

VIVIAN'S PROMISE

MODERN FAE NOVELLA 0.5

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I love him. I love him not. I love him.

Damn. I tossed the stem into the grass at my feet. Did every single flower in this field have an odd number of petals?

Of course I loved him. That's how I'd ended up in this thrift-store wedding dress, picking flowers for my bouquet in a field outside of an idyllic chapel in the English countryside in the first place. The question I'd been struggling with for the past half hour was more complicated.

Alex and I had only been engaged for a month, but we'd dated all through high school. Stumbling across the perfect dress while on our families' summer vacation to England seemed like a sign that we should get married now, even though it wouldn't be legal, and we'd have to put off the honeymoon because Alex was flying home tomorrow to get ready for cadet training. All that royal wedding excitement we'd encountered must have infected our spontaneous decision. Except I was no Diana, and Alex was much cuter than her prince.

I wandered farther from the chapel, kicking at dandelions just to watch the seeds scatter, until the structure I'd fled disappeared behind one of the rolling hills. I slipped through a gap in the hedge at the edge of the field and found myself in another nearly identical green pasture. Only, this one had even more bright blooms swaying in the breeze. And sheep. I bent and studied a trio of delicate purple flowers, wishing I had my camera with me to capture the soft petals in this light. Instead, I yanked them from the earth and began to assemble a new bouquet.

Alex claimed if he was old enough to go to war, he was old enough to have a wife. I couldn't argue with that logic. And if I changed my mind and backed out now, I'd have to sit through another lecture from my parents about the consequences of my flighty, irresponsible behavior. My stomach churned with anxiety. But I didn't turn around. I followed the pull that led me away from that chapel instead of running toward it.

The sun crept toward the horizon as I gathered up the pink and purple wildflowers. If I didn't turn back soon, I'd ruin our plans for a sunset ceremony. But I couldn't go back without a bouquet, and I'd ruined the first batch in my sad attempt at fortune-telling. So, I followed the line of pale-pink blossoms that I followed led to a clump of gnarly old trees, stopping to pick the colorful blooms every few steps. By the time I'd reached the circle of thick, twisted trunks, I'd collected a respectable bouquet. No excuses remained. Time to turn around. But the patterns created by the light as it penetrated the trees in the clearing enchanted me, and I wanted a closer look.

Lifting the hem of my long milky-white gown, I stepped over an exposed root. Summer-evening sunlight filtered

through the branches. A breeze ruffled the leaves above my head. I turned in a slow circle, marveling at the natural beauty and wishing I'd thought to bring my camera to capture the texture of the tree bark, the curving roots, the way the sun filtered down onto the carpet of moss at the center, and the lichens that dangled from the branches above. I longed to be rooted like this, to weather with time and age while growing strong and healthy, surrounded by my family and friends. Who knew what this circle of oaks had seen, had survived.

Finally prepared to return to the chapel and take my place at Alex's side, I completed my circle, turning once again to face the way I'd come. Only, now a figure stood blocking my path. Tall and lean, wearing a tunic and leggings that nearly blended with the tree it leaned against. The creature cocked its hairless head and twitched its long pointy ears as it regarded me.

"Are you lost, human?" it asked.

"What are you?" I took a step backward, away from this strange being that had appeared from nowhere.

It stepped toward me. Large dark eyes, with no visible pupil, narrowed as the corners of its mouth tilted upward. "You've entered my home and haven't guessed?"

I swallowed, then blinked, convinced what I was seeing couldn't be real. With those ears and those eyes, and how it called me "human," I could only guess that it wasn't. I'd read my fair share of fantasy stories, but never in my life had I thought I might stumble into one. "You...but that's impossible."

"Quite possible. After all, you came to me." It waved a hand in the direction I'd approached, as though it had been hiding and watching me the whole time.

"I did no such thing. I merely wished to have a closer look

at these trees. How was I to know that a...a faerie lived here?" Perhaps it would let me go if it knew I'd only stumbled into this place on accident.

"So you do know what I am." It laced the long, bony fingers of its hands together in front of its chest. Sharp nails arched from the end of each finger, making them seem twice as long as a normal human's.

It had been a lucky guess. I gulped and decided to try to make a run for it. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, but I must be going." I turned to exit the circle of trees between a different pair of trunks. Only, when I started forward, it appeared before me again.

"Not yet."

I glanced in the direction of the chapel, which was no longer visible beyond the hedge and over the horizon. Then I checked the position of the sun in the sky. I hadn't worn a watch because wearing a watch with a wedding gown seemed ridiculous. But, now I wished I knew the time. If it was late enough, perhaps someone would come looking for me. Except they wouldn't know where I'd gone.

"Please?" I asked, hoping the use of that so-called magic word might allow me to pass.

