

Witch in Disguise

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“Maybe it’s the same for him,” said Alissa, getting to her feet and going to the bookcase. “He thinks you’re talking nonsense. I swear my grandmother had an Elvish dictionary, but I have a feeling it’s at the witches’ place. Hmm.”

“Another thing to do tomorrow,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “On top of work, magic lessons, and handing Blythe over to someone else so she can annoy them instead of me.”

“All in a day’s work.” Alissa yawned. “You know, I feel like staying in tonight.”

“Me too. Want to order takeout?”

At some point I needed to re-induct myself into paranormal society as a fairy as well as a witch, but I wanted nothing more than an early night. And no drama.

A flash of glitter woke me from sleep. I blinked, disorientated, and a tapping on the window drew my attention to the little pixie on the other side of the glass. It was still dark outside. I squinted at the pixie, which hovered, beckoning urgently.

“What?” I hissed. “You want me to come outside?”

The pixie kept beckoning. Yawning, I climbed out of bed and put slippers and a dressing gown on. Then I grabbed my bag with my keys and wand inside it. Careful not to wake Alissa, I tiptoed out of the flat,

then down the hallway to the doors leading to the communal garden.

Our section of the garden was on the right, and contained mostly herbs Alissa grew, with some wildflowers. I'd meant to set up my own space, but hadn't found the time yet. The silence made me a bit uneasy, despite the house's comforting presence behind me with its security wards. Thick trees sheltered beds of flowers, and—there was no sign of the pixie.

"Blair Wilkes," said a voice below my knee.

I jumped a foot in the air. Lurking in the bushes was a small pointed-eared man wearing brown-green clothes. An elf.

"What—what are you doing in my garden?"

"Are you Blair Wilkes?" he asked, in a loud, shrill voice.

I shot an alarmed look at the house. "Keep the noise down. People are sleeping in there. Where's the—wait, did the pixie let you in?"

The pixie appeared above me in a flash of glitter, bowing to the elf. I rubbed my forehead, wishing my brain would come up with less bizarre dreams so I could actually rest for once. "Cool. Pixies and elves partying in my garden. Don't wake me next time."

A sharp jab in my shin made my eyes fly wide open. The elf had kicked me. "What the—?"

"Do not speak that way to me, human. Are you Blair Wilkes?"

"Yes!" Ow. My leg throbbed with pain. So I wasn't dreaming. Or Blythe's madness had infected me, too. Wait, her sort of madness

didn't involve pixies and elves camping out in my garden at five in the morning. Nobody except me had a life that bizarre. "Why are you here?"

"I have been tasked with issuing an invitation to one Blair Wilkes, to come and meet with our king at dawn."

"Uh... what?" I rubbed my shin, realising belatedly that I was probably being rude. "Did you leave a letter with my cat?"

"Yes. Since you didn't reply, the king saw the need to send me to ask you in person."

I put my foot gingerly down on the grass. "Why?"

The elf drew himself up to his full four-foot height. "Accept the invitation and you will be granted passage into my kingdom. Decline, and you will never be welcome again."

"But I don't even know what I'm agreeing to!" I protested. "What does the king want to talk to me about? Is it because I'm a—" I broke off with a look at the pixie. "Can you understand him?"

"Yes." The elf sniffed. "Pixies are simple creatures, but this one seems to have appointed himself your bodyguard."

And the pixie was also in touch with my dad. "Is he telling the truth?" I asked it. "I'm not agreeing to go into the forest if there's another monster loose, or a mob of elves waiting to skewer me."

The elf gave me another jab, this time in the other shin. "Impertinence!" he yelled, loud enough to make me wince. I hoped the windows on the other flats were thicker than they looked. "You are a

rude, ungrateful human. It is an honour to talk to the king.”

I swallowed. Ticking off royalty didn't count as 'staying out of trouble'.

