

Casey Pendelton

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Gremlins and Balderdash

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“Gremlins and balderdash, missed again.” Devlin scowled and slipped back in the shadows.

“Startle him not. You were warned,” Lily chided. “Fight or flight. ‘tis the nature of the blood-thirsty beast you do seek.”

Devlin chewed her lower lip. “What else is on the list?”

“The vamp is the last item. One you catch, and win you will.”

“Of all the idiotic ways to decide on a new fairy queen. What happened to pixie dust pageants and gossamer wing races? Why did they decide on a scavenger hunt, this year of all years?” Devlin’s knee-length evergreen braid whipped around as she stalked off, leaving her pixie companion to bring up the rear in a trail of twinkles and fluttering wings.

“‘Tis true, the rules are new, but the prize still glitters bright in your eyes. One more treasure, you must collect, and on your pretty head, the crown will rest.”

“You know I don’t care a flying fig about the crown. It’s that tight ass Katrice. If I don’t win, she will, and I can’t stand the thought of kowtowing to that lavender nitwit for the next twelve months.” She shrugged and grinned—the evil kind of smile that usually made fae men back up and cover their

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crotches. “Besides, when did you ever know me to back down from a challenge?”

“A challenge, yes, no matter how great. Your wings you lost because a challenge you embraced, but a vampire, Devlin, is no small feat to capture and tame. To fairy magic, a vampire does not respond.”

Twigs snapped beneath Devlin’s leather soles, and Lily flittered away to answer the call of a spotted owl. Night sounds filled the air. Through the tree branch canopy overhead, the starry night twinkled. A breeze cooled Devlin’s heated cheeks.

Where will I find another vampire this late in the game? I’m miles from the nearest metropolis, and without humans, vamps don’t have a reason to wander these woods. That I stumbled on this one was a miracle. Now, I’ve frightened him away.

She looked up in time to see Lily, no bigger than a butterfly and twice as lovely, spiraling down to alight on her shoulder.

“Wait a minute...” Devlin said. She recalled the broad back of the vampire and the way he had glanced over his shoulder at her before speeding away. Dark eyes, the scruff of a beard, and a cockeyed smile stood out in her memory. “...they run in fear. He wasn’t afraid. He grinned at me, Lily, like we were playing a game. Could it be he wanted me to chase him?”

“Tis dangerous, a vampire to chase. Best home you return,” Lily warned.

Devlin's green eyes sparkled as she grinned at her friend. "No. He's mine. We are going to catch him and beat Katrice."

"How, might I ask? His path we cannot track on the darkened forest floor, and you have not the wings to take flight."

"But you have wings, and even when I had wings, you could out fly me on my best day. We know what direction he took. You can ask your creature friends like the owl. They will help you track him, and with a wee bit of magic, you can share your thoughts with me."

"Fairy magic, this contest allows not."

"Yes, but pixie magic is a different story."

Lily settled, legs tucked beneath her, clapping her hands in glee. "Yes! Yes! Pixie magic, I can use to my friend help." As still as a pixie ever gets, the wee creature smiled from pointed ear to pointed ear, her periwinkle body nude and glowing from the natural magic she exuded. Her gossamer wings glittered. Swirl patterned veins wove through them in a unique design—the only means of identifying her from the rest of the females in her clan, each a carbon copy of the next.

"Excellent! Then off with you. He headed north by northeast. The last I heard his speeding foot falls, though they were so fast, I suppose I could have heard a forest creature instead, but I would swear he was headed toward the swimming hole at Willow Springs." Devlin's acute fairy hearing had never let her down before. She could

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hear her mother's call from five clear miles away, further if the sound traveled with the wind.

Hearing such as hers made it tough to live within the fairy community and have secrets. While etiquette called for fae folk to tune out what did not concern them, one never knew when a rival would overhear a word here or a curse there. It was just one of many reasons Devlin preferred spending her time alone in the forest or under the cloak of fairy magic, passing as human in one of the distant townships.

She kept a loft above the bakery where she spent her time painting landscapes and nature scenes. In each painting, she skillfully added her signature—a self-portrait of a green fairy, so intricately worked into the background that only she knew it was there. The locals spent little on her art, but she had caught the eye of a dealer passing through two summers ago, and he often purchased every canvas she had available and at increasingly higher fees.

Lily sped off through the trees, leaving behind a trail of sparkling pixie dust to mark her path. Devlin followed on foot, adeptly running through the forest, dodging branches and leaping over downed trees. Her breathing remained even, her eyes forever alert for Lily's trail.

It wasn't long before the pixie's thoughts found her. *The vamp I've found camping beside the spring. The swimming hole not a skip and a jump upstream.*

“Keep watch on him until I can get there.”

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Watch I will, but go I think he won't. Follow the smoke his fire does make.

Devlin wove her way around a blackberry patch and through the down-stretched arms of a willow tree before entering a lea of tall grass and wildflowers. She crossed the lea then made a flying leap to grab hold of a low hanging branch of a giant oak. With the grace of an Olympic gymnast, she swung over the branch and landed flat-footed atop the narrow limb. She walked the length of the limb then lightly stepped across to the branch of the next tree. On she traveled, from tree to tree, each limb seeming to bend to meet her steps.

She came to an abrupt halt when her pixie friend buzzed close to her head, making a *shhh* sound. Ahead, smoke whispered over the thick brush. Devlin stepped off nature's balance beam and landed gracefully on the ground, some ten feet below.

With the care of a hunter stalking her prey, she peered through the brush into the clearing in front of her. A fire blazed within a stone ring. The vampire—her vampire, as she now thought of him—sat on a log, his silhouette casting shadows onto the distant trees. Now she had a chance to really look at him. Even sitting, she could tell he was tall. His dark hair was cut short. He wore a black shirt opened at the collar and tucked into leather pants with criss-crossed lacings up the side of the legs. His hands cradled a tin cup.

