## The Bargain

by Ayehli

### Summary

To win Jack's heart away from Lily, Oona seeks an alliance with Darkness.
Chapter 1

I

Oona had never understood what her Jack saw in the girl, with her hair that smelled plain, her flightless limbs, and her woeful ignorance of the proper way to kiss. Being fairy, and having known the fire of fairy men and women (and everything in between, for they came in many forms), Oona could not fathom how any man could choose mortal over fairy. It was akin to choosing warm milk over spiced wine, a waltz over a dizzying sahal, sleep over waking.

Oona had seen Jack born, had watched him grow into the man he was now. From his earliest days she had played with his dreams and desires, coming to him in forms that had easily enticed many a mortal. Oona had lived a thousand years and a thousand more, and mortal men were her playthings.

All but this one, who stubbornly remained innocent and unknowing of all the fruits she could offer him.

And so it was that she could not leave off chasing him. Gump and the others chided her for it, scolding that mischief was one thing, persistent meddling in the lives of mortals another. She brushed them away and listened only to the burning in her hummingbird heart, the burning that could only be quenched when she possessed this man completely.

Oona had felt sure that this girl was a momentary distraction, as all mortal girls were wont to be. Her too-tall self with its coverings of poorly-spun silk (how thoroughly they covered themselves, these mortal women!) would surely dance briefly into Jack's life and dance quickly out again, leaving him heartbroken when she was married off to one of those equally horrible mortal royals, with the stink of age hanging off them as foul as the smell of their musty robes.

But the girl remained, longer than Oona or even Gump had predicted. Oona saw that Gump was wary of her and sought an alliance to do away with her, but Gump would have none of it, only muttering that the girl would be Jack's downfall, and perhaps the downfall of everything. When Oona visited Jack's dreams she fought for space with this troublesome girl. Jack's desires would not bend so easily to her when they were already bending to another.

Oona pined, and Oona raged, and for a time she vanished into the depths of the forest, not caring whether she lived or died. Her small body grew frail, kept alive only by the spirit of the trees and the mist that had borne her.

And as she lay there on the brink of death, she knew the answer to her question. She must seek an alliance with the Creature of the Great Tree.

II

Fairy folk rarely ventured into the realm of the Great Tree, which spread its dark limbs over a darker lake, its roots twisting and penetrating the scorched earth like the veins of a long-dead monster. The air was thick where the fairy forest air was light and perfumed. The only sounds were the cries of the strange birds and lake-creatures that dwelt there, and sometimes a cry of pain, or pleasure, seemingly uttered from the lips of a ghost.

Oona did not fear this place, though she preferred trees surrounded by light. She had learned the secrets of the lake, could sing a lullaby that would send the lake-hag Meg into peaceful sleep. Her
only fear was what lay inside the Tree.

She had come before—curious, as fairies were—and had seen half-human creatures eating their own flesh. Fairy-like creatures boiled in a giant pot. Satyrs and children fashioning necklaces of human bones. And all manner of copulation, among all manner of creatures.

Oona had found that the Creature of the Great Tree enjoyed playing on the mortal confusion that went hand in hand with desires forced beneath the surface. It watched gleefully as the pious man licked the flesh of a priest and shuddered with a mixture of revulsion and need. It smiled on the nubile girl whose words refused her cousin's roving hands but whose body was wet and open to his touch. It delighted in teasing out illicit desires from fertile mortal imaginations and bringing those desires to life, making the Great Tree into a circus of want, fulfillment, punishment, pleasure, and pain.

It was this great revelry that Oona saw as she entered the Great Tree, and she did not fear it, not in the way that she was sickened by the blood and carnage that were also the Creature's domain. Let mortals wring their hands over what flesh moved toward naturally—the fairy folk scoffed at such silliness.

She moved through a sea of bodies separated into groups, pairs, and even the solitary. Hands brushed her small breasts, mouths drank in the scent of her fairy skin. She saw a young boy entwined with myriad bodies and kissed his smooth neck, imagining for a moment that he was Jack.

The Creature of the Great Tree reclined on his throne in the form of a dark-haired man, clad in black silk, his pale skin gleaming in the light of the torches. A young man suckled his fingers while a red-haired girl held a yellow-haired girl firmly on the stone ground beneath his throne, hissing violent invitations as the red-haired girl writhed. The Creature's eyes were closed. Oona imagined she could see tendrils of desire wafting up from every body in the room, circling the Creature in a warm embrace from which it had no desire to awaken.

Awaken it she must, though, if she was to have what she wanted. "My Lord of Darkness." Oona's small voice rang out in the midst of moans and gasps. "I seek audience with you."

The eyelids of the dark-haired man flickered. He showed no other sign that he had heard her. "A fairy visitor to the Great Tree, such an honor." His voice crackled with the flames. "Why not join the dance, little one? Or are these mortals beneath you?"

Oona ignored the caresses of a nearby group. "I seek audience with you, my Lord. I would offer you a gift."

The dark-haired man looked her full in the face then, and Oona saw eyes that flashed red, teeth that smiled sharply. He cocked his head at her, a bird of prey intrigued by a new meal.

"I will grant you your audience, little one. Pray you that the gift be worth the trouble."

The bodies on the floor of the throne room flickered and shifted until the vast room was empty and silent. The body of the Creature also flickered and shifted. Oona saw an image of a wolf, then a dragon, then a woman with long teeth, and finally the Creature began to turn red, rising in height to tower over her, black horns and red skin glistening, yellow eyes gleaming.

The voice that emerged rumbled deeper than before. "What gift do you offer me?"

Oona met the yellow eyes. "Innocence."
The Dark Lord's expression was unreadable. "I know not of what you speak."

"A mortal girl, my Lord. One who is unknown to men. One who has no lust of her own, whose mind is empty of desires, save for the pure love of a mortal man."

The creature on the throne laughed. "You offer me a fool's gift, little one. No mortal girl who has seen thirteen summers has a mind empty of desires."

Oona shifted her own body until it grew tall. She wrapped herself in the strange, hiding garments of the mortal girl, made her hair grow long and dark, and twirled in the way that she had seen the other do for Jack.

"Jack, my Jack!" She laughed and scampered about the throne room, imagining it to be a forest. "Tell me your secrets, dearest Jack!"

She felt the Creature's eyes on her like a taut rope, felt the hunger rolling off of him in waves. She danced to the edge of his throne and stared up at him, mortal eyes like pools of pure water.

"Teach me to love, dearest Jack!"

