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All Things Being Not Quite Equal

by

Diana Pharaoh Francis

An ugly vampire with a frizzy perm isn't exactly effective, not even at closing time at the sluttiest bar in the city. There didn't seem to be a man or woman among the drunk and leering desperate enough to take Esther up on her too obvious invitation. Not even when she was wearing a blouse unbuttoned nearly to her navel, tight leather pants and four inch zebra-print heels. Not that she didn't have a reasonably good body—a little straight up and down maybe, but not repulsive. It just wasn't enough to overcome her face. There had been that one guy whose friends had dragged him off in evident pity before he could make a terrible mistake. Oh it would have been a mistake all right, just not the one they anticipated.

Truth be told, Esther looked foolish at best, downright bizarre at worst. She knew it the way she knew this entire scheme had been a bust. And she was hungry.

It looked like it would have to be another neck-breaker though. And if she made many more of those she'd be forced to move on before long. The whole serial killer frenzy would develop and it would be just too much of hassle to try to dine around the

schedules of the marauding cops and reporters. And this time she'd more than likely have to go abroad—the US was getting a bit small for a neck-breaking serial vampire. Course if she could get the hang of the overwhelming strength that had come along with becoming a vampire, then she might manage to just knock her victim out.

Esther glanced toward the door and sighed. She'd have split hours ago if it weren't for Desiree. Desiree. Now she was your stereotypical beautiful vampire. Men and women fawned all over her wherever she went—from the Circle K to The Ritz and back again. With the sex appeal of a goddess she could and did take her pick from whomever appealed on any given night. And she rarely had to kill. Course serial-killing wouldn't have bothered her much. She got along abroad as well as she got along at home. A breeze. Whereas Esther hardly survived the rare personal interaction of her elevator clerk, much less tonight's bar crowd or cabdriver in Paris. She could picture herself on the verge of dawn trying to get some drunk Parisian to give her the time of day. It would be humiliating and she'd kill him and then the whole serial killer thing would begin all over again.

She yawned and rubbed her eyes. Desiree was taken care of for the night, and it wasn't as if leaving her here would subject her to any danger she wasn't looking for. In fact she liked on occasion to mess with these over-muscled construction worker types.

Esther glanced once more at her watch. It was getting on to closing time and she'd better get moving. She didn't like to mess in her own back yard, as it were, and the further away she could get from here the better. It might take longer to hook her up to the murder. Yeah, fat chance. She had the luck of a hooker in a monastery and either she cut it too close and left still hungry, or the thing was witnessed and she had to kill another

two or three people just to keep her identity a secret and then the whole thing disintegrated from there.

“Hey!” It was Desiree’s sultry voice and Esther swung around, her brows raised.

“It isn’t working. And I’m hungry.” She wasn’t in the mood to be polite. But Desiree never expected it of her and ignored the acid in the other woman’s voice.

“It might have, if you’d had even tried to look helpless and easy. But no, you look like, well, like you, but in sleazy clothes.”

“Well you know what they say about cats changing their spots. Look, I have to find something to eat. Catch you tomorrow at Vanity?” She didn’t wait for Desiree’s nod before she was out of the door.

In the end, it turned out much better than she had expected. She found a guy who’d been mugged in an alley. His blood alcohol was tolerably low and he didn’t taste anything like heroine or coke. So she got off easy.

The next night she didn’t bother with the slut clothing. That getup and the horrific perm had been Desiree’s idea and a pretty bad one at that. This time Esther dressed in her traditional blue jeans and black blazer over a man’s white v-necked undershirt. She pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail, hooking it with a silver clasp in the shape of a dragon. It had always been her totem. Even Jeremy didn’t know about the tribal dragon tattoo she sported along the length of her left calf. She glanced at herself in the mirror before heading out. Too bad that the myth about vampires not having reflections was just that. She didn’t look nearly as bad as the night before, but not even makeup could help the face.

Esther stuck her tongue out at herself and headed for the door. She'd been at this for nearly a year now and she just didn't seem to be getting the hang of it. She just didn't seem to be like any of the other vamps, not even Jeremy who had sired her. She had developed incredible strength, she could shapeshift fairly well, although she really needed more practice. She was faster than any other vampire she'd met so far, and she'd developed a grace and agility that she'd never even imagined before.