"I wondered when you would show up." The deep voice resonated in the darkness.

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Devlin jumped and squealed in spite of herself, then clamped a hand over her evergreen lips and hunkered down. *What do I do now?*

“You might as well enjoy the warmth of the fire and bring your blasted pixie with you. Her wings alone buzz loud enough to wake the dead.” The vamp looked in her general direction, but he did not make a move toward her.

Devlin gave Lily a stern look but saw no option other than to comply. The vamp was no real danger to her. Even on foot, she could out run him, she hoped, especially in her woods, where she was familiar with every tree, every pitfall, every gully and rise. Even more comforting was the knowledge that her fairy blood was less than palatable to a vampire. Some said fairy blood was poisonous to even the oldest vampires.

She took a deep breath and parted the thicket before her and stepped into the clearing. The vampire stared at her as if she were naked rather than wearing thigh high boots of the softest leather. A rabbit fur halter covered her breasts, and a matching skirt hung low across her hips. Perhaps she would have stood out in a human community, but these woods belonged to her people.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be somewhere feeding on human blood?”

“I recently purchased the estate bordering this property. Dark Bringer,” he motioned to the stallion standing nearby with his head buried in a

feedbag, “needed some exercise, so here I am.” He looked down at the cup he held. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you more, but I wasn’t expecting visitors when I saddled up. I’ve built a fire against the night’s chill, and here is a cup of fresh spring water for you. I filled an acorn cap for your friend.”

Devlin warily circled the clearing until the fire burned between her and the stranger. “How do I know you haven’t poisoned the water, or you aren’t just using this guise of hospitality to lure me in?”

The vampire stood and tossed the content of the cup onto the ground. “You don’t. I’ll leave you the fire and be on my way,” he said in a voice as hard as nails. He picked up the saddle blanket hanging on a bush near Dark Bringer and settled it on the horse’s back. “You never told me your name. Mine is Duncan. As neighbors, we are likely to run into each other again. We might as well know a name to go with the face.”

She considered his logic before answering. “I’m Devlin. The pixie is Lily.” She sensed no danger about this night creature, and she liked the way he soothed his horse as he saddled him. Animals had good instincts about evil, and Devlin could read the emotions of most living creatures. This horse trusted Duncan. Besides, there was this contest to win.

“No. Don’t go,” she said. “I mean, if we are to be neighbors, we should get to know each other a little better, don’t you think?”

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Duncan graced her with an enchanting, masculine smile tinted with just a bit of teasing. “As my lady wishes.” With a tilt of the head, acknowledging her request, he returned to the fire and offered her a seat on the log he had so recently vacated.

She perched on the edge of the log. Lily fluttered in the tree branches above, and Duncan settled on the ground nearby.

“Might I ask why you were tracking me?” he said.

“Well, I...” *How can I tell him he is to be used as a prize in a scavenger hunt? For that matter, how do I capture him or tame him in less than twenty-four hours? I didn’t even think to bring rope.* Devlin looked down at her feet and muttered something to the ground.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that,” Duncan said congenially, his dark features lit up in merriment.

With a tilt of her head, the fairy measured his character as she often did new creatures. “I...you...well, listen, it’s like this. You seem like a nice enough fella, especially for a vampire, and I know this is a lot to ask, but I need to *borrow* you for a...ceremony tomorrow night.” Devlin swallowed hard and waited for his reaction.

He thought about it for a moment. “I know I said we are neighbors, and if it were a cup of sugar you wanted to borrow, I’d be delighted to lend you a pound, but to borrow *me*, well I would need to know more about this...this ceremony before I agree.”

Devlin could sit still no longer. She paced the length of the clearing to and fro as she spoke. “Fairy tradition calls for an All Hallow’s Eve queen carnation. In the past, the winner was chosen based on beauty, poise, magical ability, and even popularity, but this year, the elders chose to do something different—a scavenger hunt. The last item on the list is a vampire, tamed to a fairy’s bidding.

“Of course, I think the whole thing is preposterous, but I can’t let Katrice win. Katrice is my cousin, thrice removed, and a nice enough girl, if you don’t mind clueless and materialistic. A year of listening to her ramble on about party dresses and tea parties would drive me batty, and I just know she wouldn’t approve of me spending time in the human township selling my paintings.

“But the point is you’re my last hope to find a vampire in time, and if you could see your way clear to pretending a little for one evening, I’d be forever grateful.” She ended her animated plea, standing in front of the grinning Duncan. He looked up at the fairy, who stood straight and strong, trying her best to resemble an Amazon rather than a petite little thing. His kind could snap her in two with very little effort at all, if he could catch her.

“How old are you, Devlin?”

“I’m not a child,” she said. “I’ll be one hundred ninety-eight come spring.”

“How grateful?” Duncan asked, his eyes once again traveling down her body as she tried to hide the trepidation building inside.

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While not totally innocent to the ways of men and women, Devlin was uncomfortable with the attentions of a man. In fact, she had made it a point to ward off as much male attention as she could. Even so, she recognized a leer when she saw one. She backed up, warding off Duncan with her hands, even though he had made no move toward her. Her heel caught on a stone from the fire pit, sending her reeling off balance toward the fire.

Before she came in contact with the first yellow flame, Duncan was on his feet and rolling with her in his arms to safety. They landed with Devlin pinned under him, his scent filling her senses. He smelled of her woods and the musky scent of masculinity.

Duncan's dark eyes, flecked with golden brown, looked into hers. "Now, as I was saying, how grateful?"

