

EVE OF THE FAE

MODERN FAE BOOK 1

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MY eyes were playing tricks on me. That was the only rational explanation. I'd been traveling all day—a car, two planes, and now this taxi. At this point, I was so tired that I was starting to imagine things lurking in the darkness beyond the cab window. I focused on the back of the passenger headrest in front of me. There was no way that foggy blur on the horizon had actually been a group of armored men on horseback racing across the moonlit English countryside. I rubbed my eyes and leaned back against the sticky leather seat.

My fingers itched to reach for my phone and text my best friend, Angie, but I hesitated, remembering her parting words on the drive to the airport this morning. *I hope it's worth it.* Not exactly the most encouraging send-off, but she didn't understand how much Lydbury meant to me. She already thought I was crazy, running away from my perfectly acceptable life in the Bay Area to follow a dream. A dream job or a dream school would be one thing, but following a literal

dream about a woman in a tapestry, half a world away in England, was a little too far out there for my business-minded bestie. Honestly, it was a little too far out there for me, as well. But I couldn't get that lady out of my head, and once I'd figured out where I'd seen her before, it all came together. I just knew what I had to do.

When I opened my eyes, my weary reflection stared back at me from the cab window. Reaching up, I smoothed a hand over my ponytail, twisting the thick dark hair around my palm. We had to be close now. I pressed my face toward the window, careful to keep from touching the glass, and scanned the dark, rolling hills. No sign of metal armor flashing in the moonlight. I breathed a sigh of relief. Not crazy. Just tired. Then I caught my first glimpse of the peaked roof of Lydbury Manor rising up from the horizon, silhouetted against the night sky. Excitement thrummed in my veins, and I scooted to the edge of my seat.

The taxi slowed, and the crunch of tires on gravel signaled that we'd turned onto my aunt and uncle's private drive. Tall stone pillars framed the gated entrance. At the top of each, a bronze dragon curved around an iron ball, its mouth open and its forked tongue flicking out. Moonlight filtered down on them through the bare winter tree branches, and they appeared to slither and twist as we drove past. A chill ran down my spine like I'd been soaked with a bucket of ice water, and I shivered.

I tried to shake that eerie feeling as the driver guided the car down the long, tree-lined drive. He parked at the bottom of the wide stone steps leading up to the mansion entrance. Evergreen hedges garnished with strings of sparkling white lights bracketed an enormous oak door. All the windows remained dark, and other than those few strands of Christmas

lights, the place looked abandoned—but I knew better.

“Are you quite sure you have the right address, miss?” asked the driver.

I confirmed this was, indeed, the right address, then double-checked the fare and handed over my carefully counted bills. I grinned as I stepped out of the taxi and stared up at the doorstep of the ancient mansion. I loved this creepy old place and all its bizarre history so much. I’d spent every spare minute for the past few months reading and studying the legends and relevant bits of information I could get my hands on. Hopefully, my preparation would be enough to convince Uncle Oscar to take me on as his assistant. Once I’d accomplished that, the rest would fall into place. I was sure of it.

The driver set my suitcase and duffle on the bottom step and gave me one last questioning look before returning to his cab and disappearing into the darkness. I pulled my coat closed against the brisk winter wind and swung the strap of my duffle over my shoulder. At the top of the steps, I reached for the iron knocker and rapped several times.

The last time I’d been here, I hadn’t been able to reach the knocker. My father had lifted me, and even then, I hadn’t been able to make enough noise to rouse my aunt and uncle from their library at the back of the house. Most likely that’s where they were now, tucked into their favorite chairs, reading and working in front of the roaring fire. I waited for my aunt to make the long walk through the dark hall, past enormous rooms filled with antique furniture, which I’d been forbidden to play in as a child.

The door creaked open and my aunt’s face peeked out. When she saw me, she smiled and opened the door wide. “Come in, come in. Have you been waiting long? You must be freezing. Let me get your bag. Come, come. In you go.”