On the other hand, she was still damned plain—okay, ugly would be more accurate, she thought sardonically, but some women underestimated their weight or overestimated their height, so why couldn't she put a kinder spin on her looks? Even if no one else could.

Esther also couldn't hear Jeremy when he mind-called her. That was bad. You're supposed to be able to hear your sire, and all his relations—the family brood. She couldn't hear a single one. Actually as far as she was concerned it was a perk because for the most part she didn't think she wanted to hear a bunch of idiotic babbling in her head. But what was probably worse was she really hadn't lost her human personality foibles. She still ate chocolate and Chinese food. Well she didn't swallow either of them, but she still liked the taste. More than blood. Which was completely beyond the pale for a vampire and which was why she hadn't mentioned it to anybody but Jeremy. But then he'd been in on the experiment from the first. In fact it had been his idea.

They'd become friends when she was working nights as a janitor in a clinic. They were a blood bank too and Jeremy had liked the irony of working there, though he, like any other respectable vampire, despised dead blood and wouldn't have touched it to save his skin. Esther concurred wholeheartedly with him on that point. Anyhow, he'd been a

medic or something like that years ago, before he'd been introduced to the walking dead, and so he worked as a nurse at the clinic. For some strangely odd reason he'd taken a liking to her. A real liking, which was also out of vampiric character and so maybe it was his fault that she wasn't quite up to specs.

Esther had been her usual self to him, which is why she worked as a night janitor where she wouldn't come into contact with the public. Her few co-workers avoided her like the plague. But Jeremy had taken to spending her breaks with her, bringing her bits of gossip and egging her on in her tirades against stupidity.

When the subject of her looks came up, and she had begun to bitch and moan about men and their fixation on big breasts and big hair, Jeremy had listened and laughed at her. And then he had proceeded to introduce her to the world of the vampire. He had thought, and with pretty good evidence, (Esther had to admit that, since she'd gone along with the scheme), that if he made her into a vampire, then she'd develop an animal attraction that no man could resist, her face wouldn't break out any more, plus all the other little perks.

Clearly he'd been wrong.

Now she'd become some sort of side-show freak of the vampiric kind. It turned out her genes were stronger than any power of magic. Such was life. Except now she was going to be ugly for a whole lot longer than she'd originally planned. The upside was there was a certain amount of fun to be had being a vampire, not the least of which she could stay out all night in the worst part of town and not have to worry about getting mugged or raped, or whatever. In fact, at first she had courted such "dangers" since they were often the best opportunity she had to eat.

Now she was back to the hungry thing. Vampires liked to eat as often as regular folk and the sex appeal thing was the usual way of luring in likely victims, which is why you find so many of them hanging out in bars. And Esther had to admit that the one time she'd tried eating of the animal kingdom, she'd about gagged. That was not an option. She'd refused brussel sprouts, lima beans and liver as a human, and she wasn't going to dine on anything less than human as a vampire.

Esther jogged up the three flights of stairs to Vanity where she now worked as a bouncer. It was mostly a hangout for vamps, but it had developed the reputation of a hot spot in town, and so attracted normals like flies. It was pretty much the cliché—vampires hanging out in bars. But if the shoe fits and all that crap, and it was pretty much the equivalent of fast food, or Seven-Eleven. But since the various blood-sucking broods were always squabbling about something, it was necessary to have someone on hand that could deal with them. Esther's weird natural resistance to their mind commands combined with her speed and strength made her the ultimate bouncer, and Carmen was happy to keep her on the payroll, even if she were paying an arm and a leg for the privilege.

Now she pushed her way through the line and made her way up to the bar. Behind the tide of mahogany Quentin nodded at her and pointed toward the stage. A makeshift moshpit had sprung up and Marcus and Benjamin were in the process of trying to clear it out. Most of the vamps involved were willing to back down and drift away, but several were battling with the two dead bouncers. And the two idiots were losing, because they'd always had more muscle than brains, and from the looks of it, the malcontents were of Lucien's brood. Which meant trouble, anyway you sliced it.

Esther shouldered her way through the rubberneckers—vamps and humans were all alike in that respect—until she arrived at pitside, as it were. When Marcus fell in her direction, she reached forward and grabbed him by the collar and yanked him from the fray. He spun around, the long nails on his fingers turning his hand into a formidable claw. Esther lifted her finger and shook her head at him before turning back to the fight. Lucien's four had not yet realized that another party was involved and now were shoving a bleeding Benjamin back and forth between them.

