



Tom Xavier

Dark Curses,  
Faerie Dreams

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DARK CURSES, FAERIE DREAMS

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# Chapter 1

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Duggan sat hunched over her worktable, her mind focused on the difficult task of weaving a long, thin strand of Creeper-Vine through the complicated pattern of River-Willow branches that formed the bowl of her Bottle Basket.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Duggan tried her best to ignore the sound but whatever was making the obnoxious tapping noise outside the window behind her, it did not intend to cooperate.

Tap.

Duggan sighed mightily. To get this particular Bottle Basket done right, she needed to concentrate, which meant she needed peace and quiet. Total peace and quiet.

“Go slakin’ away,” she cried.

But no matter how much she wished it gone, the tapping sound refused to go away. It was as if something or someone was intent on ruining her day.

Tap. Tap-tap.

“Hallow’s Fire,” she swore, “I hate this.”

With a mighty sigh, Duggan struggled to her feet. Grabbing her chair by its back, she dragged it to the window in the back of the workshop and climbed onto its seat. Pushing her head against the window’s dirty pane, she peered out to see what was causing the annoying racket. Her eyes were a bit blurry from her many hours of close-up work and so it took a second or two for the object standing beneath the window to come into focus.

Zagger.

There stood obnoxious, utterly aggravating Zagger Dunleavy and standing right behind him was the girl who really should have known better, none other than Duggan’s best friend, Lambrell Quiverill. Zagger was holding one end of a long, crooked branch in his two hands and he was about to bang the other end against the pane of Duggan’s window when she hurriedly pushed it open. Immediately, Zagger looked up and grinned stupidly at her.

In response, Duggan gave the obnoxious boy her most disdainful look. At least, she hoped it was a disdainful look.

“Stop that,” she cried, “what do you think you’re doing, Zagger Dunleavy?”

“There you are, Duggan McDuggan. Finally. I’ve been banging on this stupid window forever.”

“Yes, yes, believe me, I know. Well, here I am. Not where I should be. Where I should be is back at my table, working. I’m very busy, so please go away.”

“We need to talk,” retorted Zagger, ignoring her plea. “Right now. Get down here and join Lambrell and me. We’ll be waiting in the trees at the usual spot.”

“No way. I can’t.”

“We’ll be waiting. Get down here and meet us. Hurry.”

Abruptly, Zagger turned and headed into the trees, with skinny, do-everything-Zagger-says Lambrell following a step or two behind him. Frustrated, Duggan sighed loudly. Although she was burnin’ annoyed, what could she do? Ignore him? No, it was pointless to argue with Zagger when he had his mind made up and obviously, his mind was made up.

Sighing again, she closed the window and went back to her worktable. The Bottle Basket was coming along nicely and she hated to abandon her work at this critical point in its creation but Zagger had left her with no choice. She had to go.

On a normal afternoon, it would have been impossible for Duggan to leave the workshop. Her parents were strict taskmasters and they accepted no excuses for her stopping work before a task was done. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it right now—Duggan’s Mum and Pops were gone for the day to deliver several crates of new baskets to the owner of the largest and most popular pub in the neighboring village of Groundlevel, leaving Duggan under the neglectful care of her old and rather addled Grandmum, Needles Korney.

“Gru’m,” called Duggan, turning from her worktable and raising her voice so her nearly deaf Grandmum could hear, “I’m going out to stretch my legs. I won’t be gone long.”

Duggan’s Grandmum was sitting at her own worktable in a far, back corner of the shop. Bent over her work, she was vigorously attacking a pile of slender River-Willow branches with her razor-sharp knife, expertly stripping away the bark from one branch after another with deft flicks of her wrist. The nearly deaf, old woman obviously had not heard Zagger’s banging on the window, Duggan noted. Nor had she heard any of the argument between Zagger and her. Nor had she heard Duggan’s raised voice just now.

“Gr’um, do you hear me?” repeated Duggan, shouting more loudly and moving near her Grandmum. “I’m going out for a bit to stretch my legs.”

This time, her old Gr’um must have heard because she looked up to give Duggan an indulgent smile.

“Of course,” she said, “Take your time, deary. It’s spring. Go out and enjoy the sun. Have some fun.”

“Um, thanks, Gr’um,” Duggan answered.

“Certainly, my deary,” murmured the elderly woman. “It’s a day to be playing, not working.”

“Gr’um, I’m not going out to play,” Duggan quickly corrected.

