



MONSTER'S PAST

BLACKTHORN ACADEMY
FOR SUPERNATURALS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAURA GREENWOOD

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BOOK FIVE



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BOOK FIVE

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LAURA GREENWOOD

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THANK YOU FOR RESPECTING THE HARD WORK OF THIS AUTHOR.

MONSTER'S PAST

The search for answers may lie in dreams of the past.

Anja has never been able to answer the question of what she is, but now she's at Blackthorn Academy, she's determined to find out—even if it means facing the dreams that plague her nights.

The moment Cethin meets Anja, he knows she's more than just a classmate, he just hopes that she can see beyond his twisted lineage and won't run screaming when she discovers she's his mate.

Between the nightmares, the new class load, and the charming dark warlock plaguing her thoughts, there's no doubt that Anja has her hands full, but can it help find her the answers she's looking for?

Monster's Past is book five in the Blackthorn Academy for Supernaturals shared world, featuring a heroine with no clue about her past, a cinnamon roll dark warlock determined to help her, and more.

CHAPTER 1



ANJA

I STARE at the uniform arranged on the bed and try to reconcile myself with precisely where I am and what's happening to me. After twenty-one years of wondering if I'm even slightly magical, I've found myself at Blackthorn Academy and with the certainty that I am.

The only problem is that I still don't know *how*.

This would be so much easier if I wasn't adopted.

I glance around the rest of the room, grateful that I'm alone, at least for the moment. I haven't seen any of my roommates awake yet, not after I arrived late last night. Which is a relief, I don't fancy the idea of changing in front of strangers, even if I know I'm going to have to get used to it.

This would have been so much easier if I'd gone to a normal university like I planned on, but an invitation to Blackthorn isn't something to be ignored, at least not according to my parents.

With nothing else for it, I strip off my sleep shirt and start to get dressed, hating the itchy feel of a uniform that hasn't been worn before. Hopefully, it'll pass quickly enough.

The door opens just as I'm pulling on my blazer and a girl around my age freezes in the entrance.

"You must be Anja," she says.

“Mmhhh. Good to meet you.” I pull the sleeves of my blazer so it’s on properly and hold out my hand.

She looks at it weirdly.

“Sorry, force of habit.” I let my hand fall.

She shrugs. “It’s no big deal, I just don’t like touching people.”

“Good to know.”

“I’m Nathara, but everyone calls me Nati.”

“Hi.” I wave awkwardly.

Something moves on top of her head and I jump, only for her to let out a bemused laugh. “Snakes,” she says by way of explanation.

“Snakes?” I echo.

She nods. “Never met a gorgon before?”

“No, I can’t say I have.”

“Oh, right, well this is Frank.” She puts her hand into her hair and pulls out what looks like an actual *real* snake.

“He has a name?”

“They all have names,” she says as if it’s obvious, pushing the snake back in amongst the others. “But Frank is the most talkative.”

“I see.” I don’t, but I’m not sure how else to respond to that. Is she going to expect me to remember the names of all her snakes? Because I don’t think I’m good enough at keeping people’s names in my head for that.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s just hair.”

“*Live* hair.”

She shrugs. “I don’t really think about it.”

“Even when they move around?” I shouldn’t be asking such blunt questions about this, it isn’t going to make a good first impression. But Nati also doesn’t seem to mind too much.

“I’m used to it,” she responds. “Aren’t you used to your hair?”

I reach up and touch the neat plait thrown over my shoulder. *Not really.* I don’t say as much out loud, it’ll come with a lot of questions that I don’t want to answer.

“I like the colour, by the way, is it natural?” she asks when I don’t say anything.

I shake my head. “Mum makes me a potion to dye it.”

“Can’t you do that yourself?”

I grimace. “I’ve never learned how, I think she’s hoping I will now I’m here.”

“Ah, so you’ll be taking Charms and Potions, then?”

“Yeah, it’s my first class.” Something I’m both unreasonably nervous and kind of excited for.

“It starts in ten minutes,” Nati points out.

“I know.”

“It takes seven to get from here to the classroom, you’d better hurry,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone that makes me wish I had her confidence and view on things.

“I don’t even know where it is.” I should have memorised the map on my way here, but there’s been so little time that I’ve not had a chance to. And I’m terrible at directions anyway, so there’s a good chance that even if I had it in front of me, I wouldn’t be able to get to the right classroom.

“Come on, I’ll show you, it’s on my way to Divination anyway.” She flashes me a smile that seems genuine.

I nod, relief filling me. Partly because at least this means Nati can’t be too insulted by my questions about her snakes. “Thanks.”

“Your mum must be a talented witch,” she says.

“What makes you say that?” I hope she’s not going to say she’s heard of her, though I don’t know how that would be possible. As far as I’m aware, there are only a few people who

are aware of Mum's name, and most of them are looking for specific medical potions when they discover it.

"It's hard to make purple natural." She gestures to my braid.

"Oh, right." I grab my satchel and throw it over my shoulder, only remembering to grab my phone at the last minute.

"Don't get caught with that," she warns.

"I won't, I have enough practice messaging under the table." Not that I'm going to need it. I doubt I'm going to have many messages.

"So, why purple?" she asks as we leave the room.

"It's my favourite colour," I respond. "You're very interested in my hair."

She shrugs. "Most people have a lot of questions about mine. I guess it makes me feel better that I can ask the same kinds of questions."

"That's fair. Your hair is..." I trail off, not too sure where I'm going with the statement.

"You can say it," she responds.

"It's pretty. I like how the scales reflect light." It's not even a lie. It's not conventionally beautiful, but I can see that it's nice, and it suits her. Or I think it does, I'm aware we've only just met.

"That's a new one," Nati responds, but I can see the pleased surprise in her eyes. "So, what's your *actual* hair like?"

"It's silvery-white." The admission comes out of me before I mean it to. I don't normally tell anyone about my hair, especially not the first time I meet them.

"Because you're secretly a crone in disguise?" She leads me down a corridor.

I snort. "And that's the reason I dye it. Being called a crone is one of the nicer things people have said to me."

She lets out a bemused laugh. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much now you’re here. Silver-white hair isn’t even going to scratch the surface of weird here at Blackthorn.”

“Really?” I’m so used to being the strange one that it’s weird to think that might be different now I’m here. No matter what school I went to, there were people who avoided me because they thought I gave off a *vibe* they didn’t like, or someone’s said something about my hair.

“You found out one of your roommates is a gorgon, you don’t think I’m the weirdest thing Blackthorn has to offer, do you?” She’s almost laughing, as if I’ve missed something about the academy I’ve ended up at. Which might be true, I know next to nothing about it other than how excited my parents got when the invitation came.

“I hadn’t really thought about it.” And there’s always a chance that I’ll turn out to be the true oddity considering I have no idea what I am.

“Then you’re in for a steep learning curve,” she says brightly. “This is you, by the way.” She gestures to a classroom door.

“Thanks for showing me the way.”

She shrugs, something she seems to do a lot. “What are roommates for?”

“I have no idea,” I admit. “I’ve never had one before.”

“Then I guess you’ll find out. See you later.” She waves and heads away towards her own class.

I take a deep breath and look at the classroom door. This may not be what I planned to be doing this term, but this is the opportunity I’ve been given, and I’m not one to turn that down. Especially when being here could reveal the answer to who I am.

CHAPTER 2



ANJA

THERE'S a surprising amount of chatter in the room as I enter, though thankfully, none of the other students are paying attention to me so don't notice the shock on my face. Even a cursory scan of the room reveals the truth behind Nati's words. The people in the room have all manner of horns, brightly hued skin and hair, and I've no doubt that's only the start of what sets these students apart from one another. I'm almost certain I spy a tentacle at the back of the room, but I'm probably imagining it.

I pull my attention away and turn to the front desk where a studious-looking woman with frizzy hair and thick black glasses sits. She looks up, almost surprised to find me standing in front of her.

"Hi," I say with an awkward wave. "I'm new."

She nods and checks one of the main pieces of paper spread over her desk. "Anja Greystone?"

"Yes."

She nods again, a contemplative expression crossing her face. "There's a spare seat over there." She gestures to the left.

I'm not entirely sure that *over there* is enough direction, but as I look over the desks, I realise there's only actually one spot free. I guess that answers my question.

I head over to it, trying not to feel as if everyone is watching me despite the fact I doubt anyone is. Most of the other students seem to be paying more attention to their friends than to me. It would have been much better if I'd arrived on time with all the other students so I could have actually met the people I'm supposed to be in class with.

I take a moment to get a good look at the guy I'm supposed to be sitting next to. I'm guessing he's around my age, but it's hard to tell with the deep-dark grey of his skin. He pushes some of his dark hair away from his face, revealing a batlike ear sticking out from beneath it. Despite the fact he's clearly tall and broad, I find the ears almost endearing.

I reach the empty seat and clear my throat, hoping he hasn't caught me staring at him, though I don't think so.

He looks up, his dark eyes meeting mine and holding me captive. My pulse pounds in my ear and I'm suddenly very aware of everything around me.

"Hi," I manage to squeak, trying not to stare, but doing a terrible job at it. I'm not sure what it is about him that has me so enraptured. Maybe his eyes, or the way his dark grey skin only enhances the shape of his jaw. "I'm Anja," I manage to say as I hold out my hand to him. Though perhaps I shouldn't do that here. Nati didn't seem too impressed by it.

Before I can pull my hand away, he reaches out to take it, causing tingles to race up and down me. "Nice to meet you, Anja." His deep voice perfectly matches everything else about him. "I'm Cethin."

"It's good to meet you too." I let go of his hand, only to notice a disappointed expression flit over his face. I try to ignore it, mostly because I think it's in my imagination. I want him to be as affected by me as I am by him.

I set my satchel down on the table and busy myself unpacking, mostly so I don't keep staring at Cethin and admiring how good his uniform looks on him. I don't want him to think that I'm rude.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye, getting a small smile in return. Heat rises to my cheeks and I wish my hair was loose so I could hide it.

I pull out my chair and make a big show of sitting down.

“All right class,” the professor calls. “We’re about to begin.”

A hush sounds over the room save for a few whispers.

“I’m Professor Melinda Wainwright, and I’ll be taking you for Charms and Potions this semester. We’ll be looking into the applications of both with the intention of good and evil.”

“Why would we learn about the application for evil?” I whisper to myself.

Cethin lets out a deep chuckle. “You really believe everyone here is *good*?” He keeps his voice low so he doesn’t draw any attention to our conversation.

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Surely that’s the kind of thing the academy would account for before they sent the invitations.

“It’s not how the world works,” he points out.

“I still don’t see why the academy would want to teach us about evil applications.”

He shrugs. “How can you fight against what you don’t know? Good isn’t the absence of evil, it’s the choice not to use it.”

Professor Wainwright clears her throat. “Mr. Armstrong, Ms. Greystone, do you have something you want to share with the rest of the class?”

My cheeks flame red. “No, professor, sorry.”

She raises an eyebrow.

Cethin clears his throat. “I was asking Anja about the addition of evil to the curriculum.”

I shoot him a surprised look.

“Ah, an excellent topic.” The professor’s face lights up as she ponders it. “And one we will touch on as the class goes on. The ethics of evil are a fascinating subject, perhaps the two of you might choose it as the subject of your term paper.”

“We can do that,” Cethin responds.

“I’m not sure we can,” I mutter under my breath.

“You want to know why they teach it and how it works, what better way?” he asks softly.

“Good, good,” Professor Wainwright says. “As I was saying before the intriguing interruption, we’ll be looking into the theory of the subject, and there will be some practical applications too. We’ll be starting with potions on that front as that is the easiest option for most capabilities and I do want you to successfully pass the class.”

“Even if we’re assigned hard essay topics,” I muse.

Cethin laughs. “It could be fun. If you like late nights at the library.”

“I don’t mind them,” I admit. “Though they’re better with company.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re supposed to do the essay assignment together.”

“You might be terrible company in the library,” I point out. “Maybe you chew loudly, or insist on cracking the spines of books.”

“Are those the standards that you’re measuring terrible at?” He seems to be teasing, but I don’t know him well enough to be sure.

“In the library, yes.”

“Then you will be glad to know that I don’t like to eat in the library, and I’ve never knowingly cracked the spine of a book,” he responds.

“But you have unknowingly?”

“I can’t answer that, or I would have knowingly cracked the spine.” He grins at me.

A small laugh escapes me in response. “Then I think you will be an acceptable study partner,” I respond.

“An excellent decision for you to make considering we’re stuck together now.”

“Only because you butted into a conversation that wasn’t yours to comment on.” I check the front to make sure our teacher isn’t paying us any attention.

“If you didn’t want the response, you shouldn’t have said it out loud.”

“That might not have helped. For all I know, you could be a mind-reader.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I’d enjoy that very much.”

“Oh?”

“People can be judgy.”

My cheeks flame red.

“Worried about what you’re thinking about?” he asks, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

I push a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “It’s not what you think it is.”