Esther sized up her opponents. All of them were about six feet, with slick hair, decked out in understated and yet expensive jewelry, and wearing your basic designer suits in godawful shades of flower pastels—clearly they had too much time on their hands. And they were damned full of themselves. She sighed. She hadn't been at this bloodsucking biz for long, but had discovered that there were as many arrogant jackasses in this crowd as the human crowd. She undid the buttons of her blazer and walked into the group, grabbing Benjamin as she had Marcus and tossing him into the crowd. The four looked at her with undisguised amusement and irritation.

"I think it's time for you boys to leave." She liked saying that. It was straight out of some bad fifties movie, but it was still fun. The one to her right crossed his arms and shook his head.

"I disagree. We were just beginning to enjoy ourselves. Get lost." It was the cornflower blue jacket.

"Can't do that. Actually, to tell the truth, I could, but I don't feel like it." Esther propped herself against the stage and waited for the inevitable. Well, it wasn't much. It never was. They tried to bend her mind and of course she couldn't hear them—even

though everyone could hear Lucien's brood, he being the lord and master of all the vamps. She'd only ever encountered his blood—never him, but they were arrogant as all hell and they had to get it from somewhere. Since she couldn't hear them, she had to wait until they looked at each other in bewilderment before she knew they were through. For a moment she contemplated pretending her brain was melting, but that really would have been over the top.

Esther held up her hands, the nails hardening into wickedly curved eagle talons. That was a trick she'd been playing with for awhile—partial and minuscule shape changes. With a quick movement she slashed the front of the goldenrod and keylime jackets, raising thin streaks of nearly black blood beneath the ribbons of cloth. Both of them look stunned and faintly unnerved. They fell back, joined in a moment by the pink gladiola jacket. That left the blue boy. It was Esther's own packanimal theory for dealing with her fellow vampires. There was always a ringleader in a group, an alpha, and if you let his or her friends know you too were an alpha, they would always get out of the way and let the strong sort out the problem.

"Time for you to go," Esther said, letting her hand return to its normal shape.

Her adversary rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Not on your life bitch. We're not going anywhere."

He had that whole "make me" attitude of a twelve year old bully facing down the neighborhood whipping boy. Not very original and although there were several people in the crowd hooting and egging him on, Esther was coming to the decision that this was getting boring, and she did not get paid to be the floor show.

Her speed surprised him. That and the fact that she did a shape change at the same time so that the pincer grip on his neck was enhanced by the eagle claws digging a half an inch into his flesh. He began to jerk away but Esther gripped harder and he froze. It wouldn't take much to snap his neck. She shoved him toward the back door, gesturing at Marcus and Benjamin to bring his buddies. Beneath her fingers she felt him going vampiral on her. His eyes were beginning to glow yellow and blood ran down his chin from where his teeth had punctured his lip. It always happened like that, which is why Carmen had her toss any misbehaving vamps out the back. Humans tended to get queasy at the sight of blood, and then there was every chance that a pissed off vampire would get a bit rabid and go hog wild on the crowd. Very bad for business, and bad for the rest of blood sucking community.

Esther wasn't very gentle with this one. She pushed through the kitchen and out to the freight elevator, bouncing him against the walls as she went. She twisted her key in the lock and when the doors opened, slung him across to the other side where his head careened off the wall. Oops. His friends followed behind more meekly.

"You can request readmittance in six months. You didn't do any structural damage, so your chances are good. But don't think of coming back before."

Blue boy was back on his feet, wiping the blood from his lip with his knuckles, though his shirt and jacket were sodden with the stuff that had run from the holes she'd made in his neck. It smelled good. Esther's nostrils flared and she felt that deep hunger stir in her veins. Her lips curled in a snarl and she stepped back, pushing Marcus and Benjamin behind her. Their control was limited and she dearly hoped they'd fed before

coming in like they were supposed to. Blue boy would have to handle his buddies whose eyes were beginning to glitter. Esther hit the down button.

"Lucien is going to hear about you," he said hoarsely as the doors began to close.