The yellow eyes locked with hers. A taloned hand reached out slowly for the smiling face. Oona let his hand come within a hair's breadth of her smooth cheek…and quickly danced away, her form shifting back into its fairy-self.

The Dark Lord clenched his hand into a fist, and a slow smile played at the corners of his mouth. "What would you ask in return, little one?"

Oona smiled. "Only that the girl be taken away from the world, my Lord, to never leave your side."

The creature stood, moving toward Oona with slow, deliberate strides. She stared up into his horned face, forcing her eyes not to look away, willing her mind not to remember the more bloody festivities that had taken place in the Great Tree.

He smiled down at her, white teeth gleaming. "I believe we have a bargain."

His hand touched her cheek, one finger trailing down from her ear to her neck. His skin was ice that burned. His touch sent a flood of images through her mind, images that would have any mortal woman in his grip, she knew. She grinned happily. Jack would be hers.
Chapter 2

Oona forced herself to be patient, though it was not in her nature. She watched her Jack frolic and play with the too-tall mortal girl, listened to the girl's braying laugh, so coarse next to the laugh of a fairy. She left off chasing Jack and invading his dreams, knowing that the Creature of the Great Tree would tell her in time how their plan would play itself out. Gump looked askance at her, suspicious that she had given up the chase so suddenly, but he said nothing.

Days turned into weeks, and Oona's patience, not of strong stuff to begin with, wore thin. Had the Dark Lord forgotten their bargain? Surely not. She had seen the hunger in his eyes. Perhaps time passed differently in the Great Tree. She only hoped it would not be years before Jack was hers.

Finally the Dark Lord visited her dreams, seeping into them like a black mist that wrapped itself around the edges of her mind. His voice was a slippery caress.

…I have not forgotten…

She smirked, unmoved by the images that flooded her dreamspace. "I knew you would not, my Lord."

…She must come willingly. You will lead her here…

"Yes." Oona shivered as the mist wrapped itself around her waist, then her leg, slipping away as quickly as it had come.

…Use a glamour. Make her believe it is the boy she follows. Use her trust in him…

Oona stiffened. She did not relish the thought of being the recipient of this girl's affections, childish though they might be. "My Lord, there are other glamours…"

…I would have her trusting, and blind with innocent love. Only then can her change bring pleasure…

Oona was silent. The mist covered her skin, becoming whispers and breaths that teased her exposed parts.

…Do you hesitate, little one?... The mist became constricting, and sharp. …Must I persuade you?...

Oona forced herself to smile. She did not fear him in the way that mortals would, but she must let him believe that she did. "I am yours to command, my Lord. My only wish is for the girl to leave this world."

The voice chuckled. …Not your only wish, little one… The mist swirled and shifted, and Oona gasped as an image of Jack took shape before her, tall and clad in green, his mouth smiling boyishly. "My Oona," he said, and held out his arms to her.

She turned her back on him. "You are not Jack, and this is not part of our bargain," she said quietly.

Warm mortal hands touched her shoulders, caressed her arms and locked her in a gentle embrace. "The girl is nothing to me, dearest Oona. Who would look on her when they could behold you?"

Oona felt her body weaken, felt the words come unbidden to her lips, though she knew it all to be a lie. "My Jack…"
"Sweet Oona, teach me what no mortal woman could…"

She turned and kissed him fiercely, pouring the heat of her fairy soul through his mortal lips, and he moaned longingly against her, warm arms embracing her small body…

…and then his kiss tasted of blood, and fire, and she heard laughter deep in his throat, felt the hands that held her rake her back sharply. She cried out and struggled away from him to see the Dark Lord standing before her for only a second before he flickered into the dark mist that swirled about her dream, slipping around her body, brushing aside the single tear that fell from her eye.
Chapter 3

Oona watched day after day as her Jack and the plain girl met and frolicked in the glens of the forest, speaking the languages of the animals that Jack knew while the girl feebly attempted to learn them. Oona marked the times and places that they seemed to meet most often, the path that the girl took through the woods. How many hours they spent together with no union of the flesh—Jack and this girl did not so much as touch fingers, and they certainly did not kiss. More mortal silliness, Oona determined. She had passed whole weeks engaged in nothing but kissing. Her lips had brought a thousand different joys to a thousand different fairies and mortals. How she delighted in the thought of schooling Jack!

On the chosen day she became a ball of light and flew to the edge of the forest river where she had so often seen the girl begin her journey. Perched in a tree, she worked the glamour that would make her appear as Jack, remembering the curve of his nose, the whiteness of his teeth, the way his hair fell in front of his eyes. Then she recalled the rhythm of his speech, the way that he moved his head like a bird. It all came easily, after so many days spent watching him in both the dreaming and the waking world.

She heard a rustle of skirts and saw the girl passing beneath the tree, fresh flowers clutched in her hands, smelling of the strange perfumes and soaps that so many mortals used to disguise their natural scent. Oona waited only a second, then pounced from the tree as she had so often seen Jack do.

The girl yelped in surprise and dropped her flowers. "My Jack!" Her pale face flushed, and she laughed. "What a fright you gave me!"

Oona-Jack smiled and surveyed the girl up close for the first time. How tall she was, in comparison to a fairy! Her female shape was so tightly bound and covered by those mortal-spun silks that almost any hint of her femininity was difficult to see, though Oona could tell that her curves were pleasing, like buds on the cusp of ripening. The expression on her face was of a kind of devotion and unknowingness that confused Oona, though she immediately longed to see Jack look at her in the same way.

Oona cocked her head at the girl. "I wanted to surprise you, my Lily." She scoffed inwardly at the name of this girl who had none of the lily's grace. "And I have another surprise for you."

Lily clapped her hands eagerly. "What surprise, dearest Jack? Shall I finally meet the fairy-folk?"

Oona forced herself to smile. "Not today, my Lily. But there is something wondrous I have longed to show you, beyond the mouth of the river, on the eastern edge of the forest."

Lily's smile faded. "Beyond the mouth of the river? But Jack…was that not where you told me never to wander?"

Oona thought quickly and nodded. "Never to wander alone, dearest Lily. But with me you shall be safe, and what I have to show you will be worth the journey."

Lily smiled again, and Oona marveled and how easily this girl trusted. She thought of how the Creature of the Great Tree would use that trust and was surprised to feel a coldness close over her heart, though she banished it quickly.
Oona led Lily along the edge of the river, keeping her patience in check as the girl stepped daintily over roots and stones, holding those troublesome skirts carefully away from the dirt. They walked further than Oona imagined Lily had ever walked, and she sensed the girl growing tired, occasionally allowing her to rest.