The words blew across her face—gentle, warm, inviting. Momentarily speechless, she blinked twice before answering. "Fairy magic is quite powerful, and the title of queen will give me the authority to grant you almost anything."

He leaned to one side, his body still draped over hers, but the brunt of his weight now rested on his forearm rather than her. With his free hand, he smoothed back a wisp of hair from her cheek. His touch was inexplicably cool and gentle, and yet it sent a charge through her like no magic ever had.

"What if I what I wanted had less to do with fairy magic and more to do with womanly magic?"

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Devlin's heart skipped a beat, and she found herself uncharacteristically at a loss for words.

Duncan ran his hand down the side of her face and neck, grazing her bare shoulder and the side of her fur-covered breast until it came to a rest on the curve of her hip. "What if I said I would do damn near anything for a single taste of your lips at this very second? Would you disappear in a wisp of smoke, or would you close your eyes and welcome my touch, perhaps even return my kiss?"

She blinked rapidly, and stammered. "I...I...wouldn't you prefer one of your own kind—I mean a human woman?"

The vampire abruptly sat up and extended a hand to help Devlin up. "There is something barbaric about fucking one's food, wouldn't you say?"

"I didn't think about it that way."

"Most people don't." He stood in one fluid move that was too quick to follow with the human eye. He dusted off his hands then looked around, as if suddenly lost. "I didn't think of it that way for decades. I had lovers who doubled as blood sources. Some would beg me to turn them. Others, I simply put into a trance and fed from them.

"I didn't think anything about it. After all, I am a vampire. It is what I do. Then one day in the south of France, I met Rene. Ah, she was something else, a feisty brunette with the body of a goddess and a mind as sharp as a four-star general. I pursued her for months before she agreed to see me. This one was oblivious to my powers of

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persuasion, and my masculine charms or extravagant gifts did not dazzle her as they have so many others.

“She became my lover. For months, she warmed my bed and my heart. I respected her wish to remain ignorant of my feeding habits. I would feed early in the evening before rushing to her side, but then a spring storm caught us during a late night sail. We were thrown far to sea. For two days, the storm railed on. I survived below deck during the day, but by the time the storm ended, we were lost, and I was starved.

“Of course, sea rations sustained Rene, but with no other options available, not even a scurried rat to chew on, I succumbed to my hunger and fed on my lover. While I slept the next day, she threw herself into the cold water, preferring death to the degradation I had subjected her to.”

“How do you know she didn’t fall overboard by accident?” Devlin asked.

“Ah, my dear lady, Rene was a prolific writer. While I slept, she wrote a detailed account of her torment and intentions. I still have the letter in my study. Whenever I weaken and consider giving in to my lustful urges, I read it again. It is quite effective at killing a good erection.”

“So you haven’t had...I mean...haven’t...” she stammered.

“...haven’t made love since Rene?” He finished for her. “No, at least not with another warm body pressed to mine.”

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Duncan's suggestive grin left Devlin shocked as she put two and two together to come up with what he wasn't saying.

"Now I've embarrassed you. I'm sorry." he said. "I often say too much when I meet someone I truly find amicable."

Devlin shrugged and managed a smile. "I'm usually the one who talks too much."

Lily whizzed between the two and landed on her shoulder. "'Tis a story of sadness to be sure, but concerns you not. Leave we should."

Devlin nodded.

"Don't go. I'm willing to help you with your scavenger hunt on one condition..."

Devlin backed up. "I can't agree to make love to you. I don't even know you." She colored as she continued, "It's nothing personal. I've never made love to anyone."

"Never?"

Wide eyed, she shook her head, meeting Duncan's gaze. The vampire and fairy let the silence fill the distance between them—she hesitant to leave and Duncan appeared lost in thought.

"I've never forced myself on a woman before, especially an innocent. I won't now, but I would like something in return. Sleep with me, just sleep. I miss holding someone close. Promise me one day, and I will be your willing servant." Duncan bowed.

* * *

The tall oaks and torch-lit clearing were filled with fairies, pixies, and elves, all waiting for the

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last two contestants to step forward—the only two reported to have attained the final item on the scavenger list. Overhead, youngsters whizzed back and forth, from relative to relative, abuzz with the excitement of the evening. All Hallow’s Eve meant feasts and mirth unlike any other time of the year, and the scavenger hunt featured real vampires. Even the fae children had heard the spook stories of vampires killing small children for their blood. To see one in person was sufficient reason for excitement.

The gathering quieted as the elders led the procession of contestants into the clearing. First came the lavender fairy, Katrice, a darling girl with voluptuous lips and curly violet hair. Behind her, four male fairies hoisted a pole on their shoulders. Tied to the pole a thin little man with stringy, gray hair and pasty skin hung, his wrists and ankles bound around the pole. He hissed and bared his fangs as youngsters reached out to touch him, each daring the next to dart closer to the snarling creature. Katrice smiled and nodded to the crowd as she followed the trio of elders, each a gnarled figure of wisdom leaning on a walking stick.

Behind Katrice and her entourage, Devlin marched, holding a leather leash. At the other end of the leash, Duncan walked upright, unfettered by ropes. A studded black collar was fastened around his neck. The leash attached to the collar by a silver o-ring the size of a wrist. Lily brought up the rear, darting back and forth across the path,

snapping magical sparks at anyone who dared come too close to Duncan.

Crissandra, a stooped fairy with wide shoulders and bent ears that stuck out to the sides of her head at odd angles, spoke for the elders. “Katrice, you bring us a vampire. That is but half the challenge. How can a bound creature be proven tame to a fairy’s bidding?”