“You don’t know what I think,” he points out. “Unless you’re trying to tell me that *you’re* a mind-reader.”

“All right, class,” Professor Wainwright calls, cutting off our conversation. “If you get out your textbooks, we’ll start with the exercise on page thirty-two.”

Panic fills me.

“Here, you can share mine,” Cethin says, sliding his book in between us.

“So you *are* a mind-reader,” I mutter.

He chuckles. “Your face is just very easy to read.” He leans closer. “And that includes what you were thinking when we were introduced.” The low inviting tone makes me think he’s telling the truth about that.

I swallow hard. I'm not supposed to be thinking of anyone like that, especially when I don't know them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I murmur.

"Of course you don't." A satisfied smile flits over his face and his ears perk up to go along with it, as if they're responding to his amusement. It makes me like them even more.

I ignore him, choosing to focus on the task at hand instead. But it's nearly impossible to with how close the two of us are sitting. No matter how I move, I can sense him. It's almost as if we're connected in a way that I'm not with anyone else.

I shake my head, hoping to rid myself of some of the delusion. I have no idea what's causing it, but there's no doubt that it's all in my head. And I'm only feeling this way because it's my first day at Blackthorn, no other reason.

And I refuse to accept otherwise.

CHAPTER 3



CETHIN

MY STOMACH RUMBLES as I follow the crowd of students down the corridors and towards the dining hall. I'm famished, and a good BLT will go a long way to changing that.

I pass through the double doors that lead into a room lined with rows of tables, many of them already filled with students. I scan the faces, looking for my friends, and almost sigh with relief when I spot them at the back. I can eat without them, but it's always better to have company.

I wind my way through the assembled students, almost tripping over someone's tail as I pass.

"Sorry," they murmur, whipping it out of the way.

"No problem," I respond. It's just one of the hazards of Blackthorn, and to an extent, I'm used to it. This is just what things are like at home anyway. I'm just grateful I don't have a tail of my own that I have to mind, they seem to have a mind of their own.

I let out a loud sigh as I sit down next to Afan.

"Where've you been?" my oldest friend asks, the deep ridges above his eyes making his frown more pronounced. Or maybe it doesn't, it's hard to tell precisely what expression he's pulling because of them.

"Professor Scottsdale droned on a little too long," I respond.

“Ah, you had Ancient Runes?” Meic asks as he reaches over to grab a club sandwich from one of the platters piled high at the centre of the table.

“Yeah. Have you?” I ask my other friend.

He nods. “I had it first period, he almost made me late for Sports Ed too.”

I grimace. “Ooof, that wouldn’t have been good.”

“I was worried Professor Puddlemoan would give me extra laps,” Meic moans.

“Don’t you already have some to do from the beginning of term?” Afan asks.

“Yep. I laughed at his name. Never going to do that again.”

I shake my head in bemusement and pick up a perfect-looking BLT from one of the plates while they continue to complain about several of our professors. Though I have to agree with some of their assessments.

Meic lets out a low whistle. “Hottie alert,” he says through bites of club sandwich as he stares past us to whoever has caught his attention.

“Seen any of them you fancy?” Afan asks, picking bits of cucumber out of his tuna sandwich with a vague air of distaste. I know he prefers to eat fish, but there are plenty of sandwich choices that don’t have salad in them.

“Several,” Meic responds. “There’s a girl with snakes for hair in my Divination class, and she’s *smoking*.”

“A gorgon?” I ask, somewhat surprised. I’d never have guessed that was his type.

“Careful, or she’ll make you rock hard,” Afan jokes.

“That’s the idea.” Meic grins widely.

I roll my eyes. I’ve known him since long before we came to Blackthorn together, and he’s never going to do anything about it. “What about your mate?”

“What about my mate?” my friend responds, taking another bite of his sandwich. “What does it hurt to look before I’ve met them?”

I raise an eyebrow, but don’t say anything. He’s been my friend long enough for me to know that he’d never do anything that would jeopardise his chances of finding his mate, and that includes messing around, even if he *claims* he will.

“How do you even know your mate is real?” Afan asks. “I’m not sure I buy into the whole thing.”

“Really?” Meic responds. “You don’t think that you’ll find the person that’s the perfect match for you?”

Afan shrugs. “Just seems like a lot of power to give fate. What if I don’t like my mate?”

“I think the point is that you like them,” I say.

“What’s changed your tune? You’re normally the first person to start talking about how this whole thing is probably made up to stop us sowing wild oats or some ridiculousness like that.” The way Afan says it makes it feel as if he suspects something. Though I’m not entirely sure what.

“Maybe I’m just considering my options,” I respond, refocusing my attention on my lunch instead of on the conversation.

I don’t want to admit that I think I’m changing my tune because of how I felt when Anja sat down beside me in Charms and Potions yesterday. He’ll probably tell me that it’s something to do with her magic, or it’s just that she’s hot.

But I know what I felt when we touched, and it’s not either of those.

The air around us changes, and I freeze, sensing the proximity of the only person who has ever had this effect on me. I look up for my gaze to catch on Anja’s. She sucks in a small breath, almost as if she can feel the connection between us too.

Mate.

I can feel it in every part of my body, the need to protect her, cherish her, and *far* more. I want to dismiss it as something I'm making up, but I can't. There is something about her that makes me certain that it's the truth.

"Hey," she says, tucking a strand of loose purple hair behind her ear. "Are these seats free?" She gestures to the bench on the opposite side of the table from us.

I nod, gaining a weird look from Afan and Meic in the process. I ignore them. No doubt I'll be laid into when we get back to our room later, but I don't owe them an explanation, not when I barely have one myself.

Anja smiles and sits down. "So, what's good?" She looks at her empty plate and then across at the variety of sandwiches, wraps, and bagels piled high on plates across the centre of the table.

"All of it," I respond. "Though maybe avoid the fish finger sandwiches."

She wrinkles her nose. "What's wrong with them?"

"They go soggy. I don't know if it's the fish or the breadcrumbs around it, but they never manage to hit the same spot as fish finger sandwiches from when I was a kid."

She lets out a small laugh. "I don't think they were ever particularly good then either."

"Let's guess, you were a ham and cheese toastie girl?"

"Absolutely not. Smoked salmon, cream cheese, and cucumber all the way. On brown bread."

I spot a plate of those sandwiches and lean over to pick it up, holding it out to her.

Anja's face lights up and she puts a couple of them on her plate. "But you know what's even better?"

"No?"

"*Crisp* sandwiches. Did you ever have those? I don't know if it's the crunch of the fried potatoes or the carb loading that makes them taste so good."

“It’s the carb loading. And the disapproval mums always gave when they were on the menu.”

She lets out a light laugh. “I think you’re right. The disapproval is definitely part of the appeal.”

A girl around our age with a nest of snakes in her hair makes her way over. “Anja, there you are.”

“Hey, Nati.”

The gorgon stills as she spots Meic a few seats down, but she pulls her gaze away pretty quickly.

Interesting. It seems his *smoking* gorgon might be into him too.

“This is Nati, one of my roommates,” Anja says to me. “And this is Cethin, he’s my lab partner, I guess?” She looks at me as she says it.

I let out a low growl at the inaccuracy of her description, but no one seems to notice. I clear my throat. “I don’t know if that’s what it’s called,” I admit.

She shrugs. “It’ll do. We sit next to each other in Charms and Potions.”

Nati nods in greeting. “Can you pass the gluten-free plate, please?” she asks me.

“Yeah, sure.” I lean over and grab the plate with the flag on top, handing it over to her.

She pulls several faces as she looks at the assortment. “They never do anything as good.”

“What is it you want?” I ask. “I could try and do a spell on it that’ll make the gluten affect you less.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ve tried spells before, they never work,” she responds.

I nod and turn my attention back to Anja.

She smiles at me in a way that makes my heart constrict and the urge to get her alone all the stronger.

I may barely know her, but it's clear that she already has more of a hold on me than anyone ever has.

I just hope that's not going to be my downfall.

CHAPTER 4



ANJA

EVERYTHING around me is hazy as a sheen of white fog fills the air. I wave my hands around, trying to find something concrete to hold onto.

Shadows move beyond the mist, growing closer, then more distant, and there's an almost constant wail floating around in the background as if the mist itself is screaming.

Panic starts to rise within me, and I try my best not to let it consume me.

It's just a dream.

I'm asleep, that's all this is. I've spent the past couple of weeks learning about magic and all kinds of spooky things, and now it's all coming to me in the form of a dream. It's nothing more than that.

Lies.

I don't know if I think the word, or if the mist is talking to me. It doesn't help with the panic.

The rush of water calls my attention and I turn towards it, compelled by forces I can't fully explain or put a name to. I'm certainly not as in control of myself as I wish I was.

I can't hear my feet against the ground, and the air is weirdly still, especially considering the presence of the mist. I don't know what to make of it.

An old woman appears by the edge of the river, a white dress in her hands.

I try to call to her, to ask her what she wants, but no words come from my mouth. Despite that, she turns to me, revealing my own face staring back at me.

A loud scream rips through me even in the dream. I can feel it from the pit of my stomach, all the way up to the pressure behind my temples. There's almost something supernatural about it, though I can't put my finger on what it is.

The mist, the woman, and the wailing fade in an instant. My eyes snap open, revealing the darkness of my dorm room to me. I stare up at Nati's bed above me and take some deep breaths while I try to remind myself that it's just a dream. A bad one, but nothing more than a nightmare.

A thin sheen of sweat covers my entire body, my breathing is rapid and my throat is sore from screaming. I touch my throat, almost surprised to discover that it feels exactly the same as normal. Somehow, that doesn't feel right.

With my breathing back under control, I roll over and search for my water bottle, grabbing it so I can take a drink, but there's nothing in it.

I groan. I refilled it before I went to bed, I should still have plenty to see me through until morning.

I throw back the covers, knowing that there won't be any sleep for at least another hour. I don't know whether I find the dreams themselves the worst, or the aftereffects, but neither are particularly pleasant.

A chill travels through me the moment my feet hit the cold ground. I reach around for a robe to throw over my sleep shirt, almost giving up on finding it when my hand hits the rough fabric of my blazer. It's better than nothing, and I'm going to be back in bed before long anyway.

The soft snores and snuffling sounds coming from the other beds reveal that my roommates are all still sleeping soundly, which is at least something. If it wasn't for the pain in

my throat and the exhaustion in every inch of my body, I'd think that the screams were just in my head.

Though that only raises more questions than it answers. How am I screaming in the middle of the night and no one can hear it? I should probably ask Mum about some of this, but I can't bring myself to. Either she'll get super excited about my powers finally showing themselves, or she'll start worrying that I'm manifesting in a way she can't understand.

No matter how I look at it, it isn't good.

I get to my feet and pull on my blazer, glad for the warmth even if it's not the nicest material against my skin. I head out of the room and down to the bathroom so I can refill my bottle from the sink. The doors of the other dorms are tightly shut and soft moonlight illuminates the corridor. It's eerier than I expect it to be, but in a way that's also beautiful.

I set my bottle down on the shelf over the sink and run some of the cold water, splashing it over my face. I meet my gaze in the mirror and shudder at how bad I look. And if I'm not mistaken, my roots are starting to show brilliant silver-white. Which shouldn't be possible. That's not how the potion Mum brews me works.

I shake my head. It's probably all in my imagination. I'm tired and still in the haze of the dream. I fill my bottle and drink half of it down before I even leave the bathroom. My throat is still raw from the dream-scream, but the water at least makes it feel a little better. If it's still like this in the morning, I can go down to the infirmary and ask for something to help with it, hopefully, they won't ask too many questions that I won't be able to answer.

Satisfied that things are as good as they're going to get, I head back to the dorm, hoping I won't wake anyone in the process. I know we're allowed to go to the bathroom when we need it, but I still feel a little uneasy being out of my room past lights out.

A soft tapping stops me in my tracks, causing my heart to race and all kinds of panicked thoughts to slip through my

mind. I search around frantically in an attempt to work out where it's coming from.

A shadow behind one of the windows catches my eye just as a raven hops through the open pane. It cocks its head to the side and studies me, almost as if it's curious.

I take a step towards it, expecting it to fly away and being somewhat surprised when it doesn't.

"Hello," I say softly.

It switches the side its head is at, making me certain that it understands me.

"I'm Anja."

It lets out a soft caw, startling me and making me jump.

The expression in its eyes suggests that it isn't too impressed with my reaction.

"Well, I didn't expect to be talking to a raven in the middle of the night," I point out. "If you don't want me to jump and freak out, then you should find me during the day instead."

The raven hops about a bit.

"Why am I even talking to a bird?" I mutter. I'm not someone who can talk to animals. I've known people who can, but it's not me. No doubt it's just because I'm delirious after the dream. "All right, I'm going back to bed," I say to the raven.

It lets out another caw.

"I need to sleep."

Caw.

I shake my head. This isn't like me at all.

"All right, good night," I say to the raven, waving to it as if it might understand me.

Caw.