As they neared the mouth of the river the forest grew still, the once-constant hum of birdsong, buzzing insects and scampering creatures gone unnaturally quiet. Though it was daylight, the sun did not seem to penetrate as deeply. The smell in the air changed from honeysuckle and pine to a strange mix of earth, ash, and decay.

Lily's eyes darted around at the strange sounds that occasionally emerged from the dimness. "Jack, what is this place?"

"This is the edge of the forest, my Lily. It will be dark for a time, but beyond it is a place of great beauty."

She had ceased to follow, standing in the midst of the forest and holding her gown up above her ankles. "Is it much farther?"

"Not much farther. Fear not, you are safe with me." Oona-Jack beckoned and gave her a winning smile.

Lily managed to smile back, though her step was more timid than before. "I trust you, Jack."

Oona felt that coldness settle over her heart again, not so easily banished this time. She made no reply, only began moving forward again.

The forest grew darker and darker, until finally the river opened up into the black lake that surrounded the Great Tree. Here there was no birdsong, no breeze. The only sounds were echoes and murmurs that seemed to come from beneath the waters of the lake, and from within the tree itself.

Lily was pale with fear. "Jack…must we truly pass through this place?"

"It is only a bit further, dearest Lily."

She backed away. "I…I do not want to see what it is you have to show me, Jack. I want to leave this place. Please."

Oona knelt on the ground before her, eyes gazing upward in what she hoped was a reassuring way. "There is nothing in this place that can hurt you, my Lily. It is ancient, and it is dark, but there is no danger here."

Lily shook her head, staring at the mass of the Great Tree with an expression that made her appear older. "I should not be here," she said, almost to herself.

Oona reached out her hand. "I would never let harm befall you, my dearest." She gazed up at the frightened figure of the girl who stared down at her with such conflicted emotions—love, fear, confusion, and devotion slipped across her face like the mist that encircled the lake. Oona held her eyes. "Do you trust me?"

Lily stared down at the proffered hand. Oona remembered that they had never touched, and wondered if she had violated some sort of mortal taboo. After a moment, though, Lily reached out and took her hand, gripping it firmly. She smiled weakly.
"I trust you, Jack."

*Then you are as much a fool as any mortal woman,* Oona forced herself to scoff, though the girl's words cut her like sharp teeth.

Oona led her over the roots and bridges of the lake, helping her to keep her balance over the dark waters below. Their movements went undisturbed by Meg or any of the lake's other creatures.

They came to the huge stone doorway and found that it opened easily at Oona's urging, Lily's hand gripping hers so fiercely that she almost cried out in pain. The large room that had played host to many a scene of blood and lust was empty and dark, the only light emerging from the already-dim outside world that filtered in through the doorway.

Lily's voice was barely a whisper. "Are we almost there, Jack? Have we only to pass through this tree?"

Oona squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Yes, my dearest. Only a little—"

Her words were drowned out by the deafening sound of the stone doorway slamming behind them. The room was plunged into blackness. Lily screamed and dropped the hand that held hers.

"Jack? Jack! What is happening?"

A presence like cold oil invaded Oona's mind. …*Your work here is done, little one...,* the Creature's voice whispered.

Oona felt her glamour drop, felt herself move away from Lily, though she could no longer be sure where the girl was. All around them came a sound that seemed to be a mix of laughter and the hissing of snakes, that became one voice but seemed to be a thousand, slithering along the walls like an army of insects. Lily was still screaming.

"Jack! Jack! *Jack, please!*"

Lights began to flicker at the edges of the room as torches along the walls burst into flame. Lily was revealed, her hair disheveled, her face streaked with tears as she turned in a dizzying circle. Her eyes fell on Oona.

"You!" she gasped. "You...you are one of the fairy folk..."

Oona backed away from the girl's outstretched arms.

Lily came closer, her face pleading. "Please...I must find Jack...you can help me, yes?"

Over Lily's shoulder, near the back of the large room, Oona saw a tall, horned form take shape. The yellow eyes gleamed at her from a distance, and she felt again the hunger that seemed to roll off of the Creature in waves.

Lily continued to plead. "Please? Please help me?"

Oona clenched her hands at her sides and met the girl's eyes. "No."

Oona shifted and flickered into a ball of light that flitted away into the upper reaches of the Great Tree. She forced her eyes away from the scene below, where the girl stared up in disbelief and horror as the Creature she still did not see moved toward her with the assurance of one that has long since won the game.
Chapter 4

Oona knew that she should flee the Great Tree in delight. The Creature was right—her work was done, her part of the bargain was fulfilled. She should run back into Jack's arms with a story of how the poor girl had perished at the hands of bandits, or of how she had been forced into marriage with a nobleman, leaving him her handkerchief as a tearful token of farewell.

But she found she could not leave the Great Tree, so fixed were her eyes on the scene that played itself out in its halls and tunnels over the hours (days? weeks?) that followed.

The girl stood like a frightened animal, her eyes darting back and forth from the ceiling where Oona hid to the strange surroundings she now found herself in. In the seconds before she turned around Oona saw the Creature of the Great Tree shift form, flickering from being to being as if unable to decide how to approach his guest. He became a fairy-like woman, not unlike Oona herself, then a crone, then a lordly man in finery, and for a moment seemed to resemble Jack. Oona wondered if he was toying with her again.

In the end, though, he became the form that Oona had seen when she first ventured into the Great Tree—pale, dark-haired, dressed in black. Lily gave a small, birdlike shriek when she saw him, though she did not run in terror, a reaction that his true form would surely have inspired.

He moved gracefully and opened his arms to her. "My lady," he said. "Have you lost your way?"

She nodded slowly, eyes fixed on him. From above Oona imagined she could see a silvery mist emanating from the girl's body like steam, tendrils of it snaking toward the Creature's eager form, which drank it in like water.

He approached her and smiled, reaching out a hand to cup her cheek. She did not pull away. Oona saw his eyes gleam with hunger, the pupils flickering a faint red.

"Speak, my lady. You need not fear me."

Lily's voice was barely above a whisper. "What…what is this place?"

The Creature bowed slightly and offered her a black-clad arm. "Ah, this place…this place is whatever your heart would make of it, my lady."

She slowly reached out her arm and took his, allowing him to lead her through the hall. "My…heart?"