Esther ignored him and turned around. Neither of the rubber-headed bouncers appeared to have been too affected by the blood, which meant they must have fed. Good boys. She sent them back to make sure that things were flowing smoothly and returned to the bar. Desiree was there.

"I don't know if you should have done that," she said as soon as Esther appeared.

"What? Them?" She made a face and shrugged. "That's the job."

"Yeah, but couldn't you have handled it a little more . . . delicately?"

"What for?"

"Fucking A, Es. Don't you know who they were?"

"Assholes with big teeth?" Esther hooked a stool with her foot and perched on it beside her friend.

"Yeah, well that too. But those were Lucien's."

"We get a lot of his in here. So what."

"Not like these. The one in blue? That's Lucien's own. Rumor is the great one is grooming him for bigger things, if you know what I mean. Pissing the twirp off will only bring Lucien down on your head."

Esther glanced over at the other woman. She didn't sound all that concerned, but probably as concerned as any vampire ever was. Whatever.

"Who wants to live forever?" she asked philosophically as she stood up, noting the irony of her question with a slight grimace. "Better make the rounds. See ya in awhile."

There wasn't any more trouble for the rest of the night other than the usual drunken spats, and everyone maintained a safe and respectable distance from Esther. Desiree disappeared before the band made its appearance. That didn't bother Esther. She'd be back if she got bored. It all depended on who she'd picked up.

Esther hadn't followed her own rules and had not fed before coming in. So that left her less than an hour before dawn to find something, or go hungry until nightfall. The thought wasn't appealing. She skimmed down the front stairs, leaving the cleanup crew wiping down the tables and sweeping the floors. The night was overcast and the streets gleamed with a soft film of rain. Esther paused at the bottom of the steps and tipped her head back as she sniffed the air. The air was crisp, although neither heat nor cold bothered her. That was another benefit of being a vampire. She used to swelter in the summer and freeze her ass off in the winter. Now she didn't need special wardrobes for different times of the year, didn't need an airconditioner, a heater or a humidifier.

There wasn't any likely lunchfood hanging around or lying the in gutter passed out. Bummer. She didn't have time to do a lot of hunting, and the fracas with blue boy and his friends had sharpened her hunger. She felt her body tense at just the thought of rich warm blood. She licked her lips as her insides began to turn to hot liquid. Her skin prickled and a tremble ran the length of her body. She knew her eyes had begun to take on the glow of an aroused vampire. Only hers went this sort of dusky purple color rather than the typical yellow or green.

"I've been waiting for you."

Esther spun around, her teeth bared. She didn't even try to quell the changes in her body sparked by rising appetite. She didn't know him. He was dressed very much like her, in black jeans, a black turtle-neck, and a black blazer. His long hair was the color of dark mahogany and was clubbed behind his head. Like all vampires, or rather most because she was certainly the exception, he was beautiful, with a greek nose, a sculpted face and a tall, muscular body. Esther wanted him, and she was pretty sure he knew it so she didn't bother to hide the fact.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded, her voice gone husky and deep as her arousal grew.

"My name is Lucien," he said. "Perhaps you've heard of me."

"Oh yes. Some of yours tore up Vanity tonight. But that is why you're here."

"As a matter of fact, it is." He stepped closer and Esther's eyes narrowed. He was stalking her, and she wouldn't be surprised if he were trying to pry into her mind. Only he couldn't. She didn't think he'd like that.

"Well get to the point, because I want to feed before dawn."

"Yes, I can see that," he said and Esther bristled. He was mocking her. "I hadn't believed what Andre said about you, but it would appear that he is correct. I can't touch your mind, and I can touch every vampire's mind. This is very disturbing to me. You understand."

Esther did. Lucien maintained his power in the vampiric world by his and his brood's abilities to screw with everybody else's minds. So what if she started populating the world with a brood he couldn't control? She'd thought it through a couple of times

since she'd gone to work for Carmen and found out how the system worked. It was just a matter of time until the great man himself turned up.

"You can't kill me," she said bluntly. "At least tonight. I can take you. I promise." She wasn't bragging and she wasn't bullshitting. He knew it. But her next words surprised him. "Bring some friends tomorrow, same time. You'll lose a few, but you can afford it."

"You're a cool one. Are there more of you?"

Of course he'd want to know that. "No. Not unless my sire threw more accidents."

