

# Fate's Game

By Skye Hoffert

“This isn't another game is it?” My voice falters, but I choose my words with care. They have enough advantages over me, and I don't want to give them more.

“Fate plays games, why can't I?” The faery prince sneers at me. His lips look wine-stained, a stark contrast to his ashy skin. I hope it's wine.

I dig my nails into my palms, I can't show fear. His kind savors it, raised on sharp teeth and bleeding hearts. They catch a taste for such things young and never stop craving it. And I gush with it. They can smell it on me.

I bit my lip to keep my expression masked and hold my reckless tongue back. I taste salt. From my tears or sweat, I can't tell. They enjoy toying with emotions, as they don't seem to have any themselves.

My hands tremble.

He studies me; his eyes are milky pools, impossible to read. I can't tell if it's a defect or an attribute of his kind. Few get to see them without their glamour, it feels like a death knell that I have. It means he doesn't intend for me to live.

They're unsettling. Nothing like the fables I've been told. I can only describe him as something vaguely human. But fiercer, a collection of sharp edges and bone.

He runs his tongue over his canine-like teeth. “What game shall we play?”

The illusion of choice is something they love to evoke. You never really have one. It's easy to gamble on a fixed game. And it's said they never lose.

“What if I choose not to play?”

His smile has more in common with a wolf than mine, “With your life as the prize?”

It's said with grandeur as if the mere offer is somehow generous. He tilts his head at me, long strands of pearlescent hair spilling across his outspread arms. His stag like horns brush against my cheek.

“It will be fun.” I feel his words as his breath caresses my ear.

I shudder, he smells earthy like mildew and decay. It overwhelms me and I feel bile rise up, I swallow it down, using the burning sensation to ground myself. I have to stay focused. If I show my hand too early. I will lose more than my life.

“What's the game?” I ask with only slight faltering.

He taps his chin, “Ah that is the question.” He turns to face his subjects. They're feral things, attempting to masquerade as people. Like poorly done abstract paintings, it's not convincing. They're savage and hungry waiting for me to fail.

I intend to disappoint them all.

I don't look like a threat, as I stand there tear-soaked. A small girl encased in a yellow raincoat, and shoes unsuited to the woods. I make for a perfect target and they hadn't once thought to question that. Does a wolf ever suspect the rabbit of treachery?

It's too easy to trap them, to play this part. Convince them that I stumbled into the woods unaware of the many dangers there. Naïve and weak as all little girls ought to be, as all little girls are. Following the lilting unseen music further into the trees than anyone would dare. Wide-eyed and too quick to say my name, they couldn't resist.

How clever they think they are, with their riddles and games. That's all we are to them in the end, shiny toys.

“You lost someone.” He says suddenly.

I nod and try to cling to my fearful facade.

“Perhaps you should try to find him.” The Prince purrs, resembling a cat that got at the cream.

I wipe my tears away. They toss around false hope and empty promises freely. It costs them nothing. Lies are costly, so they deal in half-truths.

And the ‘lost’ boy’s a lie. One I made up just for them.

He raises a slender finger that seems just a little too long. “I’ll give you till the sun goes down.”

It’s a vague deadline, but I don’t fight for more time.

“If you find him, I’ll give you not only your life but his.” He flashes his teeth, expecting me to be pleased with the generous offer.

I shift as if weighing the prospect of fighting for a chance to live. “If I find him you’ll let us both live, right? I have your word on that.”

They can’t break their word. They are bound to it and only made promises they know they would never have to keep.

“You have my word, no harm will come to you should you succeed.” He gives the slightest bow as if to further his credibility.

“I want a guide to lead us out, so there’s no chance of getting lost again.”

His smile wanes at that, and his eyes became slits. My requests are beginning to irk him.

“Of course, you’re quite clever.” He hisses.

“Then, I agree.” My voice is no longer shaking. He doesn’t seem to notice.

He clasps his hands together, no longer trying to cloak the hunger in his expression.

I don’t move.

His eyes flick to the many tunnels that I could choose to go through. I glance at them, wondering how many people have tried their luck against him and lost.

“The sun sets quicker than you’d think.”

I smile, “He’s in a cemetery over two-hundred miles from here.”

His expression changes as my words sink in.

“He’s been there for over ten years, Jack always hated the woods,” I add.

His shock fades into a fury, but the deal's already been struck. They can't harm me. I savor his shock like he did my fear.

"You said it yourself, I like to play games." The glamour slides off me. I'm not scared. And I'm not a little girl.

The recognition sets in. The faeries scatter; all but the Prince. He knows he can't escape from me.

I let the others run, maybe now they'll be warier of rabbits.