"Yes, your heart. Whatever desires you may hold hidden may here come into flower and fruit. It is a garden of secret dreams, this place."

Images seemed to flicker and dance against the walls of the great tree—a small girl playing with a boy in a pond, naked and smiling; a room heaped high with jewels and silks; a young woman staring defiantly up at an older one who backed away in fear.

Lily watched them all and bowed her head, her face flushing. "I have no hidden dreams."

The Creature laughed, a sound rich and warm. "We are all creatures of hidden dreams, my lady." His eyes traveled over her, taking in her fine, if tattered, gown. "You are of noble birth, it is
certain."

She nodded. "I am of the house of Graelin."

"Then surely you have lived long under the watchful eyes of priests? You have been schooled, have you not, to desire nothing?"

Lily pulled her arm away. "I have been given a proper education."

"Yes, proper indeed…they are skilled with the lash, those priests, when pupils' minds and bodies betray an unholy wanting…"

The girl gasped. "How…how did you…"

"Was it proper of them, I wonder, to bind you in the dark for days at a time, as punishment for that which you might have done?"

Lily shook her head and backed away. "I was wrong…I was punished…"

The Creature moved so quickly that Oona barely saw him—in a half-instant he gripped the girl's small arms in his, his face inches from hers. "I see what it was that you might have done, my lady. I see what hid within you, what the priests saw, what made them bind you and hide you away." He breathed in deeply as though she were a flower with an intoxicating scent. "What if I were to tell you that all you were punished for…all that you were forced to keep hidden…that all of it could come to life here? That you could exist in a world without shame?"

Lily seemed to swoon, and Oona felt why—the Creature was flooding her mind with images, with sensations, many of which she had likely created herself, but more of his own invention…flesh rubbed against flesh, teeth bit, blood flowed, shrieks of pleasure were mixed with screams of agony until one became indistinguishable from the other.

She moaned. "Please…not this…"

"Ask." The Creature's voice became a growl, and Oona saw his skin and shape begin to shift, taking on a hue of redness. "Ask and you shall have what you desire."

Lily was limp in the Creature's arms, drunk in an ocean of sensations and images. His form continued to shift until he towered over her, his red body crowned with horns, fanged white teeth smiling out from a mouth that whispered against her lips.

"Surrender yourself to me."

Lily's eyes snapped open, and all at once she took in everything around her. She opened her mouth and screamed, wrenched herself free of the Creature's arms, and ran from the hall into the dark recesses of the Great Tree.

Oona waited to see if Darkness would follow her, waited to see him groan in frustration, but he merely stood and watched her run, almost as if he had planned it this way. After a few minutes he glanced up in Oona's direction, and she felt the sensation of cold oil again seeping into her mind.

...All in good time, little one. Stay a while. The victory is meaningless without the chase…

Movies » Legend » The Bargain
Oona loved games. She was a creature of games, and of play, and had no concept of that which existed for a purpose other than amusement. She had lived out her hundreds of years hiding and seeking, relishing the momentary terror on human faces when she made strange images appear in their bowls of soup, competing with Gump and the others as to who could create the most original pranks and bits of deviousness, though she had always felt her heart to be in it more than theirs.

The Creature of the Great Tree, it seemed, was also a lover of games.

He became a wolf, and the mortal girl became a rabbit, and Oona forgot herself momentarily as she watched them chase and scamper through the silent halls of the Great Tree. The girl's fear was real—Oona could smell it on the air and was sure the Creature grew drunk on it, though Oona knew he could not possibly wish to dispense with his new toy just yet. When the girl-rabbit grew exhausted and lay quivering in a furry mass on the ground the Creature changed them again—the girl was herself, sweat-soaked and red-faced, and he was the dark-haired man. He crawled toward her like a wolf and reached out a hand to touch her wet skin, but she was not completely spent—she snarled at him like a wolf herself and scurried away.

He was a hawk, and she was a mouse, and she scampered in and out of the nooks and crannies of the Great Tree as he flew at her, once picking her up and carrying her in a circle only to deposit her gently on the ground.

They became children, a little boy and girl. The girl wept when she saw the Creature transformed thus, and Oona felt sure she was simply broken by it all, but she raged at the Creature so fiercely that he seemed to falter. The boy's form, it seemed, resembled that of a dead brother, stolen from her mind. "You may play with me, and you may make me impure, but he is not a part of this game!" Standing there in her child-form, her hair ragged, her body shaking, her breath coming quick and short, she suddenly seemed older, and fiercer. The Creature shifted and the boy-form dissolved, and he stood before her as himself, red and crowned with horns. She met his eyes and did not tremble before him. He cocked his head at her curiously. The air seemed to change.

They sat at his long table in silence. He ate fruit and meats and drank wine from glasses that refilled themselves, but she would touch nothing, thin as she was becoming. After a time he began to speak.

"Do you miss the light, my lady?" She did not answer him. He spoke as though she had. "I thought you might. Creatures of light have often told me what beauty lies beneath that strange orb in the sky. They speak of warmth, and of green things growing, and of birth." He chuckled and began to peel a plum. "I tell them that I have warmth enough from my fires. Green things do not interest me. And life..." He sighed and seemed to forget for a moment that the mortal girl was there.

"Who is more alive than I? There is more life within this tree, within the dreams I create, within the dark flowers nurtured here, than in anything under the false light of the outside world. That is a shallow light, a false one, built on smiles that hide lies. Here..." he gestured expansively "...there is only truth."

The peeled plum rested in his taloned hand, glistening in the light of the candles. It gave off an intoxicating scent, which Oona felt surely must be the Dark Lord's creation...or perhaps she was hungry herself.

The girl made a pretense of ignoring him, but Oona could sense her listening, could sense her
famished body turning toward the smell of the plum. Juice dripped onto the table.

Finally she stood. She met his eyes again, unafraid, her steps certain as she moved down the length of the table. She reached out her small, white hand, hesitated only a second, and then gripped the plum, her fingers brushing over his as she slid it from his grasp.

He watched her, only the trace of a smile on his face. She bit the plum and juice trailed down the corners of her mouth, staining her lips a brilliant purple. She licked juice from her fingers—more slowly than necessary, Oona thought.

Silently he handed her a peach. She took it and continued to eat.
Chapter 6

Beyond the Great Tree the world began to move.

Oona sensed it as she sensed all movement, in the prickling of hairs along her tiny arms, in distant sounds only she could hear. Something told her that she should fear this movement, that it would be the undoing of all her plans, but she ignored that voice.