She shut the door behind me, then pulled me to her. I bent to return her hug, and all the worry drained from me. This was exactly where I needed to be.

She pushed me away and held me at arm's length. "Let me get a look at you. Our beautiful Eve... You've grown so tall, just like your father. Oh, how I hated that he got all the height in the family. But listen to me, carrying on. How was your trip? Made it here okay, then?"

"Yes, Auntie. Thank you so much for letting me stay for the holidays. Your house is just as big and spooky as I remember."

"Oh, well, you know Oscar. He won't change a thing. It's a wonder I got him to agree to 'The Great Purge,' as I've dubbed it." She shook her head but smiled and squeezed my hands. "But enough of my prattling on. Let me show you to your rooms so you can get some rest. Unless you want to stay up with us old folk?" She paused to study my face but didn't give me time to respond before she continued. "Look at you. You're exhausted. Come now, up this way. We'll get you settled and catch up over breakfast in the morning. Yes?"

Aunt Vivian took my duffle from me and headed up the curving staircase. Even though we talked every week over video chat, her warm smile was even better in person. As much as I wanted to prove to her husband that I was ready to assist him with his museum project, I'd be much more convincing after a good night's sleep.

I pushed away my anxious thoughts and followed my aunt up the stairs. Now that I was here, I wanted to absorb every detail of my uncle's historic home, starting with the woodwork that I'd been too young to appreciate on my previous visit. I ran my fingers over the carvings in the banister as we climbed, tracing the patterns of leaves and marveling at the woodland creatures sculpted into the vertical supports. At the

first landing, I paused in front of the tapestry hanging on the wall. A woman with flowing golden hair billowing around her pale face sat on a throne, surrounded by lush green flora and delicate flowers.

“She’s still here.” I shuddered as I stared into the woven eyes of the golden-haired woman I’d seen in my dream.

“Who, dear?” Aunt Vivian paused partway up the next flight of stairs and turned to look over her shoulder. “Oh! The Faerie Queen. Of course. You were quite taken with that tapestry when you were a child. You used to play with your dolls right there on the landing, making up stories about their adventures.”

“That’s meant to be her, right? Lord Edric’s wife?” Once I’d recognized the woman in my dream, I’d dug up everything I could find about Oscar’s ancestor Edric and his wife, Godda. If this tapestry was any indication, she certainly was beautiful enough to be a storybook faerie queen, as claimed by the local legends.

“Oh, yes. The Queen of the Faeries. Though, why she ever agreed to marry Oscar’s ancestor after he kidnapped her and brought her here, I’ll never understand.” She shook her head at the tapestry. “Do you remember playing here?”

“I remember so much about this house, but it’s funny...I don’t remember playing here.” Goose bumps prickled across my skin. I had some new theories about that story, based on my research, and none of them involved Godda being a Faerie Queen. After all, faeries weren’t real, and my uncle was an historian, not a storybook writer. I was convinced he’d appreciate my careful analysis and ideas.

“Hmm.” She squinted at me. “I think it was just after that visit you exchanged dolls for sneakers and books. After that, you were either running too fast for anyone to catch you or

hiding with your nose in a book.” Her eyes glazed over for a moment. Then she blinked, turned her head away, and continued climbing.

I took one more long look at the tapestry, then forced myself to follow Aunt Vivian up the stairs.

She paused at the second-floor landing, then turned to say, “I’m glad you decided to take a vacation and let me spoil you rotten.” Before I could respond, she disappeared to the left and started down the hall to the guest wing. My stomach clenched as I remembered that I was going to have to tell her I hadn’t been completely honest. I wasn’t here for a relaxing Christmas holiday, at least not if I could get Uncle Oscar to agree to let me help him with the exhibit. Now that I’d arrived, I started to question my decision to withhold the true purpose of my visit, no longer sure why I’d worried that they would try to talk me out of it. Not that it mattered. It was too late to turn back now. I’d already quit my job, and I didn’t even have a return ticket.