The faerie laughed, an eerie sound that sent shivers down my spine. "First, I demand payment."

"Payment? For what?" My palms began to sweat. One fist clutched my new bouquet, and I clenched the other at my side, resisting the urge to press my hand against the silk of my dress.

"You trespassed, human. Now you must pay the price." One half of the faerie's large mouth pulled up into a grin.

"I didn't know this area was off-limits. It's not like there's a sign. How about we make a deal—"

Eerie Fae laughter cut short my proposal. "You'd like to make a deal with me?"

I had no idea why the idea was so amusing. "Let me past, and I'll never come here again."

The faerie waved one thin finger back and forth. "That's not a deal, human. There's nothing in it for me."

"Of course there is. I won't bother you again. See? We both win."

"If you want to make a deal, we must both give something up. I have you. If you leave, I'll be giving you up. I'd rather not give you up. I have use for a human like you." It sniffed the air around me.

I shivered.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave, human?" it asked.

"I need to return to my fiancé. I've been gone too long. He'll be looking for me."

The faerie cocked its head to one side and closed its eyes like it was listening to something I couldn't hear. When it opened its eyes, it grinned. "How easy it would be to make him forget you. To make all of them forget you. Who would come rescue you, then?"

My skin tingled from hairs rising in alarm on my forearms. "What do you want?"

"To taste your lies." It crept closer to me.

I froze. My breath caught in my throat. "What? No."

It shrugged. "Then bargain with me for your life, human."

I considered my options. If no one came for me, I would likely die at the hands of this creature. If I bargained for my life, I might find a way to get back, but at what cost? I took a breath. The only way I was getting out of here was to agree. "Okay."

The hedge beyond the circle of trees rustled. The faerie and

I both twisted toward the sound.

A man jogged toward us, brushing leaves from his hair. “Stop.” He paused outside the cluster of trees, gripping the strap of the canvas bag he’d slung over one shoulder. He wore simple clothes, brown moleskin slacks and a flannel shirt. I was sure I’d never seen him before.

“Who are you to interfere here?” The faerie asked the question on both our minds.

The young man straightened. “I’m Oscar Sauvage, descendent of Godda. I seek an audience with the Faerie Queen.”

“Come closer.” The faerie beckoned to the young man, coaxing him inside the ring of trees.

Oscar reached a hand inside his flannel shirt and extracted a piece of twine he wore tied around his neck. He fumbled with the clump of braided vegetation hanging from the twine, then held it out for the faerie to see. “You cannot charm me, Fae.”

The faerie stretched an arm toward Oscar and flicked its wrist. Vines twisted up from the ground, winding around the young man’s limbs and pinning him against one of the tree trunks. “No matter,” the faerie said. “I can grant you no audience, and you are interfering.”

“Leave him alone.” I picked up a handful of pebbles and tossed them toward the faerie, hoping to distract it. Whoever this man was, he might be able to help me. If he could get away, perhaps he could tell my family what had happened to me.

“You must not deal with this trickster,” Oscar said, straining against the vines that bound him to the tree.

“He’ll stay where he is until our deal is complete. He may watch, but he must not interfere.” The creature held up two long fingers and swiped them through the air between us and

Oscar. The space between the trees shimmered for a moment, but when I blinked, the effect had disappeared.

My shoulders slumped. "Okay. Let me think."

"Think, human. What is it that you desire?"

To return to the chapel, for starters. But, what if I could bargain for more? If I must give this faerie something in exchange, perhaps I could argue for more than just my safe return.

"Be careful!" The young man strained against the vines. "You can't trust this creature." His thigh muscles bulged as he pressed against the trunk with his boot and twisted.

The faerie hissed at the man. "Silence. Another word from you, and I will take you as well."

I paced while I considered my options. The man's warning made sense. Every faerie tale I'd ever heard spoke of wishes granted in unexpected ways, all because there had been a loophole in the wording. I must get this right, or I'd surely suffer undesirable consequences.

It wouldn't be enough to escape from the clutches of this faerie. I must make sure it could never harm me, or my loved ones, again. But I'd need to offer it something in return, something it would value at least as much as my life.

I stopped in the middle of the tree ring and turned to face the Fae. "I'm ready. But first I want to know what will happen if I stay with you."

"I will feed off you."

I glanced over at Oscar, but he made no move to indicate whether or not what this faerie said was true. "Will I die?"

The faerie laid one extended finger against its lips as it considered my question. When one half of its otherwise smooth forehead wrinkled, I noticed that the creature lacked eyebrows, or any hair on its face. The expression appeared

odd without the effect of a quizzical arched brow. “No.”

“Okay. Then here is what I offer you: let me return to my family and my life with no interference of any kind from you or any of the Fae, and I will return to you once a year for one day and one night.”