She watched the world below her as though she watched actors on a stage. She had almost forgotten who this girl was, and why she had been brought here. She was a character in a story, surely one of thousands that the Creature of the Great Tree had spun into the tale of his thousand-thousand year existence.

The girl seemed to glow.

They danced around the table and they danced around each other like swimmers in a whirlpool, passing each other again and again. They argued. He spoke and she disagreed. Sometimes he spoke and she was silent. He laughed at her silence.

And then she began to laugh too.

He dressed her in finery that suited the Great Tree, black robes that glimmered and glistened and whispered as she walked. Oona saw the girl's skin revealed for the first time, the pearly arms and the valley between her breasts laid bare in the flickering torchlight, soft and gleaming. She no longer looked mortal, Oona thought. Perhaps she wasn't.

For all their dancing, and arguing, and the occasional curious glances the girl threw in the Creature's direction, she would not let him touch her. After a while it seemed to Oona that she was enjoying being chased, enjoying constantly dancing out of his reach. For his part the Creature of the Great Tree showed no frustration or anger, only a bemused smile. Oona knew that he wanted her to come willingly, that he would not have her addled by charms or taken by force. An admirable goal, but one that seemed impossible to reach. This girl might have darkness within her, but she was mortal, born into the constricting womb of mortal ideas, and she would not go to him willingly.

And then he made the game's final move, and Oona marveled.

He became a man, as he often had when they spoke and danced around each other. He gazed at her with the forlorn expression of a lovesick boy, his dark hair falling around his face as he bowed low before her.

She cocked her head at him. "Why do you look at me in this way?"

He sighed and smiled sadly at her. "Because soon you will leave this place, my Lady."

"Leave?" The girl's voice was a mix of relief and confusion. "You would let me go?"

"Pleasurable as our game has been, I must admit defeat. Your virtue is a steel-barred gate, too strong for even one such as I." He turned away from her, and Oona covered her mouth to keep herself from laughing. "You are free to go."

The girl moved toward him and stopped. He seemed to sense her movement and tensed his own body, giving off the slightest hint of a tremor.
"My-my Lord? Do you…weep?"

The Creature shook his head violently. "I never weep, my Lady. I only ask you not to torment me further."

"Torment you? My Lord, it is you who have—"

"Please go, my Lady. Nothing in this forest will harm you, I have seen to it."

The girl clenched her fists. "You have brought me here—"

"You came here, my Lady—"

"I was BROUGHT here, I do not know how, but I was—"

"And I now give you freedom to go—"

"And you have told me of what is within me, and you have told me not to feel shame, and now you tell me to return to that place where they would—"

He turned then and moved toward her, and she did not move away. And for the first time in ages, Oona felt his cold-oil voice within her mind.

…did you ever truly doubt, little one?...

Oona shuddered.

He pointed toward the doorway, which slowly swung open. "There is no place for you here—"

"You told me there was—"

"There is no—"

And she was kissing him, her small mortal body rippling with strength as she gripped his arms and his back. He moaned into her consuming mouth and she moaned with him, the heat coming off of her in waves that circled around both of them.

Within Oona's mind was the sound of dry laughter.

The girl pulled back after kissing him for what seemed an eternity, breathing fast as she stared straight ahead. Oona thought she might run for the door now, her small piece of pleasure indulged and spent, but she did not.

She moved her hands to the sleeves of her gown and, never taking her eyes off of him, slipped the fabric off her shoulders. The black gossamer slipped easily over the small curves of her breasts, hissing slightly as it fell around her in a great heap, and she stood revealed before him, her pearly limbs smooth and delicate as a young birch, the gleaming whiteness broken only by the pink tips of her breasts and the dark hair between her legs. She covered nothing, though she trembled slightly.

His hand reached out to grip her neck and he sought to pull her to him, but she pressed a hand against his chest and pushed him back. "No, my Lord."

He blinked at her, and Oona felt the tiniest hint of irritation within her mind. "No?"

She ran her hand down over his chest. "I would have you…as you truly are."
The dry laughter rumbled thickly in Oona's mind. "Oh, little one, how it pleases me when they go beyond expectations..."

He shifted slowly, like a mass of smoke, until he towered over her as he had before, but seeming somehow taller this time, more alien. The girl felt it, Oona was sure, and seemed to step back slightly, but the Creature gripped her hand in his and brought it to his own robes, helping her to remove them. Beneath the black he was all angles and sharp edges, his skin glistening where hers seemed to glow softly. She reached out to touch him again and her hand jumped back as if she had been burned.

It happened quickly, Oona realized later. There were only a few seconds of wondering, of imagining if he would be gentle with this girl, if she would tease and caress him the way Oona herself had always dreamed of teasing Jack. The unanswered question hung in the air, thick as the mist that seemed to gather between them.

Then there was war.

It was the only manner in which Oona could describe what happened. They growled. They cried out in rage, or perhaps pleasure. They scratched. They bit. They fought a battle in which there could be no clear winner or loser, though his body towered over hers like a mountain.

He took her on the table, and their thrashing sent the glasses and the plates flying, splattering wine and juices onto the floor and onto their bodies where it mingled with the blood they drew from one another. He bit and licked at her flesh, making her cry out in pain one moment and in pleasure the next.

He mounted her and she mounted him until their bodies resembled a writhing, eight-limbed monster. Their shapes seemed to shift as he penetrated—she was a wolf, and he was a stallion, and she was a snake, and he was a dragon, and then they were themselves again, panting and screaming in strange languages, drenched in perspiration, blood, and wine.

And suddenly Oona did not only see it but FELT it, tasted it, smelled it, in a flood of sensations that almost sent her reeling from where she hid in the upper reaches of the Great Tree. She tasted the Creature's tongue, smelt the perfume of the girl's breasts, felt the simultaneous pain and pleasure of the Creature inside her, all rolling within her mind in a maelstrom.

The dry laughter rumbled again in her mind. "You have what you wanted, little one..."

Oona felt blind and drunk. "Not this..."

"Oh yes, this. You wanted the girl taken away, but you also wanted to witness her fall..."

Oona shook her head as she felt herself moan in rhythm with the girl. "I wanted her gone..."

"Strange, strange, how you all deny what is within you, when one such as you should know that I see all..." He gave a particularly violent thrust and the girl screamed and raked her fingernails over his back. "Why not simply feel it, swim in this sea, feel her pain and her pleasure..."