The old lady either didn’t hear her or didn’t understand her words.

“When I was your age,” she continued, “I had to work all the time. Never got to play. Not that that was right, mind. No, it was not right, not right at all. Never got to play.”

Before Duggan could explain again she was not going out to play, her elderly Gr'um lowered her head and went back to stripping bark off her River-Willow branches, their conversation apparently over. Duggan gave a soft smile. She was getting used to these fragmented exchanges with her Grandmum, who was growing more and more addled as she passed into very old age. Impulsively, she bent and gave her Grandmum a quick kiss on the top of her head before heading out.

“Bye, Gru'mmy,” she called quietly as she moved to the doorway, knowing the old woman would not hear. “I love you, *Vankayhol*,” she added, using the Ancient word for Grandmum, a word meaning the vine that ties everything together.

Outside the door, Duggan pulled up her hood and veered to her left, making her way to the narrow footpath that led to Crystal Creek and breaking into a jog when she was on it. Her Gr'um certainly was right, she observed as she hurried down the path, it really was the kind of afternoon one should pause to enjoy.

Smiling, Duggan glanced up. The sun was well into its afternoon phase and yet it was still high enough in the sky to bathe the whole world in its lovely, golden glow. Struck by the beauty of the afternoon, she slowed to enjoy the forest unfolding around her and what she saw, smelled and heard was so wondrous it took away her breath. Leaves colored in the soft greens of the new spring season were just beginning to sprout on all the trees and bushes, covering branches long bared by winter in new color. And everywhere, the flowers of early spring were thrusting themselves out of the ground to create a fantastic patchwork of brilliant colors across the forest floor.

Duggan sighed happily.

She knew all these pretty flowers by name and she loved every one of them. There were brightly yellow Pollypads and rosy Bollybeets that were said to blush even more deeply than a young maiden's cheeks. In the dark shadows, she could make out aptly named Bluebuttons so perfectly round they looked manufactured.

Duggan quickly decided there was no point in hurrying just because jerky Zagger had told her to hurry. Putting the boy out of her mind, she slowed even more to savor and enjoy this wondrous reawakening of springtime. As she passed a waist-high bush newly come into bloom, she ran her fingers lightly through its supple, young leaves. A few moments later, she paused briefly under a very old tree that was like an old friend to her. A little farther down the trail, when an orange-breasted Bobbin' Robin landed on a high limb and called down to her, she whistled back while imagining that the Bobbin' Robin was not an ordinary bird at all but rather, it was one of those brightly crimsoned, long-tailed Carnival-Flickers of Eshmagick.

With so much beauty around her, Duggan really didn't care if she was keeping her friends waiting. It could be weeks before she had another chance to enjoy a day as gorgeous as this one. And besides, that little jerk, Zagger, deserved to be kept waiting.

When she finally reached their meeting place under the old Gnarly-Oak, she found her two friends sitting on one of the fallen limbs littering the ground beneath the magnificent tree, their hoods raised, their backs to her, chatting quietly.

“What’s up?” Duggan called, laying a hand lightly on the Gnarly-Oak’s coarse bark as she worked her way around the giant curve of its trunk.

Under her soft touch, the tree seemed to purr appreciatively, like a cat being petted. Duggan quickly reminded herself trees don’t purr; their trunks only vibrate from the wind. Still, she liked imagining that this was not your ordinary Gnarly-Oak but a Magickal one, able to move and talk the way they do in Eshmagick. The breeze gusted, shaking loose a few, dried-out leaves of the recent winter that fluttered like tiny, Magickal whispers to the ground. Duggan smiled happily and was about to pick up one of the pretty leaves when Zagger’s voice snapped her back to reality.

“What’s up, you ask? Nothing is up,” complained the boy, standing and pulling Lambrell up with him. “That’s the slakin’ problem. Nothing is up.”

Duggan knew exactly why Zagger was complaining but she really didn’t care. “It’s your problem, not mine,” she shot back testily. “I told you, I have work to do.”

“No, it is definitely not my problem,” replied Zagger, “it is most definitely our problem since *you* were the one who put the idea of going to Eshmagick into our heads, *you* were the one who said, let’s leave as soon as everything is ready. So there’s no saying, it’s your problem, Zagger Dunleavy, not mine. There’s no saying, I’m too busy for you, Zagger Dunleavy. There’s no saying, I’ve got too much work today, Zagger Dunleavy. There’s no saying—”

Duggan had to laugh. Zagger was the most annoying creature she’d ever met in her life but he did have his moments. And there was no arguing his main point. The idea of going to Eshmagick had been hers.

