

Witch in Disguise

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Even if it meant embracing my fairy side, without shame.

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I arrived at Dritch & Co to find Callie hunched over the reception desk, a scowl on her pretty face.

“Callie, are you okay?” I asked.

“What?” she snapped.

“Nothing,” I said, startled. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she growled, sounding more wolf-like than I’d ever heard her in her human form. Frowning, I went into the office.

Once again, Lena was absent, and the other two were already buried in work. Bethan was so absorbed in multitasking that it wasn’t until I put a fresh cup of coffee on her desk that she looked blearily up at me. “Hey, Blair. I take it you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?” I asked, confused.

“Lena quit.” She rubbed her eyes. “That means we’ll have three people doing the work of four again, and my mother’s taken the day off, too.”

“She has? Why?”

“I don’t know. She’s acting weird lately. I don’t know. But it’s up to us to hold the fort here.”

“Huh.” I picked up the papers I’d left here yesterday. “Ah. Forgot... I might get a

call from the hunters today. I left them a voicemail message yesterday.”

“Who put them up to this?” Bethan asked. “Seriously, if my mother was here, I’d be tempted to ask if she definitely wanted us to go ahead with the decision.”

“Put who up to what?” I said blankly, wishing I’d had caffeine before coming to the office. Even a shower hadn’t woken my brain from the shock of my experience in elf territory. “Oh, you mean, who’s the person who asked us to call the hunters? Didn’t you say you didn’t know?”

“My mother will know,” she said distractedly. “I assume she was okay with the decision, but she’s not making much sense lately. Usually these decisions go to the covens first, so the town’s council can make an informed choice. I mean, we do need security. More than we already have. But the hunters don’t have a great history with a lot of the town’s paranormals.”

“Oh, is that why Callie’s in such a mood?” I asked. “I just came in and she grunted at me.”

“Did that to me, too,” Lizzie commented. “Yeah, I don’t think we should be hiring hunter security guards without the boss’s definite say-so. If it turns out the covens are responsible, then it’s fine. But otherwise...”

“They haven’t got back to me yet.” But an uneasy feeling stirred inside me. Bringing in more hunters... would Nathan agree that it was a good move? For that matter, what in the world was he doing on the werewolves’ territory this morning?

I turned to today’s call list in an attempt to get my mind firmly away from elves, Nathan, and anything fairy-related. The boss had left a never-ending list, but not a very well put together one. A lot of the names were wrong. And the job titles. Sometimes the people listed didn’t exist at all.

“Is the boss losing her grip?” I asked after the third failed call. “She doesn’t normally make so many mistakes.”

“She doesn’t normally make any mistakes,” said Bethan in a slightly frazzled

voice. "I'm having to correct all the details on mine, and if yours is half as bad, we're likely to be here until midnight."

"Same with you two?" asked Lizzie. "It's not like her to make so many errors."

It wasn't, but maybe the boss had as much on her mind as I did. Between the three of us, we made some headway, but not much. Mid-morning, we all agreed to take a break to compare notes and see who had the most accurate details.

"I had something I wanted to ask you two," I said. "Have either of you seen Blythe lately?"

"Blythe?" said Bethan, raising her eyebrows. "Nope. Of course not. I thought she was avoiding us all."

"Yeah, you're not going to believe what happened to me yesterday," I said. "She showed up at my flat asking for my help. Not only is she acting weirdly nice, she seems to have lost her mind-reading powers. I read the truth from her—no lies."

Bethan and Lizzie both gaped at me, their files forgotten.

"That wasn't Blythe," said Lizzie. "Was it? Are you sure someone—like Blythe herself—didn't just send an illusion after you?"

"Is she that good at illusion spells?" I said sceptically. I'd heard her mind-reading powers were the best magical skill she had.

"Well... no," said Bethan.

"Also, I met her family," I added. "They believed it was her. And her mum's even worse than she is, if possible."

"How in the world did you end up meeting her family?" asked Lizzie. "Nobody goes to her house. At all."

"She invited me." I shrugged, beginning to wonder if I should be telling them this. "Look, she was wandering around outside my house acting like a stranger. I

was concerned. And we couldn't get answers from Madame Grey or the other coven leaders because they were all in a meeting, so I figured I'd hear her out. Didn't come to any conclusions, but she does seem to have lost her mind-reading powers."

"Okay, I get that," said Bethan. "As unlikely as it is, any of us would panic if our magic stopped working. And she viewed hers as the best thing about her, and so did everyone else, to be honest. But as far as the rest of it goes... nope. I'd say she's messing with you on purpose."

"That's what Alissa said," I said. "And I would believe her, but she seems so genuine. She didn't even bring up the fact that I got her fired so she had to move back to her mum's place, or any of the other arguments we had."

Bethan shook her head. "Well, that definitely doesn't sound like Blythe. From the hints I picked up when we worked together, she didn't get along with her family. I thought she lived with her dad and older siblings after the divorce before she got her own place."

"How do you even know that?"

"She let a few things slip when she worked here," Bethan said. "Yeah, sounds fishy. If she's not lying, then someone must have put a spell on her. Or used a potion. How long has she been like that for, do you know? Most potions have a limited span before they stop working."