Oona did swim, just for a moment, letting the drunkenness overtake her, feeling the girl's shifting dance of rage and lust and shame and ecstasy, the Creature's overwhelming strength and power...

"She tastes of blueberries, and blossoms, and pure water..."

Oona tasted, and the Creature tasted her, and the girl, and she was one with them, mounting and being mounted, her own body mingling with theirs, drinking in the evil she knew she had done as
though it were nectar…

And then the doors to the Great Tree burst open.

For a moment the Creature and the girl were oblivious and continued their mad dance. But then the girl looked toward the open doorway and screamed. The glamour that had enveloped the two of them seemed to drop, and the girl scrambled off of the table, clutching the black garments that lay on the floor.

From her hidden perch Oona could make out a host of figures in the doorway. There was Gump, armed with his bow, glaring into the room. There were a number of fairy folk all similarly armed. And in the midst of them all, his young face twisted into an expression of confusion and horror that tore at Oona's heart, was Jack.
Chapter 7

I have done this, Oona could not help but think. The words pounded in her brain with a mixture of revulsion and excitement. I have done this. I have brought this girl here, I have given the Creature a gamepiece to play with, and I have even brought Jack here...I have broken his heart...

The last made her cringe inside, and then rage at herself for cringing. How many hearts, mortal and immortal, had she broken without thinking? Hearts were resilient, no matter what the minstrels claimed. They were torn asunder, pounded into mincemeat, rising up to seek out that same torment again and again, until the day they ceased to beat. Why should she flinch at another broken one?

Her own heart felt as cold and slick with oil as the Creature's voice within her mind.

Gump stepped forward and pointed a finger (rather theatrically, Oona thought) at the Creature. "You," he said. "You have taken that which was not yours to take."

The Creature stood unashamed before the small army at the door, not bothering to pull his garments about him. "You are mistaken, my Lord Gump," he said. "I have taken nothing that does not belong to me, and to this realm."

The girl was weeping. She clutched the black garments about her as if they were a lifeline, seeming one moment to want to toss them away from her in disgust and another moment to bury herself in them. Her hair hung in tangles over her face, the skin of her arms spattered with blood and wine.

Oona saw that Jack could not take his eyes off of her, and that his feet seemed to be as indecisive as she was—wanting one moment to run toward her, but holding back, uncertain if the girl he saw before him was the same one that he had come to rescue.

Gump drew his bow, and the other fairy folk followed. Jack carried a sword, but it hung useless at his side.

"We would not have war with you, Lord of the Great Tree. A thousand thousand years we have lived in our realm, and you in yours, and if there was some mixing of our peoples it did no harm. But we do not steal. This girl is not of your realm, and we will fight to reclaim her."

The Creature chuckled, and in an instant became an armored minotaur, roaring defiance as he pawed the earth on all fours, towering above the small army.

"No, my Lord Gump," his voice rumbled, "you would not have war with me. I would eat your fairy hearts while you still lived, and feed you the beating scraps."

The fairy army shrunk before him, though Gump maintained his stance. Oona felt sick at the thought of the bloodshed to come, the bloodshed she would have helped bring about.

And then, almost as an afterthought, the Creature shifted again into man-form and gave a comical bow, gesturing expansively toward the weeping girl. "But such meals bore me. I have already given the girl leave to go. Take her, if you truly think she does not belong here."

Gump's mouth fell open. He exchanged glances with Jack and the other fairy folk, sure that this must be a ruse. They did not move.

The Creature sighed. "No ruse, my Lord Gump. Take the girl. I have other pleasures to attend to."

And with that he was gone, vanished in a shifting of light, leaving the room silent except for the
crackling of torches and the girl's quiet weeping.

Jack finally moved. He crossed to the table and gathered the girl up in his arms, wrapping her garments more tightly around her. She clung to his neck as he carried her out of the Great Tree into the dim light of the outside forest. Gump and the fairy folk followed, an impotent army.

Oona remained hidden for a long while, her mind spinning. There had been no war. There had been no bloodshed. And, she realized, rage mounting within her, the Creature had not kept his part of the bargain.

The voice that slithered through her mind was almost bored. …*I have kept my part of the bargain, little one*…

Oona spat. "You have not! You swore to take the girl away from the world, to never leave your side!"

…*I have…*

"You have not! You could have fought them, defeated them easily, but you gave her up, gave her back to him, the one who belongs to me!"

…*I have not given her up…*

"I have no time for your riddles!"

The Creature laughed. …*You are fairy folk. You have nothing but time, and you will spend it at nothing but riddles and games…*

"We had a bargain, and I would hold you to it!"

A long silence. Then, …*I have kept my part of the bargain…*

Oona raged and cursed, but the voice within her mind was silent, and she could not make it speak again.

They brought the girl back to the forest where the light shone brighter through the trees and the birdsong was full-throated and sweet. The fairy folk shooed Jack away and bathed the girl in the stream, washing the blood and wine from her skin and ministering to her scratches and bruises with herbs and oils gathered from the flowers. She remained in a dreamlike state, sometimes sleeping, sometimes staring straight ahead with wide eyes, occasionally trembling beneath the fairy hands that comforted her.

They wrapped the black garments in a bundle and burned them over a fire, where they seemed to hiss in protest as they turned to ash. They spun her new garments from silkworms and spider's webs and the petals of roses. They laid her sleeping in a bower like a fairy queen, her perfumed hair falling amongst the leaves and flowers, her slumbering face bearing no sign of where she had been and what she had done.

Oona watched it all from the trees above, flickering as a ball of light. She wanted to rage at all of them, these doting fools who fussed and bothered over this girl as if she were an angel. *She is nothing!* she wanted to scream. *She is mortal, and she is a fool, and she was a gamepiece for the Creature of the Great Tree, and still my Jack wants her! And you feed him this tainted food, muddle his mind with these silly dreams, when he could have me!*

But something stayed her words. Some small seed of what she had done, what she had helped to
create in the Great Tree bore gentle flower and fruit within her heart, and her words lost their power.

Jack came to the girl and watched her sleeping form for ages, the same look of adoration on his face that the girl had worn so long ago, when Oona had lured her to the Great Tree. She knew she should turn away, should leave, but as with the scenes played out in the Great Tree she found she could not look away.

The girl opened her eyes, fluttering them like tiny wings. She stared up at Jack and her face broke into a smile, the light from the sun making her glow.

"My Jack! What a dream I've had!"

He smiled back at her and spoke—the first time, Oona realized, that she had heard him speak in ages. "My Lily, that dream is done. You have returned to me, and you are whole."