“All right, all right,” Duggan cried, “I get your point. So tell me, Zagger Dunleavy, what’s so slakin’ important that it can’t wait and we need to talk right now?”

“OK. That’s better. I have a burnin’ important question for you, Duggan McDuggan. My question is, what’s the thing that’s most keeping us stuck here?”

Duggan always hated the way Zagger dragged out unexpected words for effect.

“What makes you think we’re stuck?” she replied.

“Come on,” said Zagger, “you’re the queen of excuses. You always have a reason why we need to wait another week. Then another week. Then another. I’m just asking why.”

Duggan suddenly grew angry.

“There are a lot of legitimate reasons why we don’t just take off,” she countered.

“Such as?”

“Um, like, you know. Having to go to school. Work. Parents. The fact that we’re still toddlers and we can’t just walk away, just like that.”

“No, come on. We all know the big-biggiest problem is with you and your scaredy ways. But that’s not my point. What I want to know is, besides you being a total scaredy, what’s really, really keeping us from getting started.”



Not in the mood for argument, Duggan ignored the fact that Zagger had just insulted her in a huge way. An obvious point came to mind.

“Um, we don’t really know where we’re going. I mean, all we know is that Eshmagick is somewhere to the east but we don’t know exactly where. We don’t know how far.”

“Not a bad guess. Lack of geographical knowledge, we might call it. That’s one, very *big* problem facing us. Not the top one but big. So Duggan, what’s the big-biggiest thing holding us back?”

Duggan thought for a moment.

“Um, that there are scardier things than getting lost on the way. Like, if we ever get to Eshmagick, they say it’s full of deadly creatures.”

His lips twitching, Zagger agreed much too readily for Duggan’s tastes.

“Another good thought,” he said. “If we ever did find Eshmagick and the Storytellers are right, we could meet Black Chargers with giant horns and poisonous Red-Eye Snakes.”

“And Dragonsy Lions,” added Lambrell, speaking up for the first time.

“Dragonsy Lions would be bad,” Duggan agreed, giving Lambrell a small smile.

There was a moment of silence while Duggan and her friends contemplated fierce Chargers, poisonous Snakes and fire-breathing Dragonsy Lions. Then Zagger spoke up.

“Anything else?”

“I think those are pretty good reasons. This thing obviously needs careful planning so we can all come back in one piece.”

Zagger shook his head so vigorously a greasy lock of his hair came loose and fell across his forehead, covering an eye.

“Maybe, but this is exactly why I wanted you to come here and talk.”

When Zagger gave Duggan a sly, know-it-all wink, she could only respond by asking, “What are you talking about?”

Brushing his lock of hair back into place, Zagger raised his head to gaze at the face of the much taller Lambrell. Duggan immediately noticed how terribly uncomfortable Lambrell grew under the boy’s gaze.

“Tell Duggan your idea, Lambrell Quiverill,” he said to her.

Lambrell blushed and lowered her eyes.

“No, Zagger, you tell her,” the girl practically whispered.

“No, it’s your idea. You tell her,” Zagger urged.

“No, you tell her,” the girl insisted, her face growing even redder.

Watching this little exchange between her two friends gave Duggan a very bad feeling.

“All right,” Zagger finally agreed, turning his pale eyes on Duggan. “Lambrell is the one who should be telling this because it’s a slakin’ fantastic idea. Fantastic because it’s so

simple and yet it will solve all our problems. I mean, not just one or two of them but all of 'em. It's that burnin' fantastic."

"Fine," said Duggan. "Just tell me the idea."

"We catch a Faerie."

Duggan's jaw dropped.

"Do what?"

"Catch a Faerie."

"Zagger, you're slakin' out of your mind. We can't go catching a Faerie and why, in Hallow's Fire, would we even want to try?"

"Interesting you should ask," replied Zagger, giving a smile that made Duggan worry. "Actually, it was Lambrell who figured it all out. Go ahead. Ask her."

Facing her friend, Duggan raised a questioning eyebrow but the shy girl only blushed more deeply. Duggan summoned up her soft voice, the one that usually worked to coax Lambrell out of her embarrassment and into talking.

"Lambrell?" she murmured. "You have something to say?"

Her friend didn't answer right away but after a long hesitation, she raised her chin and looked Duggan in the eyes.