Katrice stepped forward, pointed her toe, and bowed deeply over her extended leg. “My lady, the challenge stated the vampire must be tamed to a fairy’s bidding, but it did not specify the fairy must do the taming.” She nodded to a pencil-thin figure in a stained wide-brimmed hat and filth-encrusted overcoat. “The vampire belongs to Mr. Greely here. He has been handsomely rewarded to ensure the creature passes whatever test you wish to put forth.”

Mr. Greely stepped free of the crowd and nodded to the fairies that hoisted the snarling vampire. They roughly lowered him to the ground, slid the pole out of his bindings, and stepped back as Greely pulled out a bullwhip and snapped it in the dirt by the vampire’s head. “Harlan, on your knees, bloodsucker!”

The crowd fell silent.

Harlan cringed, but he did as commanded. Blood-tinged drool dangled from his chin. He held his head at a strange tilt as he looked to Greely with crazed eyes filled with fear.

Darkness covered Duncan’s features as he viewed the treatment of another of his kind. He

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took a step forward, but Devlin put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“No harm will come to him. The elders would never allow it,” she said in a hushed voice.

As if on queue, Crissandra pounded her walking stick on the ground. “Enough! How dare you bring this...this brute here? This is not our way.”

“But, my lady, time was so short, and fairy magic does not work on these vile creatures. I only did what had to be done,” whined Katrice.

The crowd awoke to a rolling mumble as fairy and elf alike discussed this strange state of affairs. Not every day did a fairy hold her life in greater regard than the life of another.

The elders huddled together, holding an animated discussion. Little time passed before Crissandra again faced the lavender fairy and her entourage.

“You’ve done a very bad thing, child. You have put us in an awkward position. We cannot allow this Greely to harm the vampire further,” Crissandra chided.

“Hey, now, I ain’t be leavin’ without my property.” Greely stepped up, putting himself between Harlan and the elders. “He’s my bread and butter, he is.” His toothless mouth chewed on some unseen wad.

Crissandra addressed a red male fairy wearing a multitude of gold chains and gaudy rings. “Randolph, please see to Mr. Greely.”

Greely raised a pointed finger. “Hey now—”

Randolph slung a wave of power toward Greely. The force of it staggered Greely before he slumped to the ground. As the fae in the trees and the elves below watched, Greely's form dissolved into a million shining lights, transporting his life force away from the clearing like an Earth-bound comet. The magic that made up what was once Greely disappeared over the treetops, and the crowd's attention returned to the clearing, the vampires, and the elders. While it was uncertain where his trip would end, they knew he would regenerate safely out of harm's way.

Harlan still cowered where he knelt, sneering at the crowd that he watched out of the corner of his eye.

"Katrice, we still have a problem. What to do with this vampire? If the circumstances were different, I would order you responsible for his care, but your judgment is questionable," Crissandra said.

"I'll take him," Duncan said. He took two steps forward then stopped as Devlin pulled his leash taut.

"You! You're not even a real vampire," Katrice blurted out, her complexion darkening to match the hateful gleam of her violet eyes.

"If the human was still here, and I could find his skin beneath the layers of dirt that coated him, I would gladly show you my true nature," Duncan said, his eyes far less friendly than his tone.

Crissandra shook her head. "Tsk, ts. Child, do you not use any of the senses the gods gave you?"

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Smell the air, narrow your eyes, and look at his aura. He is as much vampire as the one you brought. I swear it is a miracle you have lived to maturity.

“Duncan, how thoughtful of you to volunteer. The fae community would be in your debt would you but take this poor creature under your wing. I would send Katrice with you as well, as a servant girl to the wronged one, but unless you have need of an ornament for your estate, I dare say she would be more hindrance than help. He could not even feed from her blood.”

Devlin looked on agape, trying to discern how the elder was so familiar with her vampire as to know his name. “You know Crissandra?”

“Duncan and I are old friends. We know each other from the old country. When he sought an estate nearby, it proved a lucrative endeavor to sell him a wee bit of fae land.”

“You sold the land to him?” Devlin was lost in confusion.

“You don’t think a community of this size can thrive without finances, do you? Not in this age.”

“I suppose but fae land?”

Crissandra waved off her concerns. “Later, child, this is not the time or place. It was an elder decision and is not open to debate.

“Duncan, as I was saying, do you have need of Katrice?”

“No, there is but one fairy I desire,” he answered, his eyes locked seductively on Devlin,

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“and she has already promised me the prize I seek.”

“Ah, well then, that is between you and Devlin. Fae laws do not extend to the love lives of our people; however, what is between you will have to wait.”

* * *

A year. A long, exhausting year and a day. Devlin was finally free of her responsibilities as queen, as free as the birds flying beyond the bluff where she stood. Last night, a new queen had been chosen, based on fairy magic skills—lucky hoarfrost breather. Festivities had ended just as the sun had peeked its orange head over the horizon.

A year had passed since she had last seen Duncan. He had left that night with her promise to come to him as soon as her term as queen had ended. Now he lay somewhere within the gray stone walls of the estate home that she looked down upon. The home had been there for as long as she could remember, but she had never paid much attention to it until she had met its occupant. During the past year, she had come here as often a time permitted, to look down upon his home and pray for just a glimpse of the dark owner, but not once had their paths crossed.

Twice she had gone as far as the stone fenced yard before losing her nerve and turning back. She convinced herself that if he thought about her as much as she did him, he would make the first move, and then there was her promise. *If only we had not promised Crissandra to wait the year, we*

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could have spent this year together, spending what free time I did have learning about one another. Even a letter from him would have made the time pass more quickly and reassured me he still remembered me.