“I apologise,” I said carefully. “I didn't expect to be woken at this hour by a visitor, and I wasn't able to read the note. Since, er, I've never learned the Elvish language. I'm from the human world.”

“Yes, you are,” said the elf sourly. “That is why the king is interested to meet you. A fairy from the human world? It's unheard of.”

I'm also half witch, and you don't like the covens. He must know that, but now didn't seem a great time to remind him.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” I said. “Does the king want to see me because he's interested in whether I can do any fancy faerie tricks? Because, uh, I haven't known I'm a fairy for long enough to know much about my magic.”

“No, he's interested to see you because he believes he once met a family member of yours.”

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Ten minutes later—I managed to convince the elf that he didn't want me meeting the king while wearing a pink dressing gown and fluffy slippers, so he let me go back into my flat to change—I set off for the forest, leaving a note for Alissa explaining where I'd gone. I took my phone with me, but I didn't want to wake her up by texting her. With any luck, I'd be back long before it was time to leave for work.

The elf followed the same path I'd once taken to the woods when I'd come to visit a witch who lived nearby, who'd actually been dating an

elf at the time. I didn't know if they were still seeing one another, but maybe the elves didn't all hate witches. Or maybe the one I'd met the first time around had been an exception. Anyone would develop a dislike of wizards after dealing with the ex-wand-maker Mr Falconer. I was kind of surprised the elf messenger chose this route rather than the path near the waterfall, but this way was closer, and I still hadn't been back to the falls since the recent murders in the forest.

A thin mist hung over the trees at this hour in the morning, the sun peeking up behind the woods that stretched from the northern side of town to the lake. The pixie flew alongside me when the elf beckoned me into the woods off the roadside. Birdsong sounded in the background, the path as tranquil as ever, but doubts began to creep in.

"So... you know the fairies?" I asked my silent companion.

The elf didn't answer. He'd dangled the bait, and now here I was, following him into no man's land. The path dipped and ploughed into deeper woodland as we walked, until it hit me that we'd long since left the witches' territory behind. And he still hadn't said a word. The last time I'd talked to an elf in the forest, he'd yelled at me that my fellow witches were destroying the woods and I'd worried he might attack me. And as for the drunken one in the hospital who bit Alissa? Hmm. Maybe I should have reminded myself of that before committing to meeting the king. This wasn't your best idea, Blair. The trees were too close, their trunks gnarled, their branches twisted, like hundreds of faces watched me—

I nearly tripped over a tree root. There were elves everywhere, looking down from the branches, peering through bushes, all staring at me. It was a hundred times worse than being stared at by witches, and I'd come too far into the woods to run back out without ending up hopelessly lost.

“Er,” I whispered to the elf in the lead. “Is everyone in the forest supposed to know we’re here?”

“We’re going into the king’s lands,” he said shortly. “Yes, I imagine they’re curious as to why a human is here. However, you had a direct invitation from the king, and you will not be harmed.”

I can’t believe this is my life. Imagine what the covens would say if they learned I was walking in the forest with elves. Then again, after I’d exposed my fairy side in public, nothing would shock people anymore. I could ride through the falls naked on a unicorn and nobody would bat an eyelid.

Finally, the leading elf stopped outside a large oak tree several times the size of a regular one, with huge branches reaching like giant arms, and thick roots sprawling across the forest floor. More elves stood in lines, wielding sharpened branches like medieval soldiers carrying swords. They stepped aside, revealing a gap in the roots which opened into a sort of tunnel.

“Your king lives in there?” I asked the elf.

“He always has.”

I’d heard the elves hadn’t always lived here, but I wasn’t about to challenge him now. Would I even fit into that tunnel? I wasn’t especially tall, but the elves seemed to stop at four or four and a half feet.

The elf held out a hand to stop the pixie. “He cannot go in there with you.”

With a flutter, the pixie flew onto a nearby branch, while the elf stopped to exchange a few words with the guards. They didn't look thrilled at the prospect of the pixie fluttering around outside, either, but they stepped aside and allowed me to follow the elf to the massive tree trunk.