A rumble vibrated from the faerie’s throat. “Your bargain is tempting, human, but not sufficient.” It licked its lips. “One day and one night each year is not enough in exchange for what you ask. However, I would take another in your place.” Its eyes cut toward the young man.

Oscar scowled but didn’t speak. Though he was a stranger to me, I hoped he knew I would never bargain with his life, not after he’d revealed himself in an attempt to save me. “Will two days and one night each year satisfy you?”

“No.” The faerie pinned me with its icy gaze. “I will let you go free to enjoy a long and happy life with your husband, but in exchange, I will take one of your heirs.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No.” There was no way I could ever agree to giving up one of my children to this creature.

“It must be you or one of your heirs. Decide, human.”

I glanced over at the young man. He strained against the vines that held him but didn’t meet my eyes. Perhaps this is why he’d tried to warn me. This horrible creature had trapped me in an impossible choice. I chewed on my lower lip as my mind scrambled for another option. Then, I had an idea.

“I will not hand over a child to you. If you want one, you must lure it yourself. And if you are successful, you must allow them to make the choice to stay with you or to return. If they choose to return, you must let them go and never bother my kin again. But it must be their choice.”

The faerie stalked toward me. “I will let them choose, if you agree you will not warn them or attempt to intervene.”

A horn blew in the distance, interrupting our negotiation. The faerie's pointed ears twitched toward the sound. It clamped a bony hand on my shoulder and turned its gaze toward the horizon. I looked as well, trying to locate the source. That's when I noticed the sun had dropped below the treetops. I needed to return soon, or Alex would think I'd abandoned him.

The faerie turned toward me but didn't release me from its grip. "I must go. Do we have a deal or are you coming with me?"

Oscar kicked his boot against the tree. The faerie stood between us, blocking my view of him. "You'll let me go free to live a long, healthy, happy life with my husband. You and your kind will stay away from me and my kin."

"Unless I succeed in luring one of your heirs to me. If I succeed, I will give it a choice to stay or to return, and in exchange you will not tell anyone about the Fae or our bargain."

"If they choose to return, you'll never bother us again." I locked eyes with the faerie and hoped I'd thought of everything.

The horn sounded again, this time closer. The faerie squeezed my shoulder, sinking long nails into my bare skin. Its pale-blue eyes remained locked with mine. "With what name will we seal this bargain? And speak the truth. I'll know if you're lying."

"Vivian," I said.

"Bryn the Rogue accepts your bargain, Vivian." It grinned and lifted its hand from my shoulder. I blinked, and it disappeared.

"You're lucky. The horn must have scared it off," Oscar said. The vines binding him had fallen to the ground at his feet when the faerie disappeared. He beckoned to me. "Come

on. We have to get out of here.”

I walked to the edge of the circle, and the faerie did not reappear to try to stop me. Hiking up the hem of my dress, I took a tentative step over the exposed tree roots. Then, when nothing happened, I lifted the other foot and crossed out of the ring.

“Hurry,” Oscar said. “We don’t have much time.” He started across the field, in the opposite direction of the chapel, glancing back at me over his shoulder after a few steps. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

“I’m not going with you. I have to go back.”

“There’s no time.”

“I know. I’m already late to my own wedding. I need to go.” I turned away from him and gripped the skirt of my dress, bunching it up in my hands without letting go of the flowers I’d picked. Just as I stepped forward, preparing to run back to the chapel, appearance be damned, a hand gripped my arm, holding me back.

My heart raced and my mouth went dry. I twisted my head, expecting to see boney fingers gripping my arm. Instead, Oscar’s smooth, warm hand held me and prevented me from bolting toward the chapel.

“If you go that way, they’ll get you for sure.”

I stared at his hand, then glanced up to take in the worried lines on his forehead. “Who?” The horn sounded again—only, this time it was louder and very near. A shiver ran down my spine.

“You can hear them, then?” His accent reminded me of the boarding-school boys in one of my favorite movies.

“That horn, you mean?”

He nodded.

“Of course. It’s loud as hell and getting closer. I’m not deaf,

I'm late for a wedding. *My* wedding." I shot a pointed look at his hand, which was still clinging to my forearm. "So let me go already. I'm not about to wander into a pack of hunters. I'll be fine."

He shook his head. "It's no good if you can hear it. You should stay with me until they've gone. If we can get to that cottage there, we should be able to miss them." He pointed to a leaning structure that appeared as though it might fall down in a stiff wind. "But we have to hurry."

"You must be joking. Look, I appreciate you trying to help me before, I really do, but I'm not about to follow you to some abandoned building just because some hunters chasing a helpless deer are blasting a horn. I may be an American, but I'm not an idiot, regardless of what you Brits think." I twisted my arm loose from his grip and stomped toward the hedge.