Instead all she had were dreams—vivid though they were. Duncan came to her dressed in a loose white shirt and slacks, his feet bare. His arm would wrap around her waist and pull her to him until her body heated against his. His free hand caressed the side of her face before he lowered his head until his lips were a breath away from hers. She closed her eyes. Time stood still as she anticipated his kiss. She opened her eyes only to discover he had turned into a flavored mist that she breathed into her, filling her with his essence. And yet it robbed her of the one thing she wanted the most—his kiss, the feel of his tongue exploring her mouth and awakening within her the passion she knew hovered just below the surface.

Devlin would awaken, frustrated, her nipples throbbing, the pleasure zone between her thighs moistened and aching. Inevitably she would punch her pillow and try to sleep only to lay awake until the dawn's light drenched her room.

She knew she should rest, conserve her energy, but sleep was the last thing on her mind since meeting Duncan.

She ached for him; to feel his arms around her, to know the taste of his lips. *But how? How can I so miss what I never really knew?*

“Brood over the vampire, you should not,” Lily warned as she buzzed close to Devlin’s head.

“I know. I know, but I can’t help it. For the first time in my life, I *want* the attention of a man, but not just any man. I want Duncan’s attention. It is killing me not knowing if he thinks of me the way I do him. For all I know, I’ll knock on his door, and he won’t even remember me.”

“Forget you, he cannot. To know you, no one could,” Lily said. Abruptly, her tone changed from consoling to impatient, as if resigning herself to the fact her friend would do as she pleased. “If go to him you must, then go.” She flittered around Devlin then buzzed away, leaving the fairy once again alone.

A cool autumn breeze washed over her. She watched a spider cross a web anchored between two saplings. The delicate threads glittered with the morning dew. The spider worked to repair her creation as the winds struggled to blow it away.

That is all I can do, isn't it? Follow my instincts and hope the winds of change do not destroy my dreams and break my heart.

* * *

The candlelit crypt rested in a sub-basement. Devlin circled Duncan’s prone form stretched out on a slab of cold marble. In his hands, which were cupped at the waist of his black tuxedo, he held a long stemmed red rose and a sheet of parchment scrawled with her name. She was glad she had chosen to wear the indigo-colored gown of shimmery silk with a rose patterned organza

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overskirt. Although the cut was simple and reminded her of something a Greek goddess might wear on Mount Olympia, it seemed much more appropriate for an evening rendezvous with a gentleman dressed in formal wear than her normal attire.

Sunset was hours away. She knew she was ridiculously early, but sleep continued to elude her, and she could think of nothing else. As she circled his lifeless form, her hand languished along the fabric of his clothing until she stood looking down at his face. *A year and he hasn't changed. He still has the same dark shadow of a beard, the same strong jaw, and kissable...lips.*

How Devlin wanted him to open his eyes, to assure her that he had thought of her as much as she had him, but dusk was still hours away, and Duncan was dead to her.

She tentatively laid her hand on the side of his face. It was cool to her touch. She wondered if he could feel her while he slept, but would he have instructed his manservant to show her to his crypt if not?

Devlin looked around the crypt, thinking she would make herself comfortable until he awoke, but the stone structure was bare of any conveniences such as chairs or a bench. Now that she was here and could see him, she felt the weariness of the long days and sleepless nights bear down on her. Her eyes went back to the note and the rose.

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She took the note from his cold hands and read it:

My dearest Devlin,

If you are reading this, you are as anxious to see me again as I am to see you. You have come to me before sunset. It is just as well. I want you to know all of me—the man, the predator, and yes, even the corpse. I never again want to base a relationship on half-truths and ignorance of what I am.

You are all I have thought about since our last meeting. It took all my strength to stay away from you, to give you your year as queen unhindered by my undying affection. If anyone but Cassandra had asked it of me, I would not have acquiesced so easily, but I owe her my life. When Rene left me, I was little better off than Harlan—a mad man incapable of reasoning or even caring for my own basic needs. Rene found me living like an animal in a cave, feeding off travelers and whatever animal life I could capture. Through fairy magic and matronly affection, Cassandra restored me to the man you see before you.

She did not sell me this land. She gifted it to me as an adopted son, as a place to call my own after wandering this world for centuries. And now, with you here, I can no more think of leaving than of cutting off my right arm.

That night in the forest, when I first looked upon your curvaceous figure and heard your

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whimsical voice, I truly became your captive. I could no more have refused to do your bidding had I been under a magical spell.

On the wall at my feet, you see a wall sconce. Press down on it, and you will gain access to my private living quarters. Please make yourself comfortable. I will be with you as soon as I can.

The sconce resembled an Egyptian palm fan. It was located at eye level to Devlin. She had to use both hands to trigger the release to the trap door. The sound of stone against stone filled the small chamber as the middle portion of the wall slid back and to the left, into a pocket between the stone crypt and the wall to the next room.

Devlin tentatively peered into the room. Across from the doorway, a soft artificial light glowed through a frosted glass pane that was set flush into the wall. It reminded her of her forest. Rich wood paneling complemented the deep green brocade of the bed linens, sofa, and upholstered chairs. Like sunrays reflecting off dew-drenched leaves, gold threads and accent pieces caught her attention as she scanned the contents. She took a deep breath. The room even smelled like her woods—earthy and full-bodied.

The four-poster bed looked invitingly soft. Devlin bypassed the seating area and sat down on the edge of the bed. She sank down with a moan then fell back into the closest thing to a cloud that she had ever felt. *Why does he sleep a marble slab when he could sleep in heaven?* As if sedated, she

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succumbed to the sleep that had eluded her for so long.

* * *

Feeling warm, safe, secure, Devlin stretched then froze as she became aware of the solid mass at her back. Her eyes flew open, and she quickly remembered where she was.

“Relax, it is only me.” Duncan’s words fell over her like a warm blanket.

She attempted to turn over, but he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her in closer, until each of her curves found a matching niche in his body.