She looked down at her dress, ran her hands over it as though to make sure it were real. "Such a strange dream, so many years I feel I've slept! But I am with you now…"

Jack reached out, tentatively, to touch her hand—the first time he had touched her, Oona knew. "You are with me now. You are home."

She gripped his hand in hers. "Yes, I am home. My Jack, my Jack!" Her eyes flickered red, and Oona caught her breath. "My Jack…there is so much I want to show you…"

And she kissed him, fiercely, as she had kissed the Creature of the Great Tree, her hands gripping his hair and her mouth moaning against his. Jack's body went rigid, and for a moment it seemed that he would kiss her back, but then he pulled away as if stung. He stood up and backed away from her, staring with fearful eyes.

She laughed at him. "Dearest Jack, why do you look at me that way?"

He shook his head as though trying to chase away an insect. "My Lily, you…you are still muddled with the dream, you should rest longer…"

"Oh no!" The girl leaped to her feet and threw her arms around him. "I am awake, so awake, my Jack, and I long to taste you—"

He pushed her away with a roughness Oona had not known he possessed. The girl looked confused, then hurt.

Jack tried to steady his voice. "They told me…they told me you could be whole again, whatever he might have done…"

"Whole?" The girl laughed, but there was fear in her voice. "Dearest Jack, when was I ever broken?"

He spoke almost to himself, seemingly unable to look at her. "They told me you could be whole again, but…you are tainted…"

Oona felt a sudden sickness in her heart, one that she could not put a name to. She should feel joy. Her Jack was turning his back on this girl, just as she had always wanted…but at the same time, a vile feeling was spreading through Oona's soul, a kind of deadness she had never known.

The girl's face was a mix of fear and indignation. "Tainted? Tainted? You are my Jack, and I am
"You are not my Lily." The words flew through the air like a slap. "My Lily was...not wise...in these matters."

The sickness flowered and grew within Oona, and all at once she knew what it was.

It was her love for Jack, her dream of Jack, the little flame of light in her heart that had driven her every word and deed since she had first set eyes on him as a young boy, flickering and dying within her.

The girl stared long and hard at him. Oona wondered if she would weep, or rage. She did not. After a long moment she turned and walked away from him, into the cover of the forest.

Oona did not see the girl for many days.

Jack retreated deep into the forest, ignoring the pleas of the fairy folk to eat, to drink, to frolic with them. He would not speak, or even weep.

Below the tree where Oona perched the fairy world went on as it always had, with its games and its couplings and its mischief, but she had no heart for it anymore. The fairy folk came to her as well and begged her to join in the dancing, but she danced away from them and would not speak.

Gump, she noticed absently, did not come for her.

Oona wondered where the girl had gone. Back to her home, she supposed, back to that strange mortal realm where they would bind her flesh with thick garments and deprive her of all pleasure. Would she hide what was within her, Oona wondered? Would she pretend long enough to forget? Would her people see what was within her and turn her away, or would they take her back as if nothing were amiss?

Oona never knew what happened when the girl returned home. She only knew that she did not stay.

She came wandering back into the forest, a ghost of herself, but with a fierceness in her eyes that Oona remembered from her time in the Great Tree. She wore one of her strange mortal gowns, though her hair hung free around her shoulders, and the front of the gown hung unlaced and low around her breasts.

The fairy folk gathered on branches, stones, and riverbanks to watch her strange march. She did not see them, or if she did she did not look. She walked purposefully, one foot after the other, treading an unseen trail.

Oona watched with the others until the girl was a distant figure in the clearing of the forest, her body a tiny ball of light that moved trance-like, dance-like, toward the forest of the Great Tree.
Chapter 8

The day they buried Jack was a day like any other in the forest, with a gleaming sun and a steady fall of blossoms and leaves, the many birds and other forest creatures that had been his close companions gathering around the little procession as though to bid him farewell. He was mortal, and he had grown old like any mortal, though the magic he had lived so long among had stretched his life out longer than most mortal men. He had become mostly himself again, in the years after the girl had left, but they said he no longer smiled as he once had, and never sought another mortal girl to love, though they did occasionally wander into the forest, young and pretty and full of wonder. He passed into death peacefully, surrounded by the fairy folk, some of whom were still fascinated by the phenomenon of mortal death. Some said he whispered the girl's name, the girl no one had spoken of since she had been seen walking the unseen trail toward the Great Tree.

Oona could not be sure that it had happened this way. She had not witnessed Jack's burial.

Gump had come to her soon after the girl had gone, after Jack had retreated weeping into the forest. He had perched with her in the tree where she had taken to living, hidden from the other fairy folk, watching their goings-on beneath her. He had not spoken for a long time. When he did, his voice was weary.

"You have done evil, Oona."

Oona flinched. She knew he was right, but habit compelled her to argue. "I have done mischief, nothing more."

"This was not mischief, that you well know. Mischief makes no lasting wounds, no lasting changes in the fabric of our realm. You have changed not one mortal but two, and changed them greatly."

*I only brought them to a place of change, Oona thought. The change was theirs to make.*

"You caused pain," Gump continued. He stared at her, and she found she could not meet his gaze. "You caused great pain to one you loved. To one whom we all loved."

Though she knew what he would say next, the words still caught her like a blow. "There is no place for you here. The forest is large, and I would not banish you, but where we make our home, you are not welcome."

He had left her alone then, and she had not wept, though her own heart seemed to ache with both the girl's pain and Jack's. The pain that, Gump was right, she had caused.

She had obeyed him. She had lived in another part of the forest, still distant from the dark surrounds of the great tree, but more distant from the bowers and the glens where most of the fairy folk made their homes. She had heard of Jack's death through the songs of the birds and the whispers of the trees, and had known she would not be welcome at his bedside. She felt very little at the news, only a slight sadness that he had never returned to his former self. Her heart had long been cold to him.

And yet with his death it was as though a long period of waiting had ended. Oona no longer had any ties to the forest, only the ties of all fairy folk, those that bound her to the trees and the water in the same way as the flowers and plants that grew there. Where for years she had rarely ventured beyond the small copse of trees and river that had been her home, she now felt a strong desire to move.
She walked and she floated, enjoying the feeling of the rocks and the leaves beneath her small feet, flitting as a ball of light when she grew weary. She had no destination, only wanting not to be still.