When I reached the landing, a movement at the end of the main hall caught my eye. I squinted into the darkness, but there was nothing in the hallway or on the back stairs that led up to the attic bedroom. I shook my head. That was it. I was exhausted and definitely imagining things. Still, a wave of nostalgia washed over me at the thought of that attic bedroom. That was where my brothers and I had slept when we’d last visited. I’d kind of hoped I’d get to sleep up there again. But my aunt had started walking down the hallway, so it looked like she had given me one of the guest rooms instead.

I turned and followed her down the hall, still carrying my suitcase. I didn’t want to ruin the beautiful hardwood floors or dirty the long, plush carpet that ran down the center of the hallway with the scratched and grimy wheels of my luggage.

Wainscoting covered the lower portion of the walls in a stain that matched the wood on the floors. The upper portion had been painted with a deep wine color and washed in light from electric candles with leaded glass shades mounted along the hall every few feet. I followed my aunt past several closed doors before she finally stopped and placed her hand on one of the doorknobs.

“Here you are, right in here.” She twisted the knob and pushed the door open to reveal an enormous bedroom. “Your own bathroom.” She pointed to a door in one wall. “And we started a fire in the hearth for you. Gets a bit drafty in this old place. If you like, I could bring you up a hot cocoa. Are you hungry at all? The cook’s gone home, but there might be something left from dinner that I could warm up for you.”

I shook my head no as I placed my suitcase inside the room and then threw my arms around Aunt Vivian.

“What’s that for, dear?” she asked.

“Thank you, Auntie. I like it when you spoil me.”

She leaned back and placed a hand on my cheek. “Make yourself at home. If you need anything, we’re down in the library. Your uncle will likely be up all night working. I’ll probably fall asleep reading in my chair. Some things never change.” She laughed and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving me alone in the room.

I shut the door behind her and pulled my phone out of my pocket on reflex. A quick glance at the screen confirmed I had no new messages. I turned off the screen and slid the phone onto the dresser, then tossed my duffle onto the bed and began unpacking my toiletries.

Once Uncle Oscar agreed to take me on as his assistant, I’d start by organizing and digitizing all his files. He probably still wasn’t using a computer. Then I’d take over coordination

of his project with the local history museum. He had classes to teach, and I had experience managing projects. It only made sense.

I changed into my pajamas and brushed my teeth, then peeled back the thick, soft duvet and crawled up onto the plush mattress. My mind continued to churn with plans long after I'd turned out the lamp. I stared at the ceiling in the darkness, listening to the crackle of the logs in the dying fire. Only then did I let myself think about the woman in the tapestry.

I closed my eyes, and a vision of Godda, seated on her throne, floated before my eyelids. Suddenly, I wasn't even remotely sleepy. Throwing off the covers, I decided to take Aunt Vivian up on the offer of a hot cocoa before bed. I pulled on my new, thick socks, grabbed my sweater off the chair, and padded down the hall toward the front staircase.

At the end of the hallway, I decided to take the back stairs that led straight to the kitchen instead of going down past the Faerie Queen tapestry. I turned left and started down the main hall, peeking into any open doorways I passed. A rustle and thunk from inside one of the dark rooms behind me made me stop and turn around.

I crept toward the open door, pausing outside to listen. Another thunk rattled the floor, followed by the unmistakable hiss of a cardboard box sliding across carpet. A dim light glowed from inside the room, one that was definitely not there a moment ago when I'd walked past.

"Uncle Oscar? Aunt Vivian? Is that you?" I called out.

A mumbled curse and a thud followed by a low growl was the only response I received.

I poked my head into the room, pausing in the entry to look around. "Uncle Oscar? Do you need help?"

A figure emerged from behind a stack of boxes. The light source seemed to be coming from behind him, but even in silhouette, I knew it wasn't my uncle.