"Who is your sire?"

The fire in her veins was burning hotter and Esther was itching to feed, and . . . other things. Things that Lucien was not going to be interested in doing with her. She shook her head, her lips curling.

"You can find that out for yourself. I'll not send him your kind of trouble. Are we through?"

"Oh no. We are most definitely not through. But perhaps this is not the time—" He looked her up and down and while normally that would have pissed her off, tonight it inflamed her more. He saw the flare in her eyes and smiled. "You'd better feed. Come."

He held a hand out to her and she looked at it. What the hell? She put her fingers in his. He led her to a dark green Porsche with dark tinted windows and helped her in. Esther tapped her fingers restlessly on her knees as he drove. He pulled up in the parking garage of a hospital. When she looked at him he shrugged.

"People come and go all night. Nurses, doctors, other staff. Easy pickings. Come on."

Once again he took her hand, and Esther wondered if he was trying to keep her from going on a bloodthirsty rampage. She felt like telling him she had a bit more control than that, but a red stain was spreading across her vision as she caught the scent of prey.

"Easy now. Wait until we get some privacy."

He pulled her between a couple of minivans near an entrance. When a lone man came walking up Lucien grabbed him, gripping his throat until the man hung unconscious. He passed the body to Esther. She cradled the man, tilting his head back so that the length of his tan throat was exposed. The hunger was almost overwhelming and she bit deeply into artery at his neck. She preferred the oxygen rich blood of the artery rather than the bitter tasting juice in veins.

It ran down her throat like sweet syrup and she moaned aloud. But then she remembered her companion and her eyes flashed open and she watched him sharply as she fed. Lucien leaned against one of the vans, his arms crossed, watching Esther sate herself. As she continued to feed he finally stepped forward and pulled her up.

"Don't drink him dry. You can have another."

Esther let him pull the body away in spite of the sarcasm. He snared her gaze now as he deliberately bent and flicked his tongue over the oozing bruise where she'd bitten the man's neck. The wound closed instantly and the dark stain beneath the man's skin faded to nothing. Lucien dropped the body behind him, running the tip of his tongue over his lips. In the end Esther fed twice more before returning to Lucien's car.

"Where are we going?" she asked, when he peeled out.

"To my place."

"No."

"Where then?"

Esther looked over at him for a silent moment and then gave him her address. If they didn't get under cover soon they would be in the car until the sun went down. That wouldn't be a whole lot better than his place. Jay, the third-shift elevator guy, gave them a faintly stunned look as he took them up to her apartment. It was hard to be offended. She couldn't recall ever bringing another man up here. She hadn't even brought Jeremy. And to show up with a specimen like Lucien. It was like Quasimoto taking home Cindy Crawford.

The elevator opened on the top floor—her entry. They stepped into a polished wood foyer carpeted with thick hand-woven wool rugs—money was another perk of being a vampire. Esther waved Lucien into her living room through an arched opening on the right and motioned for him to take a seat on the couch while she switched on a light. Not that either one of them needed it. The room's floor to ceiling windows were shrouded in dark curtains which she always left closed before leaving for Vanity. Lucien lounged on the cream colored suede of the couch, while Esther leaned against a bookcase opposite.

"Okay. Now what," she said. Lucien tucked his hands behind his head.

"Blunt and to the point. Very well. Let's talk about you."

"What about me?"

"You're a danger to me. You must know that." Esther didn't answer and he continued. "At the same time, you could be very valuable."

"Do stop. You'll make me blush." Her sarcasm wasn't lost on him but his smile held no hint of apology. He was watching her and his gaze was unnerving. Suddenly Esther was very tired of this fencing. She'd never been particularly adept at the social graces, and to be honest, never had really seen the point. She felt tired, tired in the way she used to before she'd been born a vampire and needed never sleep again. She sank down on her haunches and tilted her head back against the blonde wood of the bookcase, never taking her gaze from Lucien's.

"Tell me what you want. What fate you've decided for me."

Her words startled him and he sat forward, his elbows on his knees. He scrutinized the flat planes of her face for a moment and then sat back.

"All right. I came here tonight to ask you to come live with me. In my compound. I wanted you to come to work for me."

Esther's eyebrows shot up, but that was all of the surprise she showed. Slowly she shook her head. "I have a job," was all she said.