Please don't let this be a mistake.

I walked in, having to duck my head under the low-hanging ceiling. While the tunnel was wide enough to accommodate several elves, I had to walk at a half-crawl, half-crouch, since the average elf was the size of a child. Hoping that I wasn't breaking some rules of propriety, I resigned myself to meeting the king while on my knees covered in mud.

After a bit, the tunnel opened up into a wide cave with bark walls. The edges were lined with guards and an elf wearing gold finery sat on a tree stump in the centre. He was the same height as the other elves, but appeared smaller when sitting down.

The other elves bowed. I was on the floor already, but the elf who'd brought me here jabbed me in the spine, causing me to lose my balance and face-plant. My face flushed as I raised my head, awkwardly wiping my chin with my sleeve and hoping I hadn't smeared mud everywhere. "It's, er, an honour to meet you, your majesty."

The elves' king said something in Elvish to the guards, then stood up. In this position, he was taller than me. "You are Blair Wilkes, the fairy."

"I—yes, I am." Best to keep my desire to be more witch than fairy out of this conversation. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling his eyes taking in every inch of my mud-splattered, awkward human appearance. "No fairies have

lived near Fairy Falls for a very long time.”

“I know,” I said, then wondering if it sounded rude, I added, “I only moved here a few months ago. I’m new.”

“So you are. You stink of human nastiness.”

“Uh... thank you?” Oops. No sarcasm, Blair. That wouldn’t help.

“The last fairy who came to the falls also paid me a visit,” he said. “He came to ask a favour. I see you have his likeness, even with your human ugliness on the surface.”

My throat went dry and the insult slid right off me. “You’re talking about my... my family?”

“Speak only when I command,” said the king. “You may be human, but there’s potential in you, according to Bramble here.” He indicated an elf who I recognised as the one who’d yelled at me when I’d been in here looking for the place where old Ava’s wand had backfired.

“But—he said the witches were evil and so was I,” I blurted.

“We have no love for the witches,” said the king. “The devious ones who confined us to the woods and tore out our trees by the roots.” The other elves whispered and muttered, getting riled up. Not good. I needed to change the subject.

“Okay, I know you don’t like the witches,” I said. “I just don’t understand why you wanted to see me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I wished to see the fairy... but you look like a human.”

“Oh. I... don’t know how to remove the glamour.” I’d only done so when I was unconscious and when I’d stepped under the Fairy Falls. And the pixie had re-glamoured me the last time. It wasn’t like I’d had the opportunity to practise with an expert like I had with witchcraft.

The elf king made an impatient noise and let out a command in Elvish. One of the others snapped his fingers, and I slid awkwardly forwards, my body feeling—lighter. Wings beat, lifting me higher. I breathed in, and despite the confined space of the tree, the air tasted fresher, somehow. The smells were more fragrant. The ceiling brushed my head as I hovered, managing to refrain from flying away.

“There,” he said. “That’s better.”

I wouldn’t say I disagreed, but the indignity of being shape-changed against my will grated on me. “What was that for?” Oops. I hadn’t waited to be asked before speaking, but this time he didn’t comment. Instead, he examined me as though I was an interesting toy.

“I have a request to make,” he said. “There’s something I need, and you’re just the candidate to bring it to me.”

“Bring... what to you?” My voice rose in confusion.

“Bring me some pixie dust,” he said.

“I... why? There’s a pixie right outside.”

“Not that kind,” he rasped. “It’s a plant. A rare one, and as far as I heard, the witches have the last of it.”

“What, you want me to steal it from them? Why?” Careful, Blair.

Refusing a monarch wasn't wise, but neither was stealing from the witches, who'd done more to make me feel welcome than almost anyone else.

"I would have thought you would have guessed," said the elven king. "If you bring me what I request, then I will assist you with contacting the man who visited me in the woods not so long ago."

"My dad?" I said. "Are you sure it was him?"