It nudges its beak against something, as if it's pushing it towards me. I frown and reach out to pick it up and investigate. A shiny black button sits in the moonlight.

“Is this for me?”

The raven bobs its head.

“I’m not sure I have anything for you,” I admit, putting my hand into my blazer pocket. I know better than to not give a reciprocal trade to a raven.

I pull out a single coin and hold it out to the raven. “This is all I have.”

It cocks its head to the side.

Right. It probably doesn’t understand me. I replace the button with the coin. “For you. Thank you for the treasure.” I run my fingers over the button, feeling weirdly attached to it even if I have no reason to be other than a random raven gave it to me in the middle of the night.

The raven flaps its wings and reaches down to pick up the coin in its beak. For one horrible moment, I think it might choke on it, but that seems unlikely when it was able to bring me the button.

“Goodnight,” I say to the bird.

It hops away and launches itself into the air, flying back to wherever it came from.

I stifle a yawn, trying not to overthink the interaction. The dream still lingers in my mind, but I feel a bit better after talking to the raven. I need to sort out these dreams or I’m going to end up being even weirder than I thought I was in the first place.

CHAPTER 5



ANJA

THE BUBBLE of dozens of potions all brewing at the same time fills the air. Unfortunately, so does the smell. And while I may not be naturally gifted at potions, someone in the room is even worse if the stench of burned hair is anything to go by.

I cut the bulbous purple root in front of me, the knife slipping and grazing my skin. “Ah.” I pull my hand back, wincing at the pain of the cut and the sting of the citrus-like juice coming from the root.

Cethin freezes beside me, his ears going on alert, almost seeming as if he’s worried. “What happened?”

“I cut myself, no big deal.” I wave my hand around as if to try and make it clear that I’m fine.

He catches hold of it, his skin pleasantly warm against mine. It’s surprisingly comforting. I would have thought his skin would be cold and stone-like based on the greyness, but that’s not the case at all.

“Let me see,” he says.

“I’m fine, Cethin,” I respond.

“Please?”

I bite my lip and nod.

His gaze drops to my lips and for one moment, I consider what it would be like to kiss him and to do far more than that.

A small rivulet of blood runs out of the cut and onto his finger, the bright red showing up surprisingly well against the dark grey. He seems transfixed on the injury and for a horrifying moment, I find myself wondering if he's a vampire and that this is some kind of fixation I *don't* want. I know there are some at Blackthorn, but I'm not sure how to tell who is what. There are some characteristics that are easy to recognise, like Nati's snakes, but for the rest of the students, anybody could be anything. Or that's the way it seems to me. Maybe I should have paid more attention when Mum was trying to teach me all this stuff and then I'd be better prepared.

I clear my throat, knowing that this isn't the time to be thinking about any of this. "It's just a cut."

"Mind if I fix it?"

I frown. "How?"

He chuckles. "Magic, Anja, how else do you think?"

"Oh, right." I push a strand of hair out of my face with my free hand. "Sure." I glance to the front to make sure Professor Wainwright isn't paying us any attention. Though even if she is, I doubt she'd tell us off for dealing with an injury, even if it's a small one.

He mutters a few words under his breath and a wisp of violet washes over my hand. My skin tingles and the sting of the cut vanishes, though I can't see what happened.

I let out a small gasp at the way the magic makes me feel, though I can't put into words precisely what caused it.

Cethin looks up, his gaze meeting mine and I can see all kinds of unspoken questions in there. Or maybe they're unspoken answers and the questions are mine.

"Your eyes are glowing purple," I murmur.

"I'm using my magic," he says by way of explanation. "You should be okay now." While he says it, he doesn't let go of my hand.

Nor do I pull it back.

"I like purple," I say.

“I guessed.”

“Oh, right.” I touch my hair with my free hand. “Yes, it’s my favourite colour.”

He cocks his head to the side, an intrigued expression on his face. “Is that so?”

I nod.

He finally lets go of my hand, and I mourn the contact even though I know I shouldn’t. I examine my hand, surprised to find that there isn’t a single mark on it. “That’s amazing.” I prod and poke at it a little.

He chuckles. “The perks of being a warlock, even a dark one.”

“What’s the difference between a dark warlock and a non-dark warlock?” I ask before I can stop myself. “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that, it’s a personal question.” I turn back to the task of cutting up the root so we can add it to the cauldron simmering between us.

“We can trade questions, if you want,” he suggests.

“Okay, but I think you’re going to be disappointed in some of my answers.”

“Don’t I get to decide that?”

“Mmm.” I move my knife carefully. While I like the attention he gave me when I was hurt, I don’t want to do that unnecessarily.

“The difference is a corrupted bloodline,” he says.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, should have been clearer. Dark warlocks come from bloodlines that were corrupted by dark magic generations ago,” he says. “There are theories that it’s because using dark magic corrupts the soul or some nonsense like that.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“No. I think magic is magic, and bad people are bad regardless of what they use. You don’t have to use dark magic

in order to hurt someone, you can just as easily do it with something that's meant to be good. That knife isn't bad because it cut you, right?"

I lift it to examine it, even if I know the answer already. "I guess it's just a tool. Whether it's good or bad depends on the way it's being used."

"Exactly."

"So why do you think dark warlocks came about?"

He shrugs. "Maybe a spell gone wrong, maybe a deal with a demon. It's hard to say. I don't worry about it too much because it changes nothing. I am what I am, and I'm not evil because of it."

"A good discussion point for our essay," I muse.

"Indeed. I think you're done with that now." He gestures to the root.

"Right. I just drop it into the cauldron?"

He nods.

I pick up the board and push the chopped root into the potion. It hisses and bubbles hard as it hits the surface.

"So I guess it's my turn for a question," he says.

"Fire away."

"Which has a very different meaning to someone who can create fireballs," he jokes.

I let out a bemused laugh. "But you're not going to do that, right?"

"I think I'd probably end up with detention if I did."

"That's not a no."

"I can't promise something that I don't know will be true. What if a situation arises where I need to use a fireball?"

"Has that happened many times in your life?" I check the instructions for the potion while I wait for his answer.

“Sadly, no. Though there are a few situations that I think could be resolved faster if fireballs had been allowed,” he muses. “Here, you need to put this in.” He hands me a pot of what look like chilli flakes, but almost certainly aren’t.

“How much?”

“Just a pinch.”

“That’s hardly an exact measurement,” I mutter.

“This is Charms and Potions, not chemistry,” he points out. “It’s not about exact.”

I sigh. And that’s exactly why I wanted to study chemistry instead of something as vague as this. But Blackthorn doesn’t offer a curriculum like anywhere else, and as much as I want to be a food scientist, I also want to learn more about who I am, and this place feels as if it might have the answers.

I take a pinch of the flakes and sprinkle them over the top of the cauldron.

“Now we have to stir five times anti-clockwise,” I say as I check the instructions. “See, that’s specific.”

He chuckles as he stirs the potion. “Are you going to complain about the instructions the entire time?”

“Yes.”

“All right, then how about I ask you that question to distract you.”

“It is your turn.” I try to think through what he might ask. Will he want to know what I am? Or is it going to be something about my hair? That one seems unlikely, he’ll just assume it’s natural.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

I stare at him. “*That’s* your question?”

“So?”

“No, I don’t have a boyfriend.”

His whole face lights up, including his ears, sending a wave of affection towards him through me.

“Still a weird question. I was going to ask you if you could pass as human as my next one.”

He chuckles. “The point is to get to know each other, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes.”

“So learning about your life is part of that,” he responds. “And yes, I can pass as human.” For a moment, I think that’s going to be the end of the conversation, but a shimmer of purple moves over his body and he transforms.

I blink a few times. “Wow.”

“It’s just a glamour,” he responds. “Everything is the same underneath.”

Without meaning to, I reach out to touch him.

A smile curls at the corners of his lips. “The ears are where you’ll notice it most.”

I step closer, taking it for the invitation it is, and reach out to where his bat-like ears should be. To the naked eye, there’s nothing but air, but my fingers brush against the shell of his ear.

He lets out a strange noise and I pull my hand back.

“It’s sensitive.” He drops the glamour.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be, I invited you to touch it.” He grins at me in a way that makes me think it was all part of his elaborate plan to do that.

“What do we do next?” I ask, gesturing to the cauldron.

“Huh, and here I was thinking you were going to ask me why I didn’t keep up the human glamour all the time.”

“I can ask that if you want, but I figured the answer was either that it was too much effort to maintain it, or that you like the way you look and want to feel like you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Interesting observation. We just let the cauldron simmer for another five minutes.”

“Great.” I pull over my stool. “So which is it?”

He shrugs. “A little of both, I guess. It does take constant magic, but it’s not too much hassle so long as I can have a few chances to let the glamour drop. For the most part, I don’t see it as necessary to have one here.”

“I’m glad you don’t. I like this form,” I blurt out before realising what it might reveal about what I think about him. Then again, maybe I shouldn’t feel too strange about that, there has to be a reason he asked me if I had a boyfriend.

“Good.” His eyes flash purple despite the fact he’s not doing any magic.

Someone clears their throat and I look up to find Professor Wainwright looking down at our cauldron.

I take a deep breath, hoping she isn’t about to say that we’ve done a good job.

“Adequate,” she says with a nod of her head. “Don’t forget to clean up your bench.” She walks away before either of us can say anything.

“That’s us told,” I mutter, picking up the chopping board and knife.

“Let me, I don’t want you to cut yourself again,” Cethin says.

“Even if it’ll give you another excuse to touch me?” I half-joke.

He chuckles. “If that’s an invitation, I’ll gladly accept.”

“Maybe.” I turn towards the sinks at the edge of the room, my heart racing at the implication of my response.

And just how much I wanted him to touch me again.

CHAPTER 6



CETHIN

I LOOK up from my book and out of the window, surprised by how late it's gotten. I should get back to my dorm before lights out.

I check my watch and grimace. Or I should get back to my dorm because lights out has already been and gone. I close my book and slide it into my bag. I open and close my hand, bringing forth a puff of purple smoke, sending it out in front of me. That should do the trick of telling me if anyone's around. The last thing I want is for one of the academy staff to run into me and give me detention for being out of bed after hours.

Or maybe it won't. I don't know what magic most of them have access to, and that could mean that they ended up spotting me just from the spell I did.

I can't worry about that now, though. If I get caught, I get caught. There's nothing I can do about it and will just have to deal with my punishment if it comes. I'm not sure why they even bother with keeping a curfew sometimes, especially when just about everyone breaks it at one point or another.

I pass the opening to one of the courtyards and feel a strange tug in the pit of my stomach, urging me to stop and head inside. I don't think I've ever felt anything like that before and find myself turning without thinking about it.

A figure with flowing silver-white hair and a long white shirt appears in the archway at the other side of the courtyard, and for one horrible moment, I think I'm seeing a woman's ghost.

The woman stumbles into the light, illuminating familiar features and causing the urge to enter the courtyard to deepen.

Anja.

Mate.

An urge to protect her rushes through me as she almost falls into one of the walls. Without thinking twice about it, I rush forward with more speed and strength than I think I normally possess, reaching her just as she trips.

She falls into my arms with a small shriek and her eyes fly open, only for them to be filled with confusion.

She must have been sleepwalking.

"It's me," I whisper, hoping we've spent enough time with one another for my voice to soothe her. If she feels anything like the way I do, it stands a chance of working.

She frowns and blinks a few times as she looks up at me. "Cethin?"

I nod.

"But I'm in bed. Am I dreaming about you?" She reaches up and touches my face.

She trails her fingers over my cheek, and it makes me wonder how many times she's dreamt about me to be reacting like this. A part of me wants to find out, and to discover exactly where this could go, but I know I shouldn't take advantage of her when she's in a state like this. I don't want what isn't given freely.

I clear my throat to rid myself of the inappropriate thoughts. "You're not in bed, and this isn't a dream." I help her to her feet.

"Why am I outside?"

“I didn’t kidnap you from your room, if that’s what you’re worried about,” I half-joke, though there is a part of me worrying that she’s thinking that.

She frowns. “I’m not, actually.”

“I think you were sleepwalking,”

“Oh. I don’t think I’ve done that before.” She sighs and rubs her temple. “Great.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, leading her over to a bench.

“I was dreaming, I think. It’s hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

“You don’t really want to hear about my dreams.” She looks away as she sits down.

“Anja, I want to hear it,” I say softly.

“Why?”

“Because I just found you out here wandering around with no idea what was going on. I might know something that can help you.”

Something like hope blooms in her eyes and I regret saying that.

“*Might*,” I stress.

A shiver runs down her spine. Probably because it’s cold out here and she’s only wearing a shirt. I shrug out of my blazer and hand it to her.

“Are you sure?” She eyes it warily.

“Please take it, you’re freezing.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine,” I promise. “I’m not the one walking around in my nightshirt.”

“Why are you fully dressed?”

“Disappointed?” I quip.

A blush rises to her cheeks, only made more prominent by the silver of her hair. “That’s not what I said.”