"Um, well," she finally said, "I do believe I know how to catch a Faerie."

"No one has ever caught a Faerie," Duggan pointed out, "not in modern times."

"Doesn't mean it can't be done," replied Lambrell, her eyes widening. "I mean, even if there is a terrible Curse."



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## Chapter 2

Duggan was about to tell her friends exactly how crazy they were when Lambrell gave such a sweet look it caused Duggan to hold her tongue. Then Zagger curved his lips into an obnoxious grin that looked so superior Duggan couldn't stand it. She felt her temper rising.

"Are you two nuts?" she cried.

"Just think what it would mean if we caught a Faerie," Zagger argued. "Open your mind and *think*."

When the incredibly obnoxious grin lingered on the boy's face, Duggan grew about ready to punch him. Then, out of nowhere, fragments of an Ancient Story about Faeries popped into her head.

"Do you think it's true?" she finally asked. "The Story about Clagg McClagg, I mean."

"Of course," Zagger answered confidently. "It's gotta be hundreds of Moon-years old. How could it not be true?"

For Duggan, it felt terribly odd to be the one questioning a fabled Story about Eshmagick but someone had to be the voice of reason.

"I don't know. I mean, I believe in Magick and all that but you know, some of the Ancient Stories are pretty hard to swallow."

"Are you saying you don't believe the Stories?" Zagger demanded.

Duggan didn't know what to say. Here was Zagger suddenly acting like the great believer in Magick. Why were things suddenly getting so turned around?

"The Stories are just so...you know..." she stammered, "so Magickal."

Zagger laughed loudly.

"That's because Fairies are Magickal. Come on, Duggan, stop being a slakin' mule. Hallow's Fire, everyone knows if you catch a Faerie, it must do whatever you say."

"I guess."

"No guess, it's fact. Which is why Lambrell's idea is so fantastically simple and yet so fantastically brilliant. We catch a Faerie just like ole McClaggy did and, boom, we have ourselves the perfect guide to take us to Eshmagick. And when we're there, we tell the Faerie to keep us away from all the dangerous critters and show us the wonders and it does *exactly* what we tell it. Like I say, we catch a Faerie and *all* our problems are solved."

"This was your idea, Lambrell Quiverill?" asked Duggan, eyeing her friend.

"Yes, Duggan," answered Lambrell, blushing. "I guess so."

"Well, it's an interesting idea; I'll give you that," Duggan conceded, "though I do have one burnin' important question for both of you, which is—"

Before Duggan could finish her thought, Zagger cut her off.

“I know what you’re gonna say,” he said. “You’re gonna ask how in Hallow’s Fire we’re gonna catch a Faerie, right?”

Once more, Zagger had such a know-it-all look on his face Duggan was ready to punch him.

*Stay calm*, she told herself, as her hands trembled from the anger welling up inside her.

“Wow, you’re pretty sharp, Zagger Dunleavy,” Duggan remarked, hoping Zagger would catch the sarcasm in her voice, “pretty sharp indeed.”

Zagger failed to take her bait.

“Duggan, I tell you, Lambrell and I have it all figured out.”

“I don’t know how in Hallow’s Fire you could have,” she shot back, unable to believe they were having this conversation. “It may be true that a Faerie once caught must do whatever you say but the modern Stories say you cannot catch a Faerie anymore. No one can. No one has. Good Gidden, no one is even foolish enough to try.”

Zagger gave a quick nod of his head.

“I know, I know. Everyone knows the Story of how the Lord of all Faeries long ago conjured a special Magick that protects them against being caught. It shrank ‘em permanently and made ‘em lighter than air so you can’t get near one.”

“You’ve got that right, Zagger Dunleavy,” Duggan agreed. “The Stories say there’s a Magick protecting a Faerie from being caught but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Sure, sure,” Zagger replied, “you’re talking about the Curse. I mean, everyone knows the toddle’s rhyme, even I know it.” Raising his chin, he began reciting:

Harm a Faerie, cause it pain, bring it death,

Then comes the Curse, fire and stone, stilling breath.

Harm a Faerie, scrape its skin, break its bone,

Then comes the Curse, woe to them, all back

Home.

Pausing, Zagger glanced at Lambrell, who spoke up, finishing the rhyme:

Harm a Faerie, act of will, senseless slight,

Then comes the Curse, endless sleep, day and night.

When Lambrell’s voice trailed off, Zagger poked her with his elbow.