"She said her mind-reading powers switched off over the weekend," I told them. "She just woke up like that. I assume the personality change is a side effect. Or the other way around."

"You can't change someone's basic personality," said Lizzie. "Except through something like an amnesia spell. If she still remembers who she is, it's got to be a surface charm. They don't last long, though. Not like curses."

I cast my mind around to remember my lesson with Rita about the differences between the types of magic cast with a wand. "Curses last longer than hexes," I said. "So if it's still there today, it's probably a curse."

Curses were the hardest type of magic to track because they could be cast at any time without the victim being aware in the slightest. They could also be put on an object or scheduled to switch on after a certain condition was met... the possibilities were endless. Which meant figuring out which person had decided to put the curse on her was as difficult as reading the boss's handwriting.

"Does it matter?" asked Bethan. "You aren't seeing her again?"

"I said I'd take her with me to the coven," I said. "There's no reason she can't go there herself, but she seems to have attached herself to me for some weird reason. Anyway, I already have a magic lesson tonight, so I figured it couldn't hurt."

Technically, I didn't have a lesson, but after yesterday's had been cancelled, I knew Rita would want to make up the lost time. And while my curiosity about the next stage of my witch magic remained, my mind was more on the elf king's quest and my need to find the pixie dust. Rita would be able to help with that. Or Madame Grey. The sooner I got it done, the sooner I could learn why my dad had left me alone in the human world.

Bethan sighed. "You're too trusting, Blair. Anyway. Let's get back to it."

When I got home, it was too find the door already open, and Nina standing there, looking furious.

"What is she doing in here?" Nina demanded. "Get her out."

"Who?"

I looked past her, through the open door. Oh, no. Blythe was in my flat.

"She's insisting you invited her over and won't leave," Nina said through clenched teeth.

"I didn't," I said. "I'll talk to her. Blythe, can you go to the witches' headquarters? I'll be there soon. I just need to drop off my work things."

She blinked brightly at me. "Oh, sure!" She bounded out of the hallway.

Nina gave her a glare before retreating into the building, while I waited outside to make sure Blythe actually walked off rather than hanging around outside. She headed down the road, after giving me another puppy-eyed look that was going to haunt me for the next hour.

Why can't one thing in my life go without a hitch?

I let myself into the flat and found Alissa lying on the sofa. "Rough day?"

She grunted. "What was that shouting?"

"Blythe was hovering outside the door. Didn't she knock?"

"I was asleep." She lifted her head up. "Who else was there?"

"Nina. If I didn't know her ability wasn't permanent, I'd say she's the one who switched off Blythe's powers. She does have the ability to do that..."

Maybe even my lie-sensing skills. But I'd sensed them still working when we'd talked yesterday, and I wasn't convinced they weren't a fairy skill instead of a witch one.

"What does that matter?" she asked.

"It matters because someone hexed Blythe to turn her personality backwards. And Nina has the ability to block others' powers."

Alissa's face scrunched up. "I have no idea, and to be honest, I don't care. You shouldn't either. You have enough problems without pulling Blythe's onto your list as well. And more to the point, what was the deal with the note you left this morning? Did you seriously go wandering into the forest?"

"Uh... yeah. I have a few new developments to tell you."

Alissa listened in silence as I described my journey to the elves' territory, the meeting with the king, and his offer to help me find my father in exchange for the pixie dust.

"Huh," she said. "Pixie dust as a plant? Never heard of it."

My heart sank. "Really? Did they send me after something impossible on purpose?"

"No clue," said Alissa. "Why do you have to do what he says?"

"Because he's met my father. I think. He didn't lie."

"Blair, you need to stop trusting these people. First Blythe and now the elves."

Alissa's lack of faith stung a little, but she was probably right.

"I'll ditch Blythe as soon as the curse is off," I said. "I know she can't keep showing up at our flat acting like a lost puppy. We have two cats and a pixie to contend with as it is."

"I didn't see a pixie."

"He was here this morning, with the elf ambassador. I wouldn't have gone wandering into the woods with him otherwise."

"At least you have some sense left."

"Thanks," I said. "What's up with you?"

"Long day," she mumbled, rubbing her forehead. "Might have picked up a fever from one of the patients. I'm going to get an early night."

Who knew, maybe I was making a series of monumental mistakes by trying to help Blythe and the elves' king. I'd ask Rita about the pixie dust, and if it turned out it was impossible to get hold of, I'd tell the elves I'd failed and leave it at that.

True to her word, Blythe waited outside the witches' headquarters and beamed at me. "You did come back." She blinked at me with her huge eyes. Lost puppy indeed. The real Blythe was going to be hopping mad when she came to her senses and realised what she'd done. That thought alone was enough to cheer me up. I walked into the building in higher spirits, imagining Blythe's look of dawning horror when it hit her that she'd apologised to me, brought me into the family life she kept hidden from everyone, and begged for my help.

Luck was with me today, and I found Rita in the classroom. She was a witch of around forty-something, with dyed curly red hair and an indeterminate number of bangles on each arm.