“But you are.” Satisfaction sings through me.

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” she responds. “So, why are you still in uniform? Curfew was an hour ago.”

“I was reading,” I respond. “And I didn’t realise the time. I was trying to sneak back to my dorm when I found you in the courtyard.”

She wraps herself up inside my blazer and takes a deep breath. “What were you reading?”

“*Frankenstein*.”

“Are you going to tell me that you connected with the monster?”

I let out a small laugh. “No, I promised my sister I’d help her with her coursework when we go home for winter break. She’s supposed to be doing an essay on *Frankenstein*, so I’m reading it.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Thanks. So, the dream?”

She sighs and runs a hand over her face. “They’re probably just dreams.”

“They?”

She bites her lip and nods. “They started after I turned twenty-one. At first, it was just one a week, but now it feels like I’m having them every night.”

I frown. That’s not good. “Are they always the same?”

“Variations of the same,” she says, looking off into the distance. “There’s always an eerie mist and a river. Can we not talk about it?”

I nod. “If that’s what you want.” As much as I want to help her, I know I have to let her tell me things like this in her own time.

For a moment, I think she's going to change her mind, but she just keeps staring out into the courtyard. I want to ask her more about the dreams, especially because it sounds as if they've been plaguing her for a while, but I know better than to push her on this. If she wants to tell me, then she will. I can't protect her if she doesn't want to let me near her. I have to earn the trust for her to tell me about her dreams.

Another shiver travels through her.

"Come on." I get to my feet and hold out my hand to her.

"Where?"

"Trust me and you'll find out."

She lets out a small laugh, already seeming more like herself now the dream has been shaken away. "What if I don't?"

"You do."

"Yes." She slips her hand into mine and I feel as if something clicks within me.

I'm not sure precisely what's happening right now, but I'm grateful for it, especially when it means I'm getting to spend time with her outside of the classroom.

CHAPTER 7



ANJA

“WHERE ARE WE?” I ask as Cethin pulls me through a door with a small window.

“One of the cookery classrooms,” he responds.

“Are we allowed to be here?” I pull his blazer closer around me, enjoying the way it brings his scent closer. I’ve never considered that to be something that was important to me, but right now, I love the idea.

“We’re not even supposed to be out of bed,” he reminds me. “So I’m going to go with no.”

“We could get into so much trouble,” I murmur. Not that I have a choice about that considering I sleepwalked my way down here without even realising it. “Can we lock the door?” I wouldn’t suggest it to anyone else, but there’s something about Cethin that makes me feel safe even if I shouldn’t.

Cethin lifts a hand and his eyes glow purple as he sends a bolt of magic towards the door.

“Will that work?” I ask.

“Should do. Unless someone has an unlocking spell strong enough to break through it.” He heads over to a water heater and switches it on at the plug in the wall. It starts to whirr, presumably as it starts heating the water inside.

“Who would have one strong enough?”

“Presumably any of the teachers,” he responds.

“Reassuring,” I mutter.

“We’ll probably have enough warning that you can hide and I can take the punishment.” He searches one of the shelves and pulls out two mugs. “You drink tea, right?”

“Yes. But I’m not about to let you take a punishment because you found me sleepwalking.”

“I was out of bed already,” he reminds me. “I just happened to come across you.”

“Let’s just hope we don’t get caught at all,” I say.

There’s a hissing noise as he fills the mugs and brings them over to me. “Here you go.”

I take it from him, my fingers brushing against his as I take it. “Thanks.”

“It’s peppermint, it should help with any lingering effects of your dream.” He shuffles uncomfortably, as if worried that he’s been caught caring for me. “Anyway, we should sit.” He gestures to a small table.

“How did you even know this was here?” I ask as I take a seat.

“One of my friends takes the Culinary Delights class here,” he responds.

“Oh, I didn’t know.” I wrap my hands around the cup, enjoying the warmth of the tea within.

“I thought you said you wanted to be a food scientist,” he says.

I frown. “Did I tell you that?”

“You’ve muttered about it a few times when making potions,” he responds. “I’d have thought you’d have been all over this class.”

“I wanted to take it, but Mum and Dad encouraged me to take others instead.”

He raises an eyebrow and takes a sip of his tea before answering. “Don’t they want you to follow your dreams?”

“I think they’re more interested in me discovering what I am.”

Surprise flits over his face.

“I guess I haven’t been muttering about *that* in Charms and Potions.” I blow across the top of my tea and take a sip. Even before it hits my stomach, I know he’s right about the soothingness of it.

“No, you haven’t. You don’t know what you are?”

“Nope. Not a clue. Actually, I guess that’s not true. I’m here at Blackthorn, so I’m guessing I’m not human.”

“What are your parents?” he asks.

“Witches.”

“Shouldn’t you also be a witch?”

“I’m adopted.”

Surprise, then horror flits over his face. “I’m...”

“Don’t say sorry,” I cut him off. “I’ve heard it my entire life. What’s there to be sorry for? It’s a reasonable question. My parents are witches, and I’m not one. Or if I am, I’m a really late bloomer.”

“Could you be a necromancer?” he asks.

“Unlikely, I tried to reanimate a hamster once just to try it out.”

“What happened?”

“It got up and ran away.” I take a sip of my tea.

“That sounds like successful necromancy to me.”

“Yeah, but that’s because the hamster wasn’t dead yet. I just thought it was. I still don’t know why. I just woke up one day and thought my pet was dead. That’s when I decided to try the necromancy, but it turned out that it was just sleeping.”

“How disappointing.”

“It died three days later.”

“It did?” He gives me a curious look.

I nod. “I tried the necromancy again, but it didn’t work. Presumably, because I’m not a necromancer. I did worry for a bit that I’d caused the hamster to die *because* I tried necromancy on it.”

He chuckles. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“I know that now, but it was a real worry at the time.” I take another sip of tea.

“Have you ever sensed anyone else’s death?” he asks.

I frown. “I don’t think so, but I’ve never thought about it very much, why?”

“I didn’t know if that was a clue to what you were.” He drains his tea.

“It’s okay that I don’t know,” I assure him. “I’ll figure it out eventually. And if I don’t then it’s not like I haven’t already survived twenty-one years of not knowing. What’s twenty-one more?”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it, I don’t think I’d be able to go so long without knowing.”

“Probably because you’re aware of what you are,” I point out. The warmth from the tea spreads through me, and I find myself relaxing despite the dream. This is certainly a better way to shake the effects than splashing cold water on my face in a communal bathroom. Maybe I should see if I’m allowed to have a portable kettle in the room. Though it’s probably against the rules now I think about it.

“Yeah, true.” He sighs and leans back in his chair. “I like the hair, by the way.”

I frown and reach up to touch it. “Weird time to tell me, but thanks.”

“Why is it weird? I’ve never seen it that colour before.”

I open my mouth to tell him that it’s been purple the entire time we’ve known each other before thinking better of it and

grabbing a few strands of hair so I can see them. I let out a small groan. “Not again.” The silver-white strands catch the moonlight drifting in through the window. *Definitely* not the purple I thought it was.

He raises an eyebrow. “Is it not purposeful?”

“It’s my natural colour,” I admit.

“It’s nice, I like it.”

Warmth fills me that has nothing to do with the tea and everything to do with the compliment. “Thanks.”

“So should it still be purple?”

I nod. “I took the potion that dyes it yesterday.” And that was earlier than I was supposed to because I felt like my hair was already being washed out. I don’t understand why it’s wearing off so quickly compared to normal. And I’m fresh out of potion until Mum sends me more, and I doubt she’s going to be happy with me going through them at the rate I am.

“Do you particularly like having purple hair?” he asks.

“I prefer it to this.” I sigh, letting my hair drop out of my hand. “I know it’s probably nothing compared to what a lot of the students here went through, but kids used to be cruel about it, asking me if I was a crone in disguise, or why I’d gotten so old. It made me hate my hair. Now I’m saying it out loud, it sounds ridiculous.”

“It sounds normal,” he assures me. “I used to feel the same about my ears.”

“I like your ears,” I blurt out, meaning the words. “They’re cute.”

He lets out a small laugh. “I can safely say I’ve never heard that one before.”

“Well, they are.” I look down, trying to hide the blush rising on my cheeks. Thankfully, the dim light of the room should be helping with that at least a small amount.

“I can wiggle them,” he says.

“What?” I look up.

He meets my gaze and wiggles his ears back and forth.

A laugh escapes me. “Now they’re extra cute.”

“Then I’ll make sure to wiggle them more often for you,” he responds. “I like seeing you smile.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, feeling warm and fuzzy and all kinds of other things that I can’t name.

“And your hair is really beautiful like this.”

“Thank you.” My response comes out quieter than I mean it to be.

A sound outside the classroom makes both of us jump.

“I think it might be time to get back to the dorms.” He gets to his feet and grabs the mugs, making his way over to the sink.

I nod. “Probably.” As much as I’m enjoying myself, I know I need to sleep. And preferably *not* get into too much trouble for being out of bed after hours. At least that will only happen if we get caught. Though there’s still time for that.

I get up and smooth my t-shirt down, suddenly feeling a little exposed that it’s all I’ve been wearing since he found me in the courtyard. I must have looked like some kind of ghost coming towards him. At least he doesn’t seem upset about it.

I make my way over to where he’s standing, only for Cethin to turn around at the same time, bringing us surprisingly close together.

Neither of us moves. My gaze meets his and there’s something entrancing about the way he’s looking at me, as if we’re caught in a moment that neither of us wants to end.

He clears his throat and pulls away. “We should get going.”

“Your blazer...”

“Give it back to me tomorrow,” he responds as he grabs his bag and heads to the door of the classroom. “It’s cold and it’s still a while until you’re back in your dorm.”

I nod.

“Do you know the way back?”

“I know my way around the academy now,” I assure him.

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He disappears before I can say anything else.

I stand in the middle of the classroom, somewhat confused by what just happened. We were having a good conversation, and it was even bordering on flirty, but then he just shut it down and ran away when we got close together.

I let out a sigh. I guess I’ll probably find out what that’s about at some point. I just hope it’s not going to make things weird between us in class.

CHAPTER 8



ANJA

THE DINING HALL is buzzing with chatter, though I don't know how when it's so early in the morning. I rub my eyes, trying not to let the lost sleep of the past few nights get to me too much. At least there hasn't been any more sleepwalking. Or if there has, it's only led me back to my bed.

"I like your hair," Nati says, reminding me that I'm not coming to breakfast alone.

"Thanks." I touch the loose strands of silver-white, trying not to feel the familiar surge of self-consciousness that comes with them. I know I could message Mum and ask her for another potion to dye it, but I don't see the point if it's just going to turn back to its natural shade every time I have a dream.

Especially as they seem to be happening every single night now. Which means that it's time to embrace my natural colour.

I catch sight of Cethin across the room, and he looks up, as if he can feel me watching.

Without fully realising what I'm doing, I wave to him. He returns the gesture, making my heart skip a beat.

"Eurgh, could you be *more* obvious," Nati mutters. "Come on, I'm starving and the gluten-free croissants are surprisingly good."

“I don’t think I’m going to be swapping my proper versions for them any time soon,” I respond without taking my attention off Cethin. A small part of me wants to go over and sit with him, but I don’t think Nati will be okay with that.

“You could just ask him on a date,” Nati says.

“What?” I look at my friend.

She rolls her eyes. “Cethin. You spend most meals watching him.”

“You’re making me sound creepy.” I sit down on one of the empty benches, purposefully making sure my back is facing Cethin so I can’t look at him. I regret it almost instantly.

“It’s fine, he’s clearly into it.” She sits down beside me and grabs one of the croissants from the gluten-free plate.

“And that makes it *not* creepy?”

She shrugs and ladles an obscene amount of jam onto her plate and starts tearing the pastry to pieces so she can dip it into it. “I’m just saying. You could save us all the hassle of watching the two of you yearn for each other if you just ask him on a date. I’m surprised he hasn’t asked you.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want that,” I say, my mind going back to the other night.

She snorts. “Yeah, and I don’t have snakes for hair. I’m so certain that if he says no, I’ll cut Frank’s head off.”

An alarmed hiss comes from the nest of snakes.

I let out a bemused chuckle. “She doesn’t mean it, Frank.”

“Oh, I do.” She stuffs a piece of croissant into her mouth.

I take the opportunity to get myself some of the delicious-looking pastries. It’s times like this when I’m particularly glad I don’t have Nati’s dietary restrictions.

“Where would I even go on a date?” I muse.

My friend gives me a look that says she’s got me.

“I’m being hypothetical,” I murmur, even though it’s a bit of a lie.

“Uh-huh. Like you *hypothetically* came back to the dorm after curfew wearing his blazer the other night?” Amusement fills her voice.

I groan. “I told you, I was sleepwalking and he found me.”

“Which is an inventive excuse, I’ll give you that.”

“Nothing happened,” I respond. “He made me some tea, we flirted a bit, but then he shut down and ran off. Hardly the behaviour of someone who’s interested in me.”