"That male is the only fairy who's come into our territory in the last few decades, human. It was several years ago, but he had your face."

He's telling the truth. Whatever the pixie dust plant was, it shouldn't be that hard to get hold of, right? Let's face it, hearing the elf king out was probably better than getting my cat to sneak in and out of the jail. Not to mention, getting the elves on my side could only be a good thing.

"I'll do it," I said.

"Then you may leave."

The pixie waited outside the tunnel, fluttering anxiously. The same elf guard as before escorted me through a different route among the trees, until the other elves faded into the background and stopped pointing at me. I hardly noticed. A chance to find out why my dad had been near Fairy Falls and had never visited me as a child? I wouldn't miss it.

I stopped, realising the elf had disappeared into the trees. The pixie hovered next to me, making chattering noises.

“Hey,” I said to it. “Er... can you show me how to redo my glamour?”

The pixie snapped its fingers, and the next thing I knew, I was on my knees in human form. My clothes were streaked with mud and my face probably was, too. Pushing my hair out of my eyes, I looked up. The pixie had disappeared.

I rose to my feet. Ah. I didn't know this section of the woods. Had the elf got me lost on purpose? If I kept walking, I'd find my way out eventually, but I might easily end up on shifter territory by mistake.

“Blair?”

I spun on the spot, my heart leap-frogging. Nathan stood on the path between the trees, looking bewildered.

“Oh. Hi.” Had he seen me transform? Or was it the mud? He didn't like the elves... no, he'd once made a remark about a group of elves overstepping their boundaries and giving the witches trouble. And it was the look on his face and his tone of disdain that had convinced me he'd feel the same about fairies. At least I was re-glamoured this time.

“You're on shifter territory,” he said.

“I am? But I can't be...” That sneaky elf. He'd dropped me on the wrong side of the border on purpose. “I was lost. I'll go back...” I walked awkwardly around him and then stopped, not having a clue where the path led.

“That way,” he said, pointing. “I'm actually on my way to talk to the werewolves.”

“You are? Why?” I cringed inwardly. He had no obligation to tell

me anything. I mean, look at me, making deals with elves as though I had the faintest idea what I was doing. “Uh, never mind. I’ll see you later.”

I hurried along the path, mentally kicking myself. Shifter territory wasn’t the place to stop for a friendly chat, but it would have been nice to talk to someone about what the elf king had said. But first, I needed to tell Alissa where I’d been and clean myself up before work. Oh, and figure out how to get hold of this pixie dust, which would first involve working out what it actually was. It might even be here in the forest. Most herbs and leaves the witches used grew here. I also had full access to the witches’ stores, in theory, if I could get Rita’s help. But it sounded too easy. Everything I’d heard since I’d moved here told me that the elves were pranksters at best, hostile at worst. And it was obvious that my novelty value was mostly at work here. Still... it wouldn’t hurt to at least try to fulfil the elves’ request. They didn’t invite humans to speak to their king every day.

I got back to the flat to find Alissa had left a note of her own underneath mine, saying she was on an early shift. That postponed our conversation until later, which meant I had nobody to discuss the elf king’s offer with before work. I should have thrown caution aside and talked to Nathan, despite everything... but I hadn’t been ready to open those old wounds, especially on shifter territory.

I went to my room to find some clean clothes and found Sky snoozing on my bed. “I could have used your company out there,” I told him.

Sky remained asleep. Rolling my eyes, I grabbed some fresh clothes and made for the shower. I might have looked a dishevelled mess in front of the elves’ monarch, but that didn’t mean I had to show up for work in the same condition.

This time, I hardly noticed the stares on the way to the office. My mind whirled with the elf king's promise. A way to get information on my father without dragging Nathan into my business again, or breaking paranormal laws by getting my cat to sneak into a high security prison... I couldn't deny it was tempting. I just needed to keep my word, make the elves' king like me a little more, and maybe he'd give me answers.