I clutched my sweater in one fist and took a step backward, preparing to run. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"I could ask the same of you," he said. He stepped forward, wiping his hands against his pant legs. "Except, given your resemblance to Vivian, I take it you must be her niece, Evelyn, from California." His thick English accent curled around the words, making them sound a hundred times sexier than they should have.

I hesitated. I should have been running away from this intruder, not drawn in by his accent. "How do you know who I am?" My hand found the light switch just inside the door, and I flipped it on, flooding the room in bright light and causing us both to wince and blink. Once my eyes adjusted, I realized he was staring at me and remembered I'd left my room in my pajamas—tank top and shorts with no bra. I crossed my arms over my sweater, hugging it to my chest, and glared at him.

He grinned at me in response and took a few more steps to close the distance between us. Extending his hand, he said, "I'm Liam, your uncle's secretary."

Shock froze me in place for a moment before I extended my own hand to meet his, observing his warm, slightly rough but firm grip. "Since when does Uncle Oscar have a secretary?" I frowned at this new development.

"Since October," he said. "Your uncle is a very important man. Why shouldn't he have a secretary?"

I squinted at him. I'd been thinking the same thing earlier, only I'd imagined me filling that role, not this scruffy young man with his week-old, scrubby beard and his wavy brown mop of hair that probably hadn't seen a brush or a barber

since Easter. “It’s almost midnight. Shouldn’t you have gone home by now?”

He shrugged. “No need. I’m living here. It’s easier that way, given the hours your uncle keeps.”

I stumbled backward a few steps into the hallway, and he reached out to steady me, wrapping his warm fingers around my bare arm. His fingers shocked me like he’d been scraping his socks against carpet, and I twisted out of his grip, still trying to process what he’d said. He lived with them. Certainly, Aunt Vivian would have mentioned if they had another houseguest.

“Come on,” he said. “I’m about done up here. I’ll take you down to the kitchen.”

“I know where the kitchen is,” I said, pulling my sweater over my head. The way he looked at me left me feeling very exposed.

“Right, then.” He grinned. “After you.” He waved a hand toward the back stairs.

I hurried ahead of him, only to remember that my pajama shorts barely covered my backside. Instead of stopping, I forged ahead. Let him stare. Once I’d convinced my uncle that I’d be more than happy to take over, he’d send this so-called secretary packing. If only I’d announced my plan when I’d booked my ticket, maybe he would never have hired this guy in the first place.

I pushed open the door to the kitchen. Then I stopped as I realized that I had no idea where to find anything. When I spun around, I found myself face-to-face with Liam, who was well inside my personal space. “Oh.”

“All right?” he asked. He stood only a few inches taller than me. Our eyes were nearly level and entirely too close for my comfort.

I took a step backward. “Do you know where they keep the cocoa?”

“I’ll make some for us. Go ahead and sit down. It’ll just take a few minutes.” He stepped around me and headed for the refrigerator.

I plopped down onto one of the benches at the farmhouse-style table and watched him pour milk from a glass jug into a pot. He pushed up the sleeves on his baggy, misshapen wool sweater before setting the pot on the stove to heat.

“So, what were you doing before you started working for my uncle?” I asked.

He shrugged. “This and that.” He lifted a tin of cocoa powder out of one of the cabinets and returned to the stove to stir the milk.

“Well, where’d you go to school, then?” I squinted at him. He looked too old to be a university student. I’d pegged him as late twenties, probably about my age, but maybe I’d misjudged. It was hard to tell with that day-old scruff on his chin and his hair constantly flopping down and obscuring his face. “If you’re working with my uncle, you must have graduated from some world-class university.”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, lips twitching into a lopsided grin. “Not exactly. I didn’t graduate because I didn’t go.”

“And my uncle hired you?” I leaned forward and stared at him. This whole secretary thing was getting stranger by the minute.

“Of course.” He shrugged. “You don’t need to go to uni to learn history. All you need are books. I can read.” He lifted two mugs off their hooks and placed them on the counter next to the stove.