"That's all right. Because I'm not interested in making that offer any more."

So. He'd decided she was too great a liability. Well if he thought she was going to try to run and hide, he was mistaken. "You know where to find me."

"I don't think you understand," he said slowly, standing and pacing around the back of the couch. "I do not intend to kill you."

"Why not?" It was out of her mouth before she could prevent it, and clearly it caught Lucien off guard. A wry grin spread across his face and he rubbed a hand over his chin.

"Do you know how old I am?" He asked suddenly. Then waved her answer away. "No, let's not go there. It's a cliché waiting to happen. Let me just say that I no longer believe you to be a threat to me. At least not personally. Perhaps those whom you sire may in time prove so, but that will be a challenge to deal with later. To answer your question—" He came around the end of the low oval table in front of the couch and crouched before her. He picked up one of her hands and turned it over in his, idly turning the carved silver band on her middle finger.

"The fact is that the cliché is true. Longevity gets boring. There are few surprises left. But you are most definitely surprising."

"Yeah, in that fascinatingly repulsive way of an accident on the highway." Esther pulled her hand from his and stood. "You need to get out more."

Lucien rose to his feet slowly, watching her as she strode across the room. "I've offended you."

Esther came to halt across the room, turning to lean back against the bar. "Let's just say that I find this scene a bit less than believable."

Lucien gave her a hard look then and then smiled a faintly menacing smile. It sent a ripple of craving over Esther's skin. He paced across the room then, like a lion stalking his prey with arrogant grace. He placed his hands flat on the smooth maple wood of the bar, trapping her within his seductive embrace as he brought his lips close to her ear. She felt the stir of his breath in her hair and a frisson of desire shot down her spine. Her stomach clenched with hunger, but not for food.

"Believe that I want you. Believe that I have eyes that tell me your face does not belong on the cover of a fashion magazine." The tip of his tongue flicked along the curve

of her ear. Esther shifted uneasily and turned her head away as slick heat curled deep in her belly. But Lucien was not deterred. The points of his teeth scraped the tendons of her neck lightly, raising the hair on her arms. "I've had those faces. Believe that you excite me like none has in many years."

His teeth closed on the flesh above her collarbone and Esther went rigid. She hadn't experienced lovemaking as a vampire and when she felt the hot draw of his mouth on her vein, her body went up in flames. But then he stepped back, wiping the back of his hand across his lips.

"Change your mind?" It was the only thing that Esther could think to say. The look he gave her was incredulous.

"You never lose that edge, do you?" he said finally.

"Once or twice. Are you done here?" Her tone was only slightly less than belligerent. The predatory desire he'd stirred up was raging through her body like a firestorm. It was not a comfortable feeling.

Lucien reached for her hand again, rubbing the palm with his thumb.

"Oh no, I'm not through with you. But we've got plenty of time." He lifted her hand and pressed his lips against her fingers. Her hand bunched into a fist beneath his touch. He glanced up at her, his dark brows raised, mocking.

"You're way out of my league."

"That's where you're wrong. I am your league. Don't you know power draws power? There's never been anyone as desirable as you for me." His hand tightened on hers and he drew her close, his mouth but a whisper from her own. His voice, when he spoke, was whiskey-rough. "Whoever sired you, however you came to be, you're mine."

"I don't belong to anyone." Esther's voice was disgustingly breathy.

"Wrong again. Taste of me, feed, and let me—"

Esther pressed her lips to his, sliding her hands up to grip his shoulders. He responded with a deep thrust of his tongue, molding her against his hard length. His blood was thick, bittersweet and rich as nothing she'd ever tasted. As it ran over her tongue and filled her mouth, her body shook. He moaned and held her head between his hands. He let her taste freely of him, and then when he could hold back no more, he breached her tender flesh. She tasted their mingling life and she swayed. Lucien swung her up in his arms, pulling his head back. A thin ribbon of red trickled from the corner of his mouth as he gazed down at her.

"Mine," he said. The look in his eyes was faintly questioning, and more than a little arrogant.

Esther reached up a finger and swiped at the blood on his chin and then stuck it in her mouth, sucking. Lucien made a sound in the back of his throat, his eyes glowing a lucent green. Esther nodded.

"Mine," she said.

The End