“Maybe. Or he might have had a good reason to run away. Did you talk about forever, or anything dumb like that?”

“Of course not.”

“Maybe he was just trying to control himself.”

I frown and tear off the outside of my pain-aux-raisins so I can eat it. “I don’t know what that would even mean.”

“He’s a dark warlock, right?”

I nod. “That’s what he said.”

“I’ve heard rumours about what happens when they lose control. It’s not pretty.”

“Oh?” I eat some of my pastry, trying to work out why the ominous statement doesn’t fill me with much dread.

“If you want to know more, you probably have to ask him,” she says. “I don’t really know much more than rumours, but I’ve heard people around the academy talking about it. Their eyes glow and everything.”

“That’s just when he does magic,” I respond. “The eye glowing thing. Whenever he does a spell, they glow purple.”

“Maybe it’s nothing.” She grabs another croissant. “But maybe it’s not. I mean, you’ve seen one aspect of my magic but you haven’t been turned into stone.” She gestures towards her hair.

“How are you avoiding that by the way?”

“Gorgon secrets.” She taps her nose.

I snort. “Really?”

“Yep. Can’t tell you how I avoid turning people into stone, you might decide that the best thing to do is to use me against your enemies.”

“That seems like a stretch.”

“You haven’t told me the secrets of your magic,” she points out.

“That’s because they’re so secret that even I don’t know them. The only thing I can guess is that something about it makes me sleepwalk.”

“Maybe you’re a Nightmare.”

“A what?”

“A Nightmare,” she repeats.

“Yes, I heard you, I just don’t know what that is.”

“Oh, they’re supposed to sit on people’s chests while they’re asleep and bring them bad dreams.” The way she says it makes it sound as if it’s no big deal.

“That’s horrific.” But why else would I have been out of bed after hours?

I dismiss the train of thought. I’m not giving other people nightmares, I’m having them myself, which is a whole different thing. I hope.

“There’ll be ways to control if you are one,” she assures me. “You’re not going to go around attacking people who don’t deserve it.”

“I doubt anyone *would* deserve it,” I point out.

“Maybe your warlock’s friend,” she mutters, almost rolling her eyes in the process. “I wouldn’t mind you making his nights terrible.”

I snort. “You could do that yourself if you turned him into stone.”

“Don’t think I haven’t threatened to, he just makes crude jokes about how he’s already rock hard.”

A laugh bursts from me and I hastily cover my mouth with my hand. “Sorry, it’s just that one *is* kind of funny.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, it’s funny the first time. But I’ve been hearing those kinds of comments since before I should even have known what they meant.”

“Sorry.”

She shrugs. “Not your fault that people are idiots. But if you’re going to make jokes about my abilities, just make sure they’re better than that.”

“I promise I’ll come up with a good one.”

“That’s all I ask. And if you *do* end up dating Cethin, maybe get him to have a word with his friend about that. I’d be much more amenable to flirting if he was at least creative about it.”

“I’ll make sure to casually drop that into the conversation I’m definitely not going to have.”

Nati sighs. “Fair enough. Are you done? We should get going so we’re not late.” She nods towards my plate.

“Yeah.” I push my empty plate back, still feeling a little guilty about just leaving it, even if that’s what we’re supposed to do.

I get to my feet and look over to where Cethin is sitting, disappointed to realise he’s already gone. I guess I’ll just be counting down the hours until our Charms and Potions class later.

CHAPTER 9



CETHIN

THE MOMENT the door to the Charms and Potions classroom opens, everything within me goes on high alert and I look up to find Anja making her way inside. Every part of me screams that she's my mate, and that I should tell her so that I can seal the bond between us and make her mine in every sense of the word.

But I know I can't. I have to hold myself back for her sake. She probably has no clue what any of this means, and it isn't fair to her to force this on her.

I just have to hope that when the time comes, she'll feel the same.

"Hey," she says brightly as she reaches her seat.

I smile at her, enjoying every moment of her presence, and the fact that she seems to light up when she's around me. At least that's a good sign for when I do tell her that she's my mate. I feel bad for keeping it from her, but I don't want to add the pressure of it to her, especially when she seems to be struggling with whatever it is that's happening in her dreams. "Hi. Ready for another class full of questioning the darker sides of magic?"

"I only do that to you," she says with a small laugh as she starts to unpack her stuff.

“I appreciate the commentary. It’s all useful for our essay,” I respond.

She lets out a groan and takes a seat. “I’d forgotten about that. When is it due?”

“Just before the holidays, we’ve got time. But if you want to get started, we can schedule some library time next week.” And I’m not just saying that because I want to spend some time alone with her. Though I do. It would be good to get started.

She wrinkles her nose in an adorable way. “Do you have to make it sound so clinical?”

“How else would you like me to say it? We’re talking about studying, not making out in the library.” Even as I say it, images and thoughts about what that might be like flash through my mind and I wonder if it might not be the worst idea.

“Next week sounds good,” she murmurs, an enchanting blush rising to her cheeks.

Perhaps I’m not the only one who likes the idea of spending some time alone in the library. Though there might be *better* places for the two of us to be together.

“Good afternoon, class,” Professor Wainwright says cheerfully, cutting off any chance of a continued conversation. “Today we’re going to be attempting the *sleep charm*.”

Anja lets out a frustrated sigh. “Great, I’m going to fail.”

“You’re not,” I assure her, though I’m not entirely sure about that. She’s passable at the potion side of things, but her charm work leaves something to be desired.

“Everything you may need is in the rooms, you have thirty minutes, I shall be walking around the classroom to observe and give corrections when they’re needed,” the professor says with a clap of her hands.

“Let’s get started with making a fool of myself,” Anja mutters.

“That’s not going to happen.” Because I’m not going to let it.

“I can’t do magic, remember.” She clicks her fingers together as if to demonstrate, but unsurprisingly, nothing happens. “I can just about get away with the potions because the ingredients still do the magic itself, but charms...”

Something sparks a thought and I flip through the pages of the textbook to find what I’m looking for, grateful that my memory has served me well. “You’re in luck.” I push the book over to Anja so she can see what I’m looking at.

“It’s not a charm.” There’s a hint of awe in her voice.

“It *is* a charm. Just not the kind of charm you’re thinking of.”

“Huh, this could actually be helpful too.” She runs her finger down the page and whispers to herself as she reads. I’m not even sure she knows she’s doing it. “It says that it’s advised to be used by people who are suffering from nightmares.”

Concern fills me. “Are you still not sleeping well?” I figured she was still having bad dreams, but if they’re this bad...

A protective urge rises inside me. I want to take all of that away and shield her.

She shakes her head. “Though no more sleepwalking, so you’ll be glad to know that your reading time will be uninterrupted.”

“You were a welcome interruption.” It was nice to spend time with her away from class. Even if it was after hours and she was out of sorts from walking around like that.

For a moment, she looks as if she wants to ask something, and I can tell it’s probably about how I raced off. How can I explain that without telling her that I left because I was moments away from kissing her and I didn’t know if that was what she wanted?

“I’m still worried about it,” she admits. “The sleepwalking.”

“Understandable. I’ve heard it can be disorientating.”

“Mmm.” She pauses as if she’s going to say more, but doesn’t. “I’m going to go and get the equipment.” She gets to her feet and grabs my textbook without another word, heading over to the side of the classroom to collect the things we need to make the charm.

I watch her go, conflicted feelings making their way through me. I want to spend as much time with her as I can, and I want to tell her how I feel, but I don’t want to hurt her. Or scare her.

And I don’t want her to reject me. I don’t know how I’d cope if the woman who is supposed to be perfect for me turns me down.

She looks back over her shoulder and her gaze locks with mine. To my surprise, she closes her eyes, then turns around properly and heads back towards me, putting the textbook down on the bench surprisingly firmly.

“You okay?” My curiosity doesn’t let me stay quiet.

“Do you want to hang out tonight?”

I raise an eyebrow, trying to ignore the hope rising up within me. “Hang out as in…”

“After dinner? Maybe we can…you know, I’m not sure. What is there to do here that isn’t studying?” she asks.

“Very little if we don’t make the entertainment ourselves,” I respond. “But if you want, we could take dessert out to one of the benches.”

“That sounds like a date.”

“Wasn’t that what you were asking for?” I certainly *hope* it’s what she’s asking for. If she is, then there’s a chance all of this will work out precisely the way I’m desperate for it too.

“Yes,” she whispers. “It just wasn’t coming out right. If that’s what you want, then I’d like it to be a date.”

“Good. Then that’s what it is. I look forward to it.” My heart constricts at the sight of her smile. It’s going to be hard to restrain myself while we’re alone, but it’ll be worth it. I’m sure of it.

Professor Wainwright clears her throat, shocking both of us out of our moment. “Is there a reason you’re planning your social lives instead of doing the assignment?”

“Sorry, Professor,” Anja says, seeming somewhat surprised that we’re being told off.

“Hmm. I expect more progress next time I do my rounds.” She walks away to go and look at what the students on the bench beside us are up to.

I exchange a look with Anja and we both burst out laughing.

“I guess that’s us told,” she says.

“Worth it,” I respond. “Maybe I’ll try to get the stuff we need this time, unless you need the time to ask any *other* questions you want answers to?”

“No, the date question was the only one I had on my mind.”

I smile and grab the textbook, feeling even better than I normally do when I’m around her.

CHAPTER 10



ANJA

THE SUN IS ALREADY STARTING to set, bathing the academy grounds in a pleasant orange glow and making them warm and inviting. Or maybe that's just the prospect of the evening to come.

I look around, nerves jittering in my stomach as I consider that Cethin may have changed his mind without telling me, or that something has come up.

“Hey.”

I jump at the sound of his voice. “Hi.” I wince at how squeaky it comes out.

A hand on the small of my back offers me more comfort than I expect it to. I lean into his touch, already yearning for more of it.

“Shall we?” He gestures vaguely to the grounds.

I nod. “Though I didn't think this through, I've no idea where we can go.”

“Luckily, I thought of that.” He pats his bag.

I give him a questioning look.

“I brought a blanket,” he responds. “I figured that the benches might be a bit too public. So now we can choose where to sit.”

I bite my lip and nod. “Do you have anywhere in mind?”

He reaches down and takes my hand, sending tingles shooting up and down my arm in response.

“Come with me.” His voice is low and full of promise.

Neither of us says anything as we make our way through the grounds until we come to a small patch of grass enclosed by some of the academy walls.

But more importantly, walls without windows.

“This is a good spot,” I suggest.

He nods and opens his bag, pulling out a chequered blanket. A surprising choice especially when he hasn’t had much time to prepare for us actually going on a date.

He spreads it out on the ground and gestures for me to take a seat.

I do, and pull out the strawberries that I brought with me. “It feels naughty to have taken food out of the dining room,” I admit.

He lets out a bemused laugh and takes a seat next to me. “I know what you mean. Though I didn’t do it this time, I had some shortbread Mum sent me.” He pulls out a battered metal tin and pulls off the lid, offering me a piece. The sweet scent of freshly baked biscuits fills my nose, and from the kitchen paper inside, I’m going to have to guess they’re homemade.

“Are you sure?” I ask, not wanting to take something so personal from him without checking first.

“Of course. I brought them to share.”

“They’ll go perfectly with strawberries,” I respond, putting them between us and taking a piece of shortbread. “Does your mum send you baked treats a lot?”

He nods. “At least once every couple of weeks. I think it’s her way of saying she misses having me at home.” He sets the tin down and takes one for himself.

“That’s so cute.”

“Ah, just what I was going for.” He wiggles his ears, making me laugh in response.

“If you want me to think that you’re something other than cute, you should stop doing cute things.”

“Then again, I like hearing you laugh,” he responds. “So maybe I should keep doing them.”

A blush rises to my cheeks and I glance away, nibbling on the piece of shortbread to save myself from blurting out the first thing on my mind. The buttery goodness melts on my tongue.

“How is your sister’s *Frankenstein* paper going?” I ask once I’ve regained my thoughts properly.

“Well, I think? She’s being a bit cagey about it.”

“Which means she hasn’t even started writing the essay,” I joke. “I used to do that with my dad.”

“You might be onto something there.”

I offer him the last strawberry, but he shakes his head and indicates that I should have it. I bite into it, enjoying the tart sweetness that combats the shortbread.

A light breeze passes by and I let out a small shiver.

Cethin puts the lid back on his shortbread tin and holds out his arm in what I have to assume is an invitation. I lean in and he puts his hand on my shoulder, making me feel all kinds of warm and glowy in response. There’s something so right about sitting with him like this.

I smooth my hand over his chest, feeling the hard planes of muscles even through his shirt and wondering what it would be like if he wasn’t wearing one at all.

“Anja?” he asks, his voice low and rough.

“Mmm?” I look up, noticing the ring of purple glowing in his eyes. I don’t know what’s causing it, or what it means, but I can sense that it’s not something that’s bad for me. There’s no risk of *anything* bad happening when I’m with him.

