!

~WolfenM, 2011

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! If you enjoyed it, please help me spread the word! Again, if you'd like a hard copy, you can get it through Lulu or Amazon. If you could rate and / or review it either place, and at Goodreads, that would be great too!

You can learn more about my Gaiankind series, of which this is a subseries, here.

Works inspired by this one: A Christmas Carol Aftermath by ShakespeareFreak

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!