“You taught yourself enough history that my uncle hired

you to be his secretary.” I shook my head. A much more likely scenario came to mind. Perhaps he’d heard about my uncle’s upcoming exhibit and decided to weasel his way into Lydbury and attempt to make off with some of the family treasures. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” boomed a voice from the kitchen door.

I jumped up and ran over to give Uncle Oscar a hug. “Uncle!” I stood on my tiptoes to throw my arms around his neck. He smelled like cedar and library books.

“I thought I heard talking in here.” Uncle Oscar slung his arm across my shoulders as he led me back to the table. “Didn’t expect you to be up at this hour, though.”

“I couldn’t sleep. Then I ran into Liam upstairs.” I glanced at Liam out of the corner of my eye. “Aunt Vivian didn’t tell me that you’d hired a secretary.”

“Ah! Well, I’m sure it just slipped her mind,” he said. “Liam’s been a great help.”

I nodded, forcing my face into a smile to hide my frustration and disappointment.

He gave my shoulder a squeeze before releasing me. “And how’s the job?” His bushy eyebrows climbed toward his hairline as he waited for my response.

“Fine.” Not that it mattered since I’d already turned in my resignation. The job I’d been secretly hoping for was helping him with his museum project. Instead, he’d already hired a potential thief with no credentials. “Actually, I’ve been doing some research on Edric and wanted to talk to you about the legend of the Faerie Queen.”

“Of course. But, perhaps we can talk in the morning.” He glanced across the table at Liam. “Unfortunately, I came to steal Liam. I need his help with something.”

Liam had been watching while he finished stirring the co-

coa and then poured the mixture into the waiting mugs. He tilted his head like he wanted to ask me something, but I ignored him.

“I can help,” I offered, turning my back on Liam to focus on my uncle.

“No, no. It’s late. Get some rest. I’m sure you’re exhausted from your travels.” He kissed the top of my head. “Liam? Shall we?”

Liam nodded. “Of course, sir. I’ll be right there.”

Uncle Oscar turned to me. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.” He squeezed my hand before walking toward the door.

Liam handed me one of the mugs, now steaming and full of chocolaty goodness. “If you want—”

“It’s fine,” I said, interrupting him. I didn’t need pity from this interloper. Besides, now that I knew he had no credentials, I was even more convinced he had to go. “I’ll talk with my uncle in the morning.” I brought the mug to my lips.

“All right.” He slid his hands around his own mug. “Guess I’ll see you around, then.”

“Thanks for the cocoa.” I watched his back as he disappeared into the hallway and only felt a little bad that I’d be taking his place in a few days. He may have been able to charm my aunt and uncle, but I wasn’t about to let his scruffy good looks and sexy accent fool me.

He’d mentioned she was bright. He hadn’t said she was also beautiful. I bent over the files and tried to focus on my work, but I couldn’t stop thinking of Evelyn in her pajamas, scowling at me with her straight dark hair pulled up into a messy bun, trying to figure out how I could be smart and not have

gone to university. I laughed.

“What’s that, Liam?” The professor’s voice cut through my thoughts, and I remembered I wasn’t alone.

“Nothing, sir.” I bit the inside of my cheek and turned my back to the old man so he wouldn’t catch me smiling. I had to snap out of it. I had work to do, and the last thing I needed was the added distraction of the professor’s lethally tempting niece. Besides, I was fairly certain he wouldn’t be terribly keen on me flirting with her.

“Liam, bring me the file on Sir William, will you?”

I reached for a file among the several scattered across the table and brought it over to the professor’s desk.

“Ah, yes,” he said, glancing up over the top of his reading glasses at the label on the folder. “That’s the one.” He set down the journal he’d been reviewing and lifted the file from my hands. I turned and started back across the room, but he called me back.

“Liam, my boy,” he said, “there’s a note here about an artifact? What’s this?” I turned back and found him holding up a scrap of paper by one corner.