“No, don’t move, please. I have dreamed about this moment for so long, holding you close to me like this.” Duncan leaned in closer and took a deep whiff of her hair. “Ah, heaven.

“Did you know a man and a woman can use the same shampoo but only a woman’s hair will retain the scent and transform it into an intoxicating fragrance of magic, romance, and sexual innuendo? And yours, my dear Devlin, is beyond anything I have ever enjoyed.”

She placed a hand on top of his, urging him to let her go, then turned over unimpeded. A flash of shock sharpened her features as she took in the sight of him. His skin appeared translucent, the veins standing out just below the surface. His lips were closer to her own greenish tint than the lovely coral she remembered, had dreamed about so many times in the past year. Dark circles ringed his charismatic eyes.

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It took Devlin a moment to come to the logical conclusion. Ignoring his question, she said, “You haven’t fed yet, have you?”

Duncan took her hand in his and placed a chilling kiss on the palm. He looked surprised when she did not pull away. “No, I did it intentionally. No secrets, remember? I want you to see the predator, the villain who must feed on the life’s blood of another. Until you see that side of me as well, you will never know me, really know me. Will you do this for me? Will you watch me feed?”

Devlin frantically sought an answer, one that did not scream revulsion, and opted to ignore the question. With a tilt of her head, she asked: “Do women really fall for your flattery?”

A smile lit up Duncan’s dark features. Devlin could not take her eyes off his perfectly form teeth. “As a rule, yes, but that particular compliment, I have never shared with another.”

Suddenly uncomfortable under his scrutiny, Devlin looked away. The wall behind Duncan caught her attention, more specifically, the paintings that hung there. They were familiar. Following her gaze, Duncan rolled over on his back so he, too, could admire the artwork. More than a dozen ornately framed paintings covered the wall, each one more intricate than the last, and each one featuring Devlin’s signature green fairy. In the bowl of sunflowers, the fairy was worked into the stem of one brightly colored bloom. Another painting was of a little girl playing in a creek, her denim overalls rolled up over dimpled knees, and a green

fairy peered at her from behind a distant oak. But by far the most enchanting was the pixies dancing in the blue moonlit forest with lovers playing hide and seek in the shadows. The sparks of color against the illuminated blue background looked like the stars had come down from the heavens to play amongst the forest creatures.

“You are my secret buyer,” Devlin said.

“Yes, my agent has purchased as much of your work as he could locate. I have all of these plus a few more in my den. I soon found looking for the fairy hidden in each was more than an entertaining pastime. It became an obsession as over time, I had to find her—to find you and discover for myself the mysteries of the green fairy.”

“So our meeting in the woods was no accident? You sought me out?” Devlin asked incredulously.

“No, it was no accident anymore than the scavenger hunt was the elders’ idea. I had to meet you, to see in person what I had so often seen on canvas.”

Her mind whirled as she processed this new information. No man had ever gone to this kind of trouble for her before. At most, he might pursue her for a few months, showering her with flowers and trinkets, but no one, not even her mother, had cared much for her paintings. Yet, here was Duncan, this creature of the night who found her work so intriguing that he had created a wonderfully elaborate ruse just to meet her.

Her voice suddenly husky, Devlin ask: “Are you disappointed in what you found?”

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“No, I would have waited a lifetime for you. Are you disappointed in me?”

Devlin rolled up to her elbow and tentatively touched Duncan’s cool cheek. Tears touched her eyes, and she shook her head. How could she deny him this one little thing? After all, it would not be murder. Vampires fed all the time without killing their victims. Didn’t they?

* * *

A cleaned up version of Harlan, now calm and resembling someone’s grandfather, led in a young Hispanic woman wearing dusty gray riding pants and a cream-colored peasant blouse. Her curly chestnut hair fell around her shoulders. She walked with swaying hips and a sensual curl to her red lips.

“Duncan, why have you kept me waiting?” She asked.

“Devlin, I would like you to meet Esmeralda. She cares for Dark Bringer and provides an occasional...meal for me.”

“Who is she?” Esmeralda demanded as she nodded her head in the green fairy’s direction. “Is she your *lover*? You don’t need her when you have me.” She spread her arms wide, inviting him to enjoy her ample pleasures.

Devlin sat up a little taller on the edge of the bed, suddenly protective of her vampire.

“Enough, Esmeralda. She is my guest, and you will treat her accordingly,” Duncan ordered.

Esmeralda swayed closer to Duncan, running her hand beneath his tuxedo jacket. “I thought you and I would eventually . . . you know . . . warm the

sheets.” She looked up at him through thick eyelashes as she wet her full lips with the tip of her tongue.

“You are paid very well for your services here. See that you do not give me reason to look for a new stable hand.”

As Esmeralda began to protest, Duncan waved a hand before her and drew her gaze to his eyes. In moments, she stood quietly spellbound by the vampire.

Still looking at Esmeralda, Duncan spoke to Devlin. “I apologize for my employee. Sometimes, she forgets her place. For the record, I have never promised her anything other than money and living quarters for what she provides me.”

He ran a hand over her hair, smoothing it back from her face and neck, until it fell in wild curls over her shoulders. With a light touch, he loosened the bow that held her blouse fastened low over her full bosoms.

His body close to hers, his wide hand ran down the side of Esmeralda's neck and smoothed the blouse back from the top of her creamy white breast, then lowered his head until his mouth almost touched her skin. He looked up at Devlin, his eyes cold, and his mouth open, with fangs extended. With the hiss of a predator, he struck, his teeth sinking into the top of Esmeralda's breast; as the blouse slid lower until her brown nipple stared at Devlin. Esmeralda moaned, her head thrown back while Duncan cupped her breast and

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sucked deeply of the red liquid streaming from her wound into his waiting mouth.