I reach out and touch his cheek, biting my lip as I do.

His gaze drops there and warmth spreads through me in response. I shuffle closer, feeling the change in the air as I do. He searches my face, clearly looking for something, though I don't know what. It's only when a small smile curls at the corners of his mouth that I realise.

He's making sure I want this as much as he does. And there's a way to prove that.

I lean in and brush my lips against his, excitement and anticipation zipping through me as I do. There's something intoxicating about the moment, even if I'm not entirely sure what's causing it or why.

He barely responds, and I pull back, panicking slightly that I've done something wrong.

"I'm..."

"No," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "Don't say it."

"If you don't want this..." I trail off, mostly because I'm not sure how to finish the sentence.

"Oh, I do, Anja. I want it."

So why didn't he kiss me back?

His hand brushes against my waist and his gaze fixates on my lips again.

"Kiss me again," he says.

I nod, shifting so I'm on my knees next to him on the blanket. I reach out and touch his cheek again, leaning in. I can feel his breath tickling my skin and it only makes me want him more.

This time when I press my lips against mine, he kisses me back. Softly at first, but then with an increasing hunger until it feels like I'm the only thing he can think about. He tastes of strawberries, shortbread, and something else that I can't put my finger on. But no matter what it is, I like it. And I want more of it. I want to press myself against him more and lose myself in the kiss properly. Unsure how else to manage that, I shift so I'm straddling him.

Cethin's hand on my lower back pulls me closer, and I can feel every inch of him even through our clothes.

He deepens the kiss and I wrap my arms around him.

We lose balance and he falls back, taking me with him and not breaking the kiss at all.

Caw!

I jump, breaking away from him, but not moving from my position other than that.

A raven jumps around beside us.

Caw! Caw!

I groan. "Really? *Now* is when you're choosing to talk to me again?"

Cethin gives me an odd look. "You know the raven?" His voice is husky and his eyes are glowing even more purple than before. It makes me feel warm and fuzzy, even if I can't explain why.

"I think so." I climb off his lap, kind of disappointed that we can't take this further, even if we're out in the grounds of the academy where anyone could come across us anyway. Next time, I should suggest a more private location.

"You're going to have to explain that."

"I keep running into it," I say, digging my hand into my pocket for the speckled white pebble I've been carrying around there in case I run into my raven friend again. "Normally after I've woken up from one of my dreams."

"Maybe it's your familiar."

I frown and hold the pebble out to the raven. "I don't have a familiar."

"Obviously."

I give him an unamused look.

The raven shifts forward and inspects the pebble. It's only now it's closer that I realise it has something in its mouth. No

doubt it's trying to work out if my offering is good enough before giving it to me.

“Sorry, I know that wasn't helpful.” Cethin sighs and shifts into a more comfortable position, his eyes having returned to their normal colour.

For some reason, I'm disappointed by that.

“Are you sure it's the same raven?” he asks.

I study the bird hopping around and looking at me with intelligent beady eyes. It drops a tarnished ring next to the pebble and I find myself smiling.

“Yes,” I say to the warlock. “And thank you, I'll put that with my button.” I pull it out of my pocket to show the raven so it knows I've been treasuring its gift.

Caw!

It's almost as if the raven is trying to tell me that it approves. Though I don't know whether it's because of our gift exchange, or my assessment about it being the same raven.

“But I don't know why it's interested in me,” I admit.

“Magic,” Cethin responds. “It's the most logical explanation.”

“I suppose it does make more sense than the idea I'm being stalked by a raven,” I muse. “What do I do about it?”

“I think that's up to you,” he responds.

I look at the raven and think about what it might mean that I have one in the first place. I guess it confirms that I am magical, though I'd gathered that already simply from the fact I'm here.

“Would you like to be my familiar?” I ask the bird.

The raven flaps its wings and picks up the pebble before it jumps into the air.

Is that an answer? Or does it just mean that the raven has gotten tired of my indecision already? Just like every aspect of

who I am, I'm left confused and without the answers.

I shake my head. "Typical. It interrupts us at a great moment, and then disappears as soon as we're trying to work it out." I pick up the ring and slip it into my pocket with the button. I know there's nothing special about either of them, but it feels like they're important. Maybe *because* the raven is supposed to be connected to me.

He chuckles. "It was a great moment."

"I suppose it just gives us an excuse to have another great moment." I lean back in. "If you want one?"

The purple glow returns to his eyes.

I guess I have my answer.

CHAPTER 11



ANJA

THE MIST SWIRLS around me and the distant wailing grows stronger than ever. I can already feel the panic starting to build within me as I make my way over to where I know the river is waiting for me.

Everything seems a little bit sharper than it has been in the past, as if my mind is trying to tell me that this isn't *just* a dream, it's some kind of manifestation of my magic.

I guess that's something I've known for a while, but I've been trying not to think about it too much because I don't know precisely what it means.

The figure appears in front of me, dunking the white dress into the river. Red streaks run into the water, making it seem as if she's washing away a bloodstain from them.

What does it all mean? If it *is* linked to my magic, then I'm a little worried about what precisely that means I can do.

The woman turns to me, though to my surprise, I can see that she's *not* a mirror image of me this time, though there are similarities. She opens her mouth, a scream ripping free and shocking me out of the dream.

My eyes snap open and I find myself looking up into the darkness of the dorm room. I clutch at my throat, but there's nothing there, probably because I wasn't the one screaming

this time. Despite that, I can still feel myself drenched in sweat and the echo of the dream is still living within me.

I roll over and grab my phone, groaning when I see it's already past midnight. A chat notification catches my attention, and I click on it, finding myself in my chat with Cethin.

< The courtyard is the perfect place for late-night reading.
> He's attached a photo of the bench we sat on when he found me sleepwalking, the time stamp from half an hour ago.

< You're going to get caught. > I send back.

< I didn't expect you to be awake. Bad dream? >

My heart swells at the fact he's already figured that out. < Yes, just woke up. > It's nice to have an immediate distraction from everything going around my head.

< What happened? >

I take a deep breath. I've only told him bits and pieces of what happens in my dreams before, but maybe it's time I tell him more. I start typing out a message before realising that there's just too much for that. < Are you still in the courtyard? >

< Yes. >

< I'll be there in five minutes. > I throw off the bed covers and pull on some clothes, already feeling relief at the decision to finally properly talk to someone about this.

I leave the room as quietly as possible, not wanting to wake Nati or my other roommates. I don't think any of them would turn me into the academy staff, but it's better to be safe rather than sorry. People can be grumpy when they're woken up earlier than they should be.

I hurry down the stairs, making good time to the courtyard. My heart skips a beat when I notice Cethin sitting on the bench and I hurry over.

He looks up from his book and a wide smile spreads over his face, though it does nothing to hide the worry lingering there.

I pause, realising I don't know whether I'm supposed to kiss him hello or not. This is still sort of new and it's not like we've had an in-depth conversation about it.

He rises to his feet and pulls me to him, and the moment he leans in, I realise I have the answer to my question. My eyes flutter closed as his lips brush against mine in a surprisingly sweet kiss.

"Talk to me," he murmurs without pulling away very far.

I nod, and gesture for us to sit down on the bench. I rub my left thumb until he reaches out and takes my hand in his.

I take a deep breath. "Okay, so I've been having the dreams since I turned twenty-one."

"You said. I assume that's some kind of milestone for whatever you are," Cethin says.

I frown. "I hadn't considered that, but I guess it makes sense. There's always some mist, and there are wails in the air. There's a woman at the river washing clothes. Normally, I think the woman is me, and that's when I wake up screaming." I touch my throat, still able to feel the echo of all the dream-screams.

"Screaming?" he echoes.

I nod. "No one else seems to be able to hear it. Or none of my roommates seem able to, they're always asleep when I wake up. Today was a bit different, I didn't think the woman was me this time, and it was almost as if she was trying to tell me something. But then *she* screamed and I woke up. That hasn't happened before."

"What about when you were sleepwalking? That didn't seem like you were screaming."

I frown. "No, it didn't. I was wandering around in the mist when I fell. I didn't get as far into the dream as normal. Though maybe that's not true. Maybe I dream about that all the time and just don't notice. Or maybe it's an escalation. I don't know."

"But you think the answers are in your dreams?"

“Yes. I mean, they must be, right? Why else would I be having them?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “It’s not something I know much about. Although...”

I perk up. “You know something?”

“I know of a potion that might help you communicate with your dream.”

“Is that even possible?” I try to keep my hope at bay, but it’s impossible to.

He shrugs and runs his thumb over the back of my hand in a surprisingly soothing gesture. “Only if your dream wants to be communicated with.”

“I want answers.”

“Okay, then let’s go.” He gets to his feet.

“Where?”

“The Charms and Potions lab.”

“You’re so casual about breaking into classrooms.”

“You want answers, and we can’t just brew a potion there during the day, so we should do it now,” he says.

I nod. Even if we get caught and given detention, it’ll be worth it if I discover the answers to what I am. “All right.” I join him and reach out to take his hand, loving how natural it feels for us to do that.

Caw!

I jump without meaning to, causing Cethin to laugh.

“I’m guessing that answers that one,” he says. “Definitely your familiar.”

“Do you want to come with us?” I ask the raven.

It cocks its head to the side.

“I don’t have any gifts this time. I haven’t found anything perfect,” I admit.

Cethin gives me an odd look.

The raven opens its mouth to show me that it doesn't have anything either.

"That's okay," I assure it, ignoring the warlock for the moment. "If neither of us have anything, it's still an even exchange, right?"

Caw.

"So, do you want to come?" Not knowing what else to do, I hold out my arm and kind of pat it.

The raven studies me, and for one moment, I think it's going to fly off again. Instead, it hops towards me and flaps its wings, coming to rest on my shoulder and completely ignoring the arm I offered it.

"I don't even know if you're male or female." Which isn't something I ever thought would bother me, but I want the raven to know that I care about it.

"I can fix that." Cethin clicks his fingers and some purple smoke rises from his fingers. It floats towards the raven, who doesn't seem in the slightest bit bothered by the spell. "She's female."

"Okay, so I can stop thinking of her as an it, then." I reach up and stroke the raven's head.

He nods. "And you should give her a name."

"What if she doesn't like it?" She pushes her head against my fingers in what seems like an acceptance of my affection. Or maybe it's a demand for more. I don't speak raven very well, though it seems like it's going to be a skill I need to learn. Hopefully, there's still space in Familiar Training class. And time in my schedule for it.

"Then I'm sure she'll bite you or something."

"Do birds even bite?"

"I don't know enough about ravens to be sure. Maybe it's just a peck?"

"All right. How about Midnight?" I ask the raven.

She pushes her beak against my fingers.

“Ow, okay. Not Midnight. Erm...Swiftwing?”

She repeats the motion while Cethin stands there and watches with bemusement clear on his face.

“Okay, okay. Thistle?” I hold a breath while I wait for the raven to let her displeasure be known, but this time she doesn’t do anything. “Thistle it is.”

“It’s a good name,” Cethin agrees.

“It is.”

“Come on, let’s get to the classroom before anyone catches us here,” he says, reminding me that we’re still in the middle of the courtyard and that curfew was hours ago. Maybe the staff don’t patrol the building as much as they claim to.

“It doesn’t even make sense that we have curfew,” I mutter. “Aren’t we all over eighteen?”

He shrugs. “Maybe they’re worried about all the mischief that we could get up to. Or perhaps the castle is haunted and they’re just trying to keep us away from the ghosts.”

“Ghosts hardly seem like they’d be that big of a deal compared to some of the students.”

“I don’t have an explanation for you,” he says. “We’re just here, so we have to abide by the rules.”

“Or actively choose to ignore them,” I respond.

He chuckles. “Yes, or that. So let’s go break some more.” He takes my hand in his.

I don’t mind breaking the rules so much when it’s with someone like him.

CHAPTER 12



CETHIN

I GLANCE at Anja to make sure she's okay, and she gives me a reassuring smile in response. I know that breaking into a classroom is reckless, even if it is for a good reason.

I call on my magic, the purple smoke sneaking into the lock and making it click. I push open the door and gesture for her to head inside.

"You'd think they'd use locks that would stop magical interference," she murmurs.

"Maybe they think no one is dumb enough to break into a classroom in the first place."

She brushes past me, reaching out to trail her hand across my chest as she does, while Thistle sways on her shoulder, completely unaffected by the situation. I don't know enough about familiars to be certain, but it does seem normal from what I've witnessed around the academy.

I close the door and place another spell on it that should let me know if anyone tries to open it unexpectedly. Though I do believe what I said to Anja, I think for the most part, the staff just don't expect students to end up in here randomly.

I turn around to find her standing in the moonlight, her lips parted and the silver-white of her hair shining, making her look more beautiful than ever.

Mate.

The urge to ignore everything and kiss her overtakes me. Though in reality, I want far more than that. But I can't. I have to fight with that part of myself and make it wait until she knows she's sure about me. About us. I can't force the mating bond on her, even if I know she's the one who can make me happy for a long time.