Oscar came jogging after me. "Sorry. Perhaps I wasn't clear. That's no ordinary hunt." He cut me off and stood blocking my path.

"Unless they're hunting brides, I don't think I'll have a problem." I veered around him, but he held out his arm.

"Right. See, that's the thing." His cheeks colored in the fading daylight. "Legends say that's exactly the sort of thing they're after."

I cocked my head. "Are you teasing me?"

"No. Sorry. I just...it's the summer solstice, right? Sunset." He pointed to the horizon.

"Exactly. My wedding day and time." I glared at him. "You're welcome to join me. It's not like the chapel will be full. But I really have to go."

The words were barely out of my mouth when the first rider leapt the hedge. The hooves of his black horse hit the ground but didn't make a sound. Oscar grabbed me and pulled

me against him as he edged us closer to the bushes.

Five more riders followed the first over the hedge before continuing on across the field, galloping away from us on silent mounts.

“What was—”

Oscar’s hand covered my mouth before I could get the rest of my question out. But, it was too late. A final rider, the one carrying the horn, cleared the hedge and pulled up short. He turned his mount to face us.

“What do we have here?”

Oscar released the hand he’d had covering my mouth and reached for my hand. His fingers closed around mine, warm and somehow reassuring, as he stepped alongside me to face the rider.

“Two lovers out for an evening stroll?” The rider slid from the saddle, keeping one hand on the reins of his mount.

“Apologies for getting in your way,” Oscar said. “We’ll just be going.”

“Nonsense.” He walked toward us with his eyes fixed on Oscar. “You look familiar.”

It should have concerned me that this mysterious sunset hunter recognized the guy who’d earlier attempted to rescue me and now held my hand like we’d been dating for years. But I couldn’t stop staring at the rider’s clothes. From the leather armor vest to his breeches and boots, the entire ensemble made him look like he was returning from a Renaissance fair, or a reenactment of some type. Perhaps that was why Oscar wanted to keep me from getting in the way.

The rider stopped in front of Oscar. “Yes. I know who you are.”

Oscar tightened his grip on my hand. “You must be mistaken.”

“No. I’d know that face anywhere.” He scrubbed a hand against his own chin. “You’re a Sauvage. Is this your lady?” He turned his eyes on me and caught me staring at him.

For a moment, it appeared as though I could see right through him to the trees in the field beyond. But it must have been some trick of the fading daylight, because when I blinked, the effect was gone. I opened my mouth to respond and clear up the confusion, but Oscar beat me to it.

“Yes. In fact, we were heading up to the chapel. We’re about to be married. We should really be going, if you’ll excuse us.” He tugged my hand and started walking toward the hedge.

I glared at him. He’d just tried to save me from bargaining with a faerie, only to try to keep me from returning to the chapel. Now he was pretending we were a couple. Perhaps there was something more to this strange rider than I understood. I decided to trust him and follow his lead.

“Stop.”

Oscar froze, and I halted alongside him, but that command caused something inside of me to snap. I’d had to make a terrible deal that I would likely regret forever, the sun was setting on my wedding, and my fiancé probably thought I’d abandoned him. Whoever this hunter guy was, I’d had enough. I’d gone along with Oscar’s polite English attempt at an exit. Now it was my turn.

I spun around to face off with Mr. Creepy Renaissance Fair. “Look, I don’t know who you think you are.” I pointed my finger at him as I lunged toward him. “But, I’ve had about enough. Whatever you and your friends are up to, we want none of it. Do you hear me? We’re getting out of here. Right. Now. So, don’t try to stop us again.” I gave him the glare I saved for my brother when he’d gone too far, pausing just long enough to show I wasn’t scared of him. After that, I’d

planned to pivot and march away, all the way back to the chapel.

Only, the creep stared back at me for a moment, then he had the nerve to start laughing. “Oh, she is a feisty one, isn’t she?”

Oscar’s hand gripped my shoulder. “Sorry. Sorry about that.” He tried to pull me back, but I wouldn’t budge.

If he thought this was feisty, he hadn’t seen anything yet. I shrugged off Oscar’s hand and executed my practiced older sister “you’re going to get it now” look before flinging my hair over my shoulder and pivoting toward the hedge. I’d managed a few angry steps before I sucked in a breath and froze in place from what felt like a bucket of cold water thrown at my back. Except, I wasn’t wet, and somehow that creep was standing in front of me instead of behind. His brows shadowed his eyes as he scowled at me, and I shivered.

Oh, no. Not another faerie. Please don’t let him be another faerie.

Thank you for reading this preview.

Buy the full novella at <http://a.co/d/i14oURw>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Menozzi is an award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy with romance. A former Midwestern girl, she currently resides on Orcas Island with her husband. In her spare time she is a competitive swimmer, reluctant runner, and devourer of books.

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