Devlin cringed in horror but did not look away. Never had she seen such an amazing sight, so primitive, and yet erotic. She felt like a voyeur, watching two lovers embraced in an intimate moment. Her breath came out warm and fast, catching in her throat, then gushing out as she watched a dribble of blood trickle down over Esmeralda's breast. Deep within her, she felt her own heat rise, balling up in her stomach then spreading down her inner thighs. She squeezed her legs together and curled into a human ball, her chin resting on her knees, hoping to quench the desire so unfamiliar to her.

In mere minutes, Duncan raised his head and gently handed Esmeralda to Harlan, who waited nearby with a white square of cloth. Harlan supported her weight and dabbed at the trickle of blood flowing from her wound then led her still dazed from the room. Duncan took a burgundy silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his mouth, while waiting for Devlin's reaction. She sat on the edge of the bed, her legs pulled up to her breasts, her eyes wide, innocent, expectant.

The silence weighed heavily between them as they each waited for the other to make the next move.

"Now you have seen me at my worst, as a predator, feeding on others. Are you still willing to keep you promise, to give me but one night out of

your long life in exchange for the favor I granted you?" Duncan asked.

Devlin stared at him, curiosity overcoming her horror. She noted how Esmeralda's blood had returned Duncan's complexion to the rich hue she remembered. Where before he would have stood out in a crowd as sick or dying, now he would blend in with all but the most religious sun worshippers. How could she tell him how she really felt? How much she wanted to know him better, to explore his body and his mind, and yet, had been horrified and aroused by his actions?

As silence filled the room, Duncan rushed to fill it. "Do not feel obligated to stay. I mean, I understand if you find what you saw repulsive. It took me a long time to grow comfortable with that part of me. The only reason I even made the bargain was for the chance, however small, to get to know you."

His eyes filled with longing, and the ache of decades of loneliness tore at Devlin's heart. She wanted to go to him, but how? She was no seductress, no worldly woman, and around this man, she was not even the spirited fairy who enjoyed a good challenge.

Tears filled her large green eyes as she unwrapped herself and rose just as Duncan turned away. He spoke to her over his shoulder. "I'll arrange for your paintings to be returned to you. Without the dream, the illusion of being loved by the green fairy who haunts them, they are

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meaningless. Now, if you will excuse me, I need some fresh air.”

He walked briskly toward the door before Devlin’s lilting voice stopped him cold. “Don’t go.”

Silence hung in the area as he turned slowly on his heels to see Devlin now standing at the corner of the bed with one hand resting on the bedpost. “I’m not...I mean... Just don’t go, ok?”

Devlin’s shimmery skirt outlined her long legs as she glided across the floor, stopping a breath away from Duncan who was too stunned to speak. Hesitantly, Devlin reached out and ran a hand down his lapel; her eyes focused on his chest. “You didn’t choose this life, any more than I chose mine. You don’t feed to hurt. I saw the care you took with the girl. I saw how you cuddled her in your arms and made her comfortable. Even as your teeth sank into her flesh, I saw her reaction to you, saw the way she appeared more lover than victim. Even her initial reaction to finding a woman in your room spoke of her devotion to you. She *wanted* to be here, needed to be here with you as much as I do.”

Duncan captured her fluttering hands and laid a kiss on each palm before placing them on his chest, his hands resting over hers.

Her breathing echoing in her ears, Devlin’s gaze slowly traveled up his chest, over his strong chin and sensual lips, past his aristocratic nose, until her gaze final met his. “I...I want someone to make me feel like that. For the first time in my life, I

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want to know what it feels like...to be loved by a man...to be loved by you.”

In an instant, she found herself encased in Duncan’s arms, her lips captured by his. As his demanding mouth set her heart to racing, she melted into his embrace, her body meshing with his, her arms sliding up his tuxedo jacket to link behind his head as she met his fervor. This is what she had dreamed of for so long, and now the time had come. He would not disappear into a mist. He would not, if for no other reason than she willed it so. She was free to enjoy his touch, his taste, the masculine scent that emanated from his person.

Duncan’s hands slid down her back to cup her ass. Effortlessly, he lifted her and backed her up until he laid her down on the cloud-soft comfort of the bed. Her long evergreen hair spread out like a canopy, blending into the brilliant brocade of the bedding. Their bodies melded into one as they kissed and touched, allowing the heat of the moment to burn bright.

Whether by magic, vampire speed, or lover’s expertise, Devlin found her simple gown removed, replaced by Duncan’s firm hands and searching mouth, and his bare skin rubbed against hers. She gasped as his tongue found her moistened netherlips. She pulled him in closer, her legs instinctively wrapping around his head. Slowly, her uneasy gait as her hips rocked became a steady rhythm, and Duncan matched her motions, allowing his skilled hands and mouth to bring her closer and closer to the pentacle of pleasure.

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Time stopped for Devlin. What could have been minutes or hours ceased to have meaning as she concentrated on the unfamiliar liquid fire coiled in her belly. She didn't know how to release the energy, but she trusted Duncan. He would know. He would show her the way. With a sudden awareness, Devlin's eye flew open, and she clasped her hands in his hair, pulling him closer while trying to still his exploring tongue. The fire overwhelmed her senses, and every nerve in her body screamed for release. Her body pulsated from one climatic explosion to another. She rocked from side to side, moaning, slowly becoming aware of her hold on Duncan and relaxing, allowing him to kiss his way up her stomach to rest his head on her chest.

Duncan's weight comforted her. She took her time rolling to a stop, catching her breath, suddenly more relaxed than she ever had been before. She could have laid there until the end of time without feeling like she had missed out on anything, but Duncan had other ideas.