"Are you okay?" she asks, stepping forward and lifting a hand.

Thistle flaps her wings and flies over to the window to look outside.

I clear my throat. "I'm fine."

She moves into the gloom, and for one eerie moment, I get a sense that she's something dark and dangerous. No doubt it's the magic within her. A lot of what she's saying makes it seem like she's some kind of omen-driven being, but I'll probably know more after she's drunk the potion.

"Where do you want me?" she asks.

Anywhere. Everywhere.

I push the thought aside. It's not what she's asking. "Can you set up a cauldron?" I turn away so she can't see the purple that's no doubt ringing my eyes right now. She doesn't seem to have figured out that it shows up when I'm thinking of the mate bond as well as when I do magic. Which I guess makes sense when the mate bond is so tightly tied to my magic.

I sort through the ingredients drawers, being careful not to take too much of anything that will make it too obvious we've been in here. I doubt Professor Wainwright will be able to figure out it's us, but it's always better to play it safe.

Once I've got everything, I head over to where the cauldron is sitting on the small flame and start prepping everything.

"Do you want me to do anything?" Anja asks.

"No, I've got it," I assure her. "But I'm going to need some of your hair."

"My hair?" She reaches up to touch it.

“Well, technically, it can be anything. Blood, a fingernail, skin. I just figured hair would hurt the least.” I start chopping the ingredients.

“Ah, right, that makes sense. How much?”

“Just a few strands should do,” I respond.

“Ah.” She tugs and pulls out some strands, setting them down on the workbench beside me. “Where did you learn potions?”

“My dad,” I respond. “He’s really good at them. Mum not so much, even though she’s great in the kitchen.”

“Mmm, I remember the shortbread.” She gets an almost dreamy expression on her face.

“I think she’s sending gingerbread next week.”

“Biscuits or cake?”

“Which would you prefer?” I push the chopped mugwort root into the cauldron, getting a hiss in response.

“You can’t ask your mum for baked treats based on what I prefer,” she responds.

“Can’t I?” It doesn’t matter much to me which Mum sends, and I know she’ll like it if I tell her what I want rather than my normal response of getting her to make whatever she feels like making. I’m not trying to be awkward towards her about it, I just really don’t mind. Anything she makes is always delicious.

“Okay, I prefer the cake version.”

“I’ll let her know,” I respond.

“And how are you going to do that?” She leans forward on the desk.

I raise an eyebrow, trying not to be too satisfied that she seems to be angling after that. “Are you asking if I’ve told my mum about you?”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I guess so? I know we’ve been on one date, but...” she trails off and sighs.

“Nope, you don’t want to hear it.”

“Don’t I get to decide that?” I stir the cauldron and sprinkle a pinch of dried lavender over the top of the potion.

She takes a deep breath, and for a moment, I don’t think she’s going to tell me what’s on her mind. “It’s just that sometimes when we’re together, I get a weird feeling. Like this is something big. Does that make sense?”

Shock travels through me and I freeze in place as I try to process exactly what she’s saying.

Mate. The word races around my head, partly in disbelief that she seems to be feeling some of the bond herself.

“See, I’m sorry, you didn’t want to hear it,” she mutters, turning away.

I reach out and catch her wrist in mine to stop her, regretting that there’s a desk in the way. She turns back and meets my gaze, hope shining in there.

I glance at the potion, satisfied that all it needs to do is boil for five minutes. I head around to the other side of the desk and draw her to me, pushing loose hair out of her face so I can look into her eyes.

“I know what you mean,” I say softly. “You’re more than just a girlfriend to me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I’m your girlfriend now? And here I was thinking you were the one getting freaked out about commitment.”

“Well, I’d like you to be my girlfriend,” I respond, trailing my hand up her arm. “I don’t want to see anyone else.” Not that it’s really an option for me, now that I’ve met her, now that I *know* her, there is no one else.

“I’d like that too.” She goes up on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck.

My gaze slips down to her lips and all thoughts disappear. I lean in and brush my lips against hers.

She presses herself against me and lets out a small moan as I deepen the kiss, making it more difficult than before for me to hold back.

My hand slips down and finds the smooth patch of skin where her shirt has risen up, I trail my fingers over it, wanting to go further. Wanting her more than I've ever wanted anything.

The alarm from my phone blares, cutting through the haze and we both pull back.

"We have *got* to start making out when things can't interrupt us," she mutters.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," I respond.

"Maybe *after* you shut that thing off."

I laugh and pull away from her despite that being the last thing I want to do. I make my way back around to the cauldron and place the strands of hair at the top. "All right, another ten minutes and we're done."

She nods. "What should I expect?"

"I don't know, I think it's going to depend on what your dream has to say to you."

"Ominous," she mutters.

I don't disagree, but this is the only way I know of that might help her find the answers to what's happening in her dreams. Hopefully, it'll be what she wants, and it won't end up revealing things she'd rather not know.

CHAPTER 13



ANJA

CETHIN'S alarm goes off again, though at least it's not interrupting anything fun this time. Maybe I should be more disappointed about that.

"Okay, it should be ready," he says, grabbing the mug he must have got from the store and ladling some of the potion into it. "Drink up."

I eye it warily and pick up the mug. "Just like that?"

He nods. "Maybe sit down first."

Ah, right. That's a good idea considering I probably need to be asleep for this to work properly. I sink to the floor and lean against the bench. "I'm scared," I admit.

He comes to join me and puts an arm around me. "I know. But I won't let anything happen to you," he promises.

I don't know why, but that's all I need to hear. I lift the mug to my lips, almost overwhelmed by the scent of lavender. I wrinkle my nose. It's not exactly the most pleasant thing to drink and I haven't even started yet.

But this mug might hold the answers to my nightmares. And if I can find that, maybe I can *finally* have a peaceful night's sleep.

I focus everything I can on the warmth and security of Cethin's arm around me and down the potion in one go, barely

tasting it.

My eyes flutter closed and I lean my head against his shoulder, all sense of reality being chased away by the encroaching mist. It swirls around me in an almost comforting way. Maybe because I've been dreaming of it so often that it's become familiar.

The wailing begins, but it feels different than last time. Like it's coming from multiple people and not just one. I turn around slowly, trying to make out what's going on beyond the mists. I can make out several figures through the fog, but none of them come close enough for me to see clearly.

Not knowing what else to do, I make my way to the river, and to the woman who looks like me, but isn't me.

"Hello?" I call as I get there and realise she isn't around.

"You were not expected, child."

I whip around to find the woman behind me. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

"It is, and it is not," she responds. "You must accept the part of you that you are running from."

"How can I run from something I don't understand?" I ask, trying not to be too frustrated about the crypticness. "It's not that I don't want to, it's that I can't."

"Find a way, child. You know the way. I know that you feel the call."

"The call?"

She reaches out and touches my chest. Everything tightens within me and I can feel the tension of a scream building. I want to tell her that I don't want this, and that the screaming is too much when I don't understand it, but she's already gone.

My mouth is forced open by invisible magic, and the scream rips from me, filling the air around me with a strange sense of foreboding. My vision begins to blur, going black, but even then the scream continues. If I thought this part of my nightmares was bad, then this is even worse. Especially because I seem even more aware of it than normal.

I stop screaming and then there is only darkness and the echo of my own screams in my ears.

Warm arms tighten around me, only causing confusion. This has never happened as part of my dreams before. I force my eyes open, surprised to find Cethin looking down at me, his eyes glowing a deep shade of purple and a low growl coming from his throat.

I reach out and touch his face. "I'm okay." My voice is croaky from the screaming, but I manage to get the words out.

It takes him a moment to realise what's happening, and he shakes his head, his eyes returning to their normal colour.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I thought I was supposed to be asking you that," his voice is raspy, as if he's been shouting.

"That was before I woke up with you growling over me." I shuffle so I'm sitting up, and lean back into him, half expecting him to pull his arms away.

But he only wraps them around me tighter.

I let out a small sigh and settled back into him.

"You screamed."

"I told you that happened when I have the dream," I point out, though I'm surprised he heard it. Maybe it's because of the potion. "That shouldn't have made you growl and your eyes glow."

He clears his throat. "It's nothing."

"No, it's not."

He swallows hard.

I break his hold on me, but only so I can go onto my knees and look at him. "Cethin..." I reach out and touch his cheek, drawing his gaze back to mine. "Tell me," I whisper softly.

"You don't want to know."

"Why would I ask if I didn't?" I can tell that whatever is bothering him is important, even if he doesn't want to say.

“You’re my mate, Anja,” he says.

“What?”

“My mate.”

“I heard, I just don’t really know what that means or why it’s making you all growly and glowy.”

He takes a deep breath. “It means that you’re meant for me,” he says. “And I’m meant for you.”

I wait for a sense of panic to set in, but it doesn’t. Something about his words feels *right*. “I’m your mate,” I murmur.

He nods. “I knew it the moment we met, but it took me a little while to work out what the feeling was.”

“What is the feeling?” I move closer to him as if drawn in by something I can’t see.

His eyes meet mine, and I see a burning passion in them that I haven’t seen before. “A need to be with you, to touch you, to protect you.”

My breathing hitches. This is different from our conversation before I drank the potion. But it also makes everything slot into place and gives me a real understanding of the way I’ve been feeling.

“That’s why my eyes were glowing and I was growling. Hearing you scream like that made me want to summon every shred of magic I could so I could tear the world apart and make it all better.”

I swallow hard. “There’s nothing to protect me from, I’m right here.”

“I know.”

I bite my bottom lip, drawing his gaze right to it.

“You shouldn’t do that,” he murmurs, his voice low and inviting.

“Why not?” I resist the urge to repeat the action, though it’s harder than I expect it to be.

“Because I will have to kiss you if you continue.”

“Why would that be bad? We’ve already kissed. Several times,” I point out.

“This is different,” he says.

“So we can’t do this?” I lean forward and briefly press my lips against his, pulling back ever so slightly to wait for how he’ll respond.

He reaches forward and pulls me to him, crushing his lips against mine with barely restrained passion.

I press myself against him, barely aware of the classroom around us, or the lingering effects of my dream. None of it matters, the only thing I’m aware of is how good it feels to have Cethin’s lips against mine.

His hand rests on my lower back, pulling me even tighter to him. I smooth my fingers over his shirt, wanting to feel his skin more than I ever have before.

He pulls back. “We should stop.”

“Why?” I murmur. “If we want this, then why stop?”

He groans. “Anja…”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are. But we shouldn’t. We’re in the middle of a classroom.”

“No one knows we’re here. And we’ll already get in trouble if they find us here,” I point out, my fingers toying with the buttons of his shirt as I do.

“No, we can’t.” The way he says the words makes it seem as if it’s paining him too. “You’ve only just found out that you’re my mate, and your dream. Don’t ask me to do this.”

“Because you will?”

He groans. “My restraint is holding on by a thread, don’t test it.”

A small part of me is tempted to. Especially because of what he’s implying will happen if I push him further. But I

shouldn't do that to him. It isn't fair when he's said he doesn't want to, and while I'm disappointed by that, I have to respect his choice. If what he's saying about us being meant for each other is true, then there'll be plenty of time to explore what I want.

"Tell me about your dream," he says.

I sigh and lean my head against his shoulder.

Thistle hops down from where she's watching from one of the benches and comes to sit by me, clearly called by my magic. Cethin must be right about her being my familiar, she's responding far too often when I've had my dreams for there to be another explanation.

"The woman from the river talked to me," I say. "It's the first time that's happened."

"What did she say?"

"A load of cryptic stuff about me having to accept what I can do before I can stop the dreams. Which I get, but at the same time, I have no idea what I can do. If I *could* accept it, then I would."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"It's just that there must be more clues than that. You said she looked like you?"

"Yes. Long silver-white hair, sometimes she looks really old, other times she looks my age. She washes things in the river in some of the dreams. Oh, and the wailing was different this time. It sounded like it was coming from more than one place. I don't know, it all seems as if it's raised more questions than it's answered."

He frowns. "Maybe. But it's also given us a lot of information to work with." He leans in and kisses the top of my head. "We'll work it out."

I sigh and lean into him. "I hope so." Because I really can't keep waking up in the middle of the night screaming, even if I no longer have to shoulder the knowledge of that alone.

CHAPTER 14



CETHIN

I DON'T EVEN NEED Anja to say anything, I know she's in the room the moment she walks into the library. I don't know if I'm picking up on her scent, the sound of her footsteps, or if there's something else that tells the bond between us that she's around, but I know it.

I look up and wave her over to the table I'm at. She pulls out the chair next to me and leans in to kiss my cheek before sitting down.

"Hi."

"Hey," she says. "Should I be disappointed that you didn't invite me here to make out in the library?" She waves at the huge stack of books on the table in front of us.

I chuckle. "I don't think Mr. Brecken would like that very much."

"I wasn't planning on telling the librarian what we were up to," she jokes, her eyes shining with amusement. "But I will concede that there are better dark corners for that." She places her hand on my leg under the table, a little higher than she should considering where we are.