“Yes, well, sorry, sir. I meant to tell you, I’ve started cataloging the artifacts in the attic room upstairs. I created an index and have been cross-referencing the index with notes in the relevant files.”

“Dead useful, that.”

“Yes, well, I thought it might help a bit.” I had my own reasons for creating the system, but he didn’t need to know about that.

Oscar shook his head and placed the paper back into the file. “With your help, we’ll be done with this in no time.”

“Well, sir, at the very least, I expect you’ll spend quite a bit less time banging your shins on crates while hunting about

in the clutter upstairs.” Which was precisely what I’d been doing when Evelyn appeared. Not that it could be helped; nearly every room in the house was packed with artifacts covered in a thick layer of dust.

“Quite.” He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and bent his head over the file.

I started back toward the filing cabinet. Cute niece or no, I had a mountain of artifacts to sift through and less time than Oscar realized to complete it in. The museum exhibit was the least of my concerns.

“Liam,” he said.

I stopped walking. “Yes, sir?”

“About my niece...”

I sighed. *Here it comes*, I thought. The speech about keeping my hands off his precious, brilliant, and beautiful niece. I turned to face him and pasted an innocent look on my face, as though I hadn’t been imagining her tight body under that tank top and shorts.

“Yes, sir?” I asked.

“I know I’ve been keeping you busy these past months with all this cataloging.” He removed his reading glasses and tapped them against the file folder.

“Yes, sir.” I nodded and kept my face blank.

“And I do so value your help,” he said.

And now the lecture.

“But I think I can spare you for a few days if you’d be so kind as to show my niece about town.”

I had just opened my mouth to reassure him that I’d keep my hands to myself. But, as my brain made sense of what he’d said, I quickly shut my mouth and raised my eyebrows. “Sir?”

“I’d like her to enjoy her holiday, and I’m fairly certain

she'd enjoy spending time with someone closer to her own age. Vivian and I are too old to know what you young people do for fun these days. If she had to spend all her time with us, I'm sure she'd be bored, and Vivian is quite concerned that Evelyn enjoy her stay."

"Oh. Well. I see." This was certainly not what I had been expecting.

"I'm sure it won't be much trouble." He adjusted his reading glasses and looked back down at the file.

"Of course, sir. If you think she'd enjoy that." I did my best not to sound too eager.

"I do." The corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn't look up from the file.

I took a few tentative steps backward in case he decided he had more to add.

"That will be all for now, Liam. Best get some sleep." He shooed me with his hand but didn't look up again.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'll just tidy up the kitchen, then be off to bed."

The professor didn't respond, so I took that as agreement and collected my empty mug, which gave me a plausible excuse to return to the kitchen. My luck couldn't possibly be so good as to find her still sitting there. My heart beat faster as I pushed the door open, but the kitchen was empty.

I set the mug in the sink and glanced out the window as I washed up. The gardens were barely visible in the moonlight. They contained the usual for an historic manor. Manicured hedges. Rosebushes. Gravel paths dividing patches of grass where Vivian's chickens would be pecking about come morning. Not bad for a country estate. It didn't hold a candle to Mum's garden at home, but it wasn't shabby.

Thinking of home made my heart ache and reminded me

why I'd agreed to take this job in the first place. Evelyn was an ill-timed distraction from my mission. A delicious and potentially delightful distraction, but a distraction all the same. The professor thought he could spare me for a few days, but he didn't really understand what was at stake. I clenched my fists. My cataloging project gave me an excuse to examine every piece of the collection up close. But if I were right, and what I'd been searching for was here, I couldn't waste any time.

I only had a few more days before the solstice. Time was running out. I needed to speed up the work without breaking my promise to my family and blowing my cover. Now that the professor had asked, if I didn't spend time with Evelyn, I might get sacked before I found the artifact I'd been sent to retrieve.

Sod it. I'd find a way to make it work. I wanted to spend more time with Evelyn. I'd find a way to do both. Without magic.

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