"Hey, Rita," I said. "I have a couple of things I wanted to ask you before my lesson."

"Oh, you have a lesson?" asked Blythe. "I'll wait outside."

"Or ask Madame Grey," I said to her. "She'll be able to help you."

"That's not a good idea," said Rita. "She's very busy. What did you want to ask her?"

Blythe looked questioningly at me. "Blair thinks something's wrong with me."

"Her mind-reading powers vanished," I explained. "At the same time, she started acting like... this. We used to work together."

Rita's gaze sharpened in understanding. "Yes. You're Blythe, right?"

"I am," she said, sounding worried. "Er, I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"No. Sit down. Let me try a few spells so I can see if anyone cast a curse on you."

Blythe sat obediently at the front desk, and Rita pulled out her own wand, walking around her. "Hmm. No visible effects."

Her wand moved in circles, and Blythe fidgeted, her mouth pulling down at the

corners. "What's happening to me?"

"It's not a spell," said Rita. "Nor a curse with any side effects that I can see. When did this happen?"

"Saturday, I think," I said. "She showed up at mine first thing Monday morning, thinking I could help. I don't know why. It's not like I haven't left a trail of unholy chaos behind me lately."

"You did catch a murderer the other week." Rita's lips pursed, and she stood back, waving her wand over Blythe once more. "Not a spell. Or a potion. I'd say a hex or curse, but that's a very odd combination. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was more than one."

"So someone wanted to get rid of her magic and someone else put the personality altering curse on her?" Were there two people out to get her at once?

"She might even have done it herself. Did you, Blythe?" She spoke to the baffled young witch as though addressing one of the academy's ten-year-old students.

"I don't think so," said Blythe, biting her lip. "Am I stuck like this?"

"I'm sure Madame Grey will be able to fix you when she has a free moment," said Rita. "Blair, did she give you any clues about who might have done it?"

"Well, she argued with my neighbour today. They didn't seem to like one another, or she didn't before the curse, anyway. Nina has the ability to turn off other witches' powers... but she said it was temporary."

"Oh, I heard about her," said Rita. "I'll ask her to come in to have a word. Blythe, I'm afraid there's not much I can do for you. Blair and I have a lesson now."

Yes, we do.

Blythe obediently turned and left, and I shook my head after her. "She's seriously lost it. Not that it isn't an improvement, but it's plain weird."

“Madame Grey will sort her out,” said Rita. “I apologise for missing your lesson yesterday. Have you practised the spells we learned with your left hand?”

Oh. “I... no. I’ve been busy. And I made such a mess of things in our flat last time that I didn’t want to cause Alissa any more stress. I’ve been run off my feet at work, too.”

I sounded like I was making excuses, but I’d genuinely forgotten. I’d hardly had a moment’s peace for ages.

Disappointment clear in her tone, Rita said, “In that case, get out your wand. I’ll leave a message for Nina asking her to come here so I can ask her a few questions.”

I picked up my bag and carried it to my usual spot in the classroom as she made the phone call, trying to quash my feelings of guilt. I was only one person trying to live what felt like three lives. Besides, I knew at least one solution to my magical mishaps: use my left hand and not my right. Hopefully after that, success would follow.

I pulled out my wand, which I’d decorated with a pair of fairy wings. While it felt more at home in my left hand than my right and I was relieved to have an explanation as to why my magical skill was so erratic, I still wasn’t a particularly confident spellcaster. Though now I thought about it, my magic hadn’t malfunctioned since the killer’s threat had gone. Hmm.

Rita nodded when I explained this after she’d finished talking to Nina on the phone. “You were under a lot of stress. That can’t have helped.”

“Yeah...” I decided not to mention I was under almost as much stress now, minus the threat to my life. And that might change if I aggravated the elves. “Before we start, I wondered—do we have any pixie dust in the ingredient stores?”

“Any what?”

“Er, it’s a plant, isn’t it?”

She blinked. “Yes, I believe went extinct a few decades ago, at least. Madame Grey will know.”

I nearly groaned aloud. Trust me to fall for a trick like that. “Never mind.”

“Okay, Blair. Show me the levitating spell, using your left hand this time.”

I was on my best behaviour for the rest of the lesson. So, thankfully, was my wand. Maybe having something else on my mind made it easier not to stress about magic. Of course, it didn't hurt that I was no longer agonising over when to tell Nathan the truth about being half fairy, which had distracted me for weeks. For the first time, I left the classroom feeling optimistic about my future as a witch.

That feeling vanished when it hit me that I'd have to either tell the elves I'd seen through their trick, or avoid them forever. I paused outside Madame Grey's office, debating, then I knocked. She was likely to know why the elf king might have asked me to bring him pixie dust. If it'd really gone extinct, the older witches might remember. Or Vincent the vampire might. As an elder vampire, he'd been around for much longer than the majority of people in town. But I'd tried to swear off dealing with the vampires any more than I had to. Partly for safety, partly because I wanted to stop accidentally ticking people off. I was incredibly lucky not to have run into any werewolves when I'd ended up on their territory this morning.