“Go on, tell her, Lambrell,” he coaxed, his face shining with delight. “Tell her about the book.”

The edges of Lambrell’s ears grew bright red and although her words came out slowly and cautiously, the excitement behind them was obvious to Duggan.

“Um, well, the thing is, I have this book,” said Lambrell. “It’s a very old book.”

Zagger waved a hand dramatically at Duggan.

“Hear that? A very old book. Go on, Lambrell, keep going.”

Lambrell swallowed hard before resuming, “Um, I wouldn’t even know about this book except my Grandpops, old Hambell the Dyer, well, he slipped it to me when I was a young toddle. ‘Never tell anyone about it, Lambrell,’ he said to me. ‘Especially your Folksies cuz it’s a secret book only for you.’”

“Hear that?” Zagger chortled. “A secret book.”

Duggan refused to let Zagger annoy her. Lambrell’s tale was simply too interesting.

“What about this book?” she asked.

“Well,” Lambrell continued, “I used to read it when I was little. You know, when I was, like, Five or Six. But then I got older and I didn’t read it anymore and I kinda forgot about it. For a long time, I didn’t think about the book.”

“And it’s a book about what?” Zagger coaxed when Lambrell’s voice trailed off and there was a long moment of silence. “Tell her, Lambrell.”

“Um, yeah, the thing is, it’s all about Faeries.”

“And,” Zagger prodded, “what’s in the book, Lambrell? Tell her.”

Lambrell got a faraway look in her eyes.

“A few nights ago,” she murmured, “I was walking through old Bailey’s Field after dark, heading home from looking for mushrooms in the high woods. All of a sudden, this light started popping on and off in the trees at the edge of the field. At first, I didn’t pay much attention. But after it kept blinking, I started thinking maybe it was a Faerie over there because of the way the thing was flying in and out of the Honeyhocks and blinking all the time.”

“Fireflies blink in the dark,” Duggan pointed out.

“Duggan, it wasn’t a firefly. It was a Faerie.”

This was too much for Duggan.

“Lambrell, come on,” she cried. “How can you say that? Did you see it up close?”

“No, but I know it was a Faerie,” Lambrell answered stubbornly.

Duggan couldn’t believe her ears. She snorted.

“A Faerie? Here? In little Cowgrass?”

“I’m pretty sure,” replied Lambrell, sounding pretty sure.

Duggan decided the girl was either nuts or suffering from too much time with Zagger.

“Pretty sure you saw a Faerie? Here? In little Cowgrass?” she repeated, snorting again. “All right, assuming Magickal Faeries still exist, the way the Ancient Stories say, do you know how slakin’ crazy that sounds, Lambrell? You saw a Faerie wandering far from Eshmagick and just happening to be here, of all places, buzzing around in some farm field near your house in sleepy old Cowgrass where nothing ever happens.”

Lambrell refused to back down.

“Duggan, I know it sounds crazy but I tell you, what I saw was a Faerie flying around in the Honeyhock trees, looking for sugar just like the old Stories say. Maybe I was seeing things but I swear it was a Faerie, right here in Cowgrass. I swear it.”

Duggan sighed and relented a bit.

“All right, what’s this slakin’ got to do with your book?”

Lambrell now spoke more excitedly.

“Like I say, I hadn’t thought about that old book for a long time,” she said, “but when I saw the Faerie, I remembered there’s this part in the book that tells how to get around the Curse and catch one. I never took it seriously cuz it was, you know, just a funny, old book. But when I saw that Faerie in the Honeyhocks, well, all of a sudden I thought, why can’t we catch one just like it says in the book? So I told Zagger about the Faerie and about the book, and...well...”

When Lambrell grew silent, Duggan shifted her gaze back to Zagger, who again had that deserves-to-be-punched look on his face.

“Well?” she asked with a skeptical look on her face.

The boy’s grin widened.

“See. Like I say, all our problems solved. We use the book and catch Lambrell’s Faerie and just like that, we’re outa here. So get your work done, Duggan McDuggan, then come to Lambrell’s house. Tonight. Meet us in the old shed right after supper and I mean right after supper.”

If she had wanted, Duggan could have raised a dozen, obvious objections to all of this craziness but for some strange reason, she held her tongue. Maybe it was the expression on Lambrell’s face, which was bright with excitement. Or maybe it was the startling notion they could actually get to Eshmagick instead of just dreaming about it. She was certainly curious about Lambrell’s book.

*Hallow’s Fire*, she thought, *could it all be true?*



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