He blew on the nipple nearest his face until it hardened into a puckered button of delight then teased it lazily, as if he had all the time in the world just to make love to this one bit of her body. His tongue flickered over the hard nub, eliciting a moan from Devlin. He growled and shifted until he rested on one elbow, his free hand cupping her breast as his lips closed around her, suckling her. Suckling her while his tongue continued to flick across the sensitive tip.

Amazed at how quickly her body could go from sated to burning with a renewed need to feel him between her legs, Devlin stroked his head, her body arching up to meet him. She cried out when Duncan's teeth nipped her already sensitive flesh.

Momentarily, she froze. Her mind raced as she fought the urge to pull away in fear of those teeth piercing her flesh and draining her of her life's blood, then she remembered. This was not a predator. This was Duncan—the man she had waited a year to be with. She trusted him, and more importantly, she needed him with a longing that transcended time. Duncan raised his head, looking at her with questioning eyes. She laid a hand alongside his face and smiled, instantly assured she had made the right decision.

Duncan straddled her and returned his attention to her breasts—molding, kneading, rolling her nipples between his thumb and finger—until Devlin cried out, wanting more, to feel his cock pressed against her throbbing clit. The scent of the sex filling her nostrils and awakening a primal urge so strong that her eyes flew opened and glowed with fae magic.

She dug her fingernails into his arms and urged him further up her body until she could capture his lips with hers and wrap her arms and legs around him, pressing her body against his raging cock. Their bodies rocked as her tongue plunged into his mouth, tracing the ridges along the roof of his mouth as he shuddered and pulled her closer. They

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kissed until Devlin was lightheaded and had to come up for air.

Duncan trailed kisses across her jaw and sucked at her earlobe, emitting a deep, heady growl of satisfaction as she writhed beneath him.

Reaching between them, Devlin sought to feel that one part of a man she had never touched before. She marveled at the smooth, kid-glove softness of his cock and the way it seemed to jump at her touch, as if a living, independent being. Duncan rolled to his side, allowing her to look down the length of him, marveling at the sight of his shaft thrusting toward her. She wrapped her fist around him. Duncan's hand closed over hers, guiding her hand up and down in long, sure strokes. He groaned in delight as a glistening bead of moisture permeated the head of his cock. Devlin rolled her palm over it, using his natural lubricating to increase his pleasure.

"No more," Duncan said as he situated himself between her legs then slowly entered her. "So tight," he whispered. "So tight. So long I've wanted everything you have to give me. Slow. We have to take it slow."

Devlin's heart skipped a beat as she looked up into the glazed eyes of a madman. She was on the verge of her own erotic insanity as her growing passion and the pounding of her heart blocked out reason.

He worked his cock in and out of her tightness, sliding a little deeper with each stroke until he came to a barrier. He pulled out and stroked the

side of her face. “There is something I didn’t think about, little one, but it doesn’t matter. I knew. Somehow I knew. It is one of the reasons I fell in love with you. Remember that, won’t you? That I loved you...”

Duncan entered her once more as Devlin’s face contorted in confusion, her mind lost in passion and the question his words had created. The look was quickly replaced with one of surprise as he broke through her maidenhead. He stopped for so long that she thought he was waiting on her to continue. Instincts took over, and she moved under his body, her hips rising to meet his. Soon Duncan matched her strokes, pulling her along with him until they both were crazed animals, trying to pull as much electricity from the moment as possible. Heavy breathing and Devlin’s whispered pleas for more filled the air. With a mighty roar of pain and pleasure, he plunged his cock deep within her one last time and came before collapsing on top of her.

Lost, Devlin frantically sought her own release to no avail before realizing something was not right. Duncan had ceased moving. She pushed at his body, trying to roll him over then finally succeeded in crawling out from under him. She rolled him over to see his glazed eyes watching her; his breathing was imperceptibly shallow. She watched his mouth open and close. Open and close. Then he tried to speak.

It took him several tries before he could form the words. “It isn’t your fault. I wanted to die this way in the arms of a woman I love. No man could

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ask for a more perfect ending to life. I've been too long in this world. Forgive me." His eyes fluttered then saw no more.

Wide eyed, Devlin felt the tickle of panic in the back of her throat. *Is this normal? Do vampires just fall dead like this? It must be dawn. Yes, dawn.* Her gaze traveled over his face and down his chest, until it rested on his still firm manhood, thick and covered with the green tint of her virgin blood. *Blood. A fairy's blood is poisonous to a vampire.*

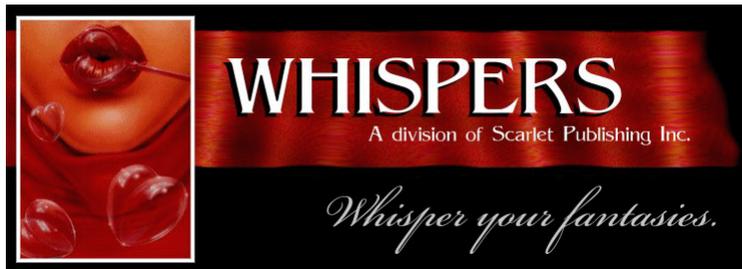
Tears rolled down her face while she stroked the hair back from Duncan's forehead. Tonight she would stay with him, hold his cooling body close while she mourned, and tomorrow...tomorrow she would return to the forest, forever changed. She would no longer see any creature as immortal or sane, because even the sanest have secrets, like her longing for Duncan and his longing for death.

Casey Pendelton

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Casey Pendelton lives in a hovel in Middle America with her pet gargoyle, Rassmussen. She has an honorary degree in Overactive Imagination from the School of Second Childhood. To learn more about Casey, visit <http://www.another-chapter.org>.

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