She did not realize where her feet were taking her until the light through the trees grew dimmer, the color of the tree branches darker. When she began to see the dim reflections of the waters of the lake and smell the scent of decay she wondered if she should turn back, but her hesitation lasted only a moment. There was nothing for her in the forest of the fairy folk, there had not been for years. It could be that there was nothing for her in the Great Tree either, that the Creature would not even allow her entry, but somehow she felt the need to return.

Perhaps Gump was right, she thought. If there is no place for me here…it must mean that there is a place for me there.

She had heard whispers and stories over the years that the Great Tree had changed. Where once a few adventuresome fairy folk might have strayed near the waters of the lake, or even within the bounds of the Tree itself, now all were warned to stay far from it. What new darknesses the Creature had created and nurtured within his realm no one could say. They only knew what the earth, and the trees, and the animals told them—that something had changed in that realm, and that it had a power unlike any it had ever possessed.

When Oona reached the edge of the lake she heard only silence. The sounds near the Great Tree had always been more muted, but now the occasional cries of strange birds, the whispers of old ghosts, even the ripples in the water where things might lurk beneath the surface were gone. The very air above the lake was frozen in silence.

Oona made her way over the rocks and fallen tree trunks. Meg the lake-hag did not stop her as she approached the entrance.

Where the Creature's throne room had been there was only empty space. Oona wandered about in the semi-darkness of the Tree for what seemed like ages, wondering if he had shaped some new throne room within it, or torn a hole in the fabric of time through which only a select few could enter. She did not call out for him—her presence must have been sensed by now.

She heard voices and saw flickering lights at the same time. She made her way along a narrow corridor that opened suddenly onto a vast, cavernous room. The roots of the Great Tree stretched skyward for what seemed like miles, encircling a canopy of tiny stars set against the blackness of the sky. Three fireplaces crackled and sent waves of heat throughout the room.

Bodies were everywhere. Human, satyr, demon—they were much as Oona had seen them when she had entered the Great Tree all those years ago, touching and whispering and licking and copulating, in groups, in pairs, alone.

But there were so many more of them. And there was a different kind of urgency in the air, a threat of violence that seemed to hang like the heat that fogged the room. Looking closely, Oona could see that many of them raked each other with teeth and nails, that there was blood on the stone floor. A series of screams she heard from within one group did not sound like screams of pleasure.

"A fairy visitor to the Great Tree, such an honor."

The voice was rich and full of smiles. Oona's eyes traveled to the center of the room and she gasped.

Beneath the layers of silk and jewels and the dark paint that covered her eyes and lips, Oona could still recognize the mortal girl. She was a girl no longer, to be sure, but she had not aged, not in the
way Jack had aged and died. She sat on a throne much as the Creature had all those years before, one pale leg draped over the arm of the throne, the gown she wore falling away to reveal a breast, her hair tied up in ropes of red gemstones, some of it falling in ringlets over her silk-covered shoulders. Her lips were black and glittering, her nails were long and sharp, and her teeth were brilliantly white when she smiled. On either side of her bodies looked up in adoration—a young girl kissed the excess folds of her gown that hung over the throne, a man pressed his face against her outstretched leg.

She laughed at Oona's gaping. "Come closer, little one. I would not harm you...unless that is what you desire."

Oona moved forward in a trance, unable to take her eyes off the girl. "You...you..."

"But it is you I have to thank, is it not?" The girl's voice was still musical, though lower than it had been, and more certain. "It was you who brought me here, after all. You who made the glamour, who played the trick that changed me forever."

Oona lowered her eyes. "It was wrong of me, and I have been cast out for it—"

"Oh no." The girl rose from her throne, crossing to Oona in a whisper of silks and a tinkling of gems. "No, little one, it was a great service you did me, and this realm." She leaned forward and kissed both of Oona's cheeks delicately. The scent of her was dizzying. "I am grateful."

Oona's eyes wandered about the room, trying to take in everything she heard and saw. "Where...where is he?"

The girl smiled. "Where is who?"

"The Creature. The...Lord of this place."

"Oh yes." The girl laughed. "That was many years ago, but my memory is long." She crossed back to the throne and stroked the dark hair of the man who lay languid by her throne. "What was it he said to you then? 'How it pleases me when they go beyond expectations?'" She leaned down and let the man kiss her fingers. "Perhaps it pleased him even more when the pupil became the teacher."

The face was almost unrecognizable in its blind adoration, but Oona could see the eyes, the mouth, the dark hair that had been one of the Creature's many forms. As she watched he seemed to shift under the girl's stroking fingers, becoming wolf-like, then feminine, and even for a second a hint of his true self, red and crowned with horns.

Oona was reeling. This place was alien to her now. "What did you do to him?"

"Do to him? Nothing at all. Heavy is the head that wears the crown...and after a time he came to realize that I was more...suited...to this game."

The girl's expression changed for a moment, and Oona saw the tiniest hint of innocent youth behind her painted eyes. "What became...of the boy?"

"He lived long, longer than many of his kind. He is buried now, in the fairy forest, or so I have heard."

The girl ran a hand through her hair and gazed toward the distant stars. "Did he find love again?"

Oona shook her head.
The girl sighed, though her expression revealed that the grief was not deep. "A pity."

Oona felt lost. Some of this world was familiar to her, and welcome—the pleasures, the joyful abandon, the games. But she was overwhelmed by the rest of it. Most of all, the idea that this was a place that she had helped to create…that might never have come to be without her role in it all…filled with an unfamiliar sense of foreboding.

"And now I must ask why you have come, little one." The girl's voice took on the practical tone of a parent or a teacher. "We have no visitors from the fairy realm anymore, and I do not wish for strife with your lord Gump."

"He is my lord no more," Oona said, surprised that the words did not catch in her throat. "I was cast out…for what I did to you. And to Jack."

The girl chuckled. "So you have come here because there is no place for you in the outside world, little one. This is a familiar story."

Oona heard the words coming out of her mouth before she had fully formed them. "I helped to make this place. It is strange to me…but it is a part of me."

"Quite right, quite right." The girl lounged on her throne and lowered her lips to those of a nearby girl, who swooned at her kiss. "But I do not see why I should let you stay. As I have said, we do not have visitors from the fairy realm any longer, and outcast or no, I do not want trouble with your people."

Oona swallowed. "Perhaps…there is something I could offer in return?"

The girl sat up and fixed her with a mischievous stare. "An interesting proposition." She waved her hand, and a youth with yellow hair brought glasses of wine. "Sit by my side, little one. Let us come to some sort of agreement." She sipped the wine and closed her eyes. "I do love a good bargain."

THE END

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