"I wouldn't mind you showing some of them to me," I joke.

She raises an eyebrow and she moves her hand even higher still. My body responds instantly. Mostly because every part of

me has been on alert since the moment she walked in.

“Even if you don’t want to...”

A low growl escapes from me. “I never said I didn’t want to. You’re my mate, Anja. Trust me, I really want to.”

She meets my gaze and I’m surprised to find a similar amount of desire swirling in her eyes. She bites her bottom lip and it’s all I can do *not* to take hold of her hand and drag her to the back of the library where there is slightly more privacy.

Though the risk of getting caught is still a little too high for my liking. That’s not how sealing our mating bond should go.

I clear my throat. “I actually thought you should see this,” I say, forcing my attention back to the stack of books. I search through it for the one I’m looking for. “Aha.” I find the one with the dark red cover and hand it to her.

She takes it from me, a curious expression on her face. “The history of the bean sídhe?”

I nod. “Banshees.”

“Why...oh. You think that’s what I am.”

“You’ll know better than I will,” I respond. “You’ve experienced your dreams, whereas I’ve only heard about them. But a few of the things you’ve said made me think about omen-related beings. You said you sensed when your hamster was going to die, and then there was a moment where I just got that sense from you. I can’t fully explain that one.”

“So why banshees?”

“Because they’re what you described.” I gesture to the book.

She flips it open and scans the first few pages. I watch her read, nervously waiting for her verdict. I’m not sure whether I want to be right or not. On the one hand, it’ll give her the answers that I know she’s been searching for, on the other, I can’t imagine it’ll be nice for her to know that she can predict death.

But everything adds up. Her dreams started at the right age, the colour of her hair, the descriptions she's given of the women in her dreams, and even the dreams themselves. I don't think she's prophesying anyone's death, it's just her powers awakening, but that doesn't mean it's not going to be stressful.

Anja lets out a small gasp.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"This woman." She taps a page of the book.

I lean over and look at the picture she's pointing to. "She looks a bit like you," I say.

"She's the woman from my dreams." Her voice is barely above a whisper, but I hear it.

"Are you sure?" I scan the caption, but it doesn't reveal very much.

"Yes." Anja sets the book down, a confused expression on her face.

I guess that leaves no doubt in my mind about what she is. There's no way this can be a coincidence.

"I need air," she murmurs, pushing her chair back and racing away before I even have time to process her words.

I stare after her, confused by what I'm supposed to do. Should I follow her? She didn't say not to, but that doesn't mean that I shouldn't.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Clearly she needs this book and the information in it. I grab it and head over to the desk where Mr. Brecken seems as if he's almost asleep.

I clear my throat and he startles to attention.

"Ah, Cethin, you're still here," he says.

I smile. "I am, it took me a while to get through all the books you found me."

"It must be a very interesting project you're working on," he says.

I think of the beautiful potential-banshee who has just gone running from the room. “The most interesting I’ve ever worked on,” I respond. “Is it okay if I check this one out? I just need to run an errand before I come back and deal with the others.” I feel bad for leaving them, but I need to get back to Anja.

“It’s fine, I can put them back,” the librarian responds. “Let me see the one you want.”

I hand it to him.

He clicks his tongue and types a few things into the computer next to him. “No one’s wanted this one in a long time.”

“It’s a subject of special interest to me.” Which isn’t even a lie.

“A fascinating one too. Banshees carry a load far greater than you or I could ever imagine.” He hands the book to me. “All yours. Just make sure you bring it back in a couple of weeks.”

“You know I will.” I’m already turning and slipping it into my bag, anxious to go find Anja and make sure she’s okay.

I hurry out of the library, surprised to find a raven sitting at the top of the stairs to the main floor of the academy.

I guess I’m not the only one worried about her.

CHAPTER 15



ANJA

MY WHOLE BODY tenses at the sound of footsteps, only to relax when I realise I recognise them. Have I spent so much time around Cethin that I'm able to differentiate the sound of his shoes, or is it something to do with the mate bond that means I know he's there? I've been researching so I can assure him that there's nothing to worry about the next time he's concerned that we're going too far. But nothing I've found has told me what I'm able to do with the bond, it's all focused on how important it is to him.

The flap of wings announces Thistle's appearance, and she comes to sit on the back of the bench beside me.

"I thought you were supposed to be my familiar?" I ask her.

"I think she was being," Cethin responds.

"How so?"

"I think she was worried and wanted to bring me to you."

"Oh." I turn to the raven and smile, though I don't know if she can understand the gesture. "Thanks."

Thistle flaps her wings, which I have to assume means she's heard me.

"Can I sit?" Cethin asks.

“Of course.” I don’t even have to think about my answer. “I’m sorry for running away, I wasn’t really thinking things through.”

“That’s okay. I’m just lucky Thistle decided to show me the way or I could have spent hours searching the grounds for you.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just follow me.”

“I was getting this for you.” He pulls the book about banshees from his bag and hands it to me.

“Are you supposed to have this?”

“Yes, I checked it out properly, I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re insinuating.” He sits on the bench and leans back.

“I was going to go with *borrow without permission*.”

He snorts. “Well, I borrowed *with* permission. It’s a library after all.”

I turn the book over in my hands, trying to process exactly what I’m thinking. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I’m here for you, Anja. For whatever you need.”

I can think of a dozen flirty things to say to that, but I know this isn’t really the time or the place for them. Instead, I let out a sigh. “I’m a banshee.”

“You might not be, it’s just a theory.”

I snort. “It’s not a theory.” I flip to the page with the drawing of the woman from my dreams. “She looks like me.”

He shuffles closer and puts an arm around me.

Thistle hops over to the other side, but doesn’t seem to engage with us much. It’s nice to have her here though, it’s support I never realised I wanted or needed.

“It could be a coincidence that she looks like you.” He doesn’t believe the words, I can hear it in his voice.

“It isn’t. You know when you just *feel* things?”

“Like you being my mate?”

I nod. “Yeah, like that. I guess I just feel like this is the truth. This woman has been in all of my dreams, and there has to be a reason for that.”

“Does it say much about who visits the dreams of banshees?” he asks.

“How should I know? You’re the one that spent time with the book, not me,” I point out, hoping he *has* so I can skip to the parts of the book I need.

“I didn’t have time to read all of it,” he responds. “But I did see a section about awakening banshee powers.”

I flip to the front and scan the table of contents for the right page. I find it and scan the neatly printed text within. “*When a bean sídhe comes of age, they are often visited by a powerful ancestor in their dreams.*” I shut the book and lean into him. “I guess that answers that.”

“Mmm.”

“I don’t even know what to do with the information. I’m a banshee.”

“You don’t have to do anything with it,” he says.

“That’s not true. I have these powers.” I look at my hands as if expecting them to change and become magical, but I guess that’s not how my magic works.

“That doesn’t mean anything, you’re more than what you are,” he says. “Do you think I’m evil?”

“What? No, of course not. Why would I think you’re evil?” I look at him, horrified that he’d think I was capable of thinking that.

He shrugs. “I come from a line of warlocks so twisted that their bodies warped and became this.” He gestures to himself.

“I like the way you look.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But that doesn’t change anything I’m saying.”

“But you’re not evil,” I point out. “You’re sweet, and funny, and kind.”

“With cute ears,” he teases, giving them a wiggle.

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, I let out a laugh. “Yes, with cute ears.” I sigh and look down at my hands.

“So if you can accept that I’m not evil because of what I am, why can’t you accept that you’re more than your magic? Banshees aren’t even malicious, all they do is foretell death, they don’t cause it.”

“I don’t know, because it feels like my whole life I’ve been building to finding out what I am, and it’s strange to think that it’s so…” I trail off, not really knowing what I’m trying to say.

“You’re just forgetting all the other things you are,” he points out. “You’re beautiful, smart, determined, sexy, funny, and adorable.” Every word he says rings true within me.

I nod and look out over the academy grounds. “I guess it’s not right to judge my magic on the preconceived notions I have of it.”

“That too. There’s going to be so much that you can do with them that you don’t even know about yet.”

“Is it weird that I’m at Blackthorn without understanding any of my magic?”

“We’re *all* at Blackthorn to learn,” he points out. “Some of us know more about doing our thing when we come here, but it doesn’t change the fact there’s a lot we don’t know.”

“I guess that’s true.” And I did hope I’d be able to work out what I was by coming here. That’s a goal accomplished, even if it isn’t the answer I really wanted.

“I’ll help you in whatever way I can,” he says.

“I think I need to talk to the woman in my dreams again.”

“Okay, we can do that. Though we might need to make a stronger potion this time,” he says.

“Do you know how?”

He nods. “I do. We can try later, if you want? Or would you prefer to get some sleep?”

I snort. “I’m not going to be able to anyway. But if you’d rather have a rest...”

“As opposed to spending time with you? I’d be a fool for sleeping.”

“I’ll be unconscious for most of it,” I point out.

“And not for the rest,” he counters. “And if it means that you can get a greater understanding of what you are and how your powers work, then it’s fine by me.”

I shift on the bench and lean in so I can kiss him, wanting him to know just how appreciative I am of his support. He cups my cheek in his hand and kisses me back softly, but even that’s enough to remind me of the need swimming around within me, desperate to be sated by something only he can give.

Perhaps tonight can hold the answer to more than one thing for us.

CHAPTER 16



ANJA

IT'S LESS weird to be in the Charms and Potions classroom than it was the first time. Probably because we've been out of bed after hours several times now and it's never gotten either of us into any trouble. The academy has to know they're inviting people to sneak around like this when they banned us from going back to one another's rooms.

Cethin cuts an even bigger mugwort root than last time and pushes it into the already bubbling cauldron. He sprinkles in the lavender and something I don't recognise, a serious expression on his face. He checks some notes on his phone, and then steps back.

"How long do we have until the potion finishes?" I ask him. Despite weeks of lessons, I'm not very intuitive when it comes to potions. Which I guess makes sense when I consider what my magic can actually do. At least I seem to have found myself a boyfriend who *does* know what he's doing.

"About half an hour," he responds. "Why?"

"It doesn't need tending to, right?"

He shakes his head and narrows his eyes at me. "What are you planning?"

I bite my bottom lip and head over to the door to check it's still locked. Satisfied that it's fine, I head over to the desk beside him and hop up, sitting on it and considering the best

way to suggest this. I lean forward, knowing the shirt I chose to wear tonight leaves very little to the imagination when I do that.

Cethin's eyes darken and a faint gleam of purple starts to glow within them. A good sign for me getting what I want. "What are you up to?"

"That's something you should come and find out," I say in my best come-hither voice, though I'm not entirely certain I manage it very well.

Or I'm not until I see the way he reacts.

Excitement builds within me and I reach out to pull him to me by his shirt. "Getting alone time has been difficult," I murmur. Though we do seem to have been doing just fine on that front, none of it has been properly alone where no one can disturb us.

"And you thought that in the middle of a classroom was the right time to change that?"

"We've kissed in here before, what's the harm of another?" I meet his gaze, knowing he can probably sense the desire coming from me. I certainly feel as if I'm being obvious.

His lips quirk up into a bemused smile. "A kiss?"

"Mmhmm."

"Just a kiss?"

"I'm not promising anything."

His eyes flash purple, definitely not in anger this time. He leans in closer, his breath fanning against my lips. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"I do, Cethin," I whisper, meeting his gaze so he can *see* how much I know what I want.

My eyes flutter closed as he leans in and presses his lips against mine. His touch is hesitant at first, as if he knows that this time we won't be stopping at just a kiss.

I pull him closer, impatience growing within me as I do. My hands travel down to the bottom of his t-shirt and I tug at

it, allowing my fingers to slip underneath. The warmth of his skin only increases my desire.

I fumble with the buckle of his belt, but he breaks the kiss and reaches for my hands to stop me.

“I’m sure about this,” I tell him, meeting his gaze. “I want this. I want you. But if you don’t...”

“I do.”

“Then why are you stopping it every time I try to take things further?” I can’t help the hurt that comes through my voice.

“I don’t want you to feel as if I’m not respecting you.”

I close my eyes and try to restrain my frustration. “And how is it respecting me if you’re not listening when I’m saying what I want? I know that me being your mate is a big deal, and it should be. But I’m okay with that. If you’re not and need more time...”

A low growl cut me off.

I raise an eyebrow.

Cethin clears his throat. “Sorry.”

“What was that for?”

“The thought of waiting might have provoked a bit of a response,” he admits.

I grin. “Ah, so you *do* want me.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you, Anja,” he responds, a hint of desperation in his voice. “But there’s no going back from this.”

I reach out and put my hand on his chest. “I know.”

“But you don’t know much about it.”

I laugh. “You’re not the only one who knows how to use the library to research things,” I point out. “Though it wasn’t much help. The internet, on the other hand, was *far* more informative. There were even articles about the different kinds

of equipment that some guys have.” Even saying it is enough to pique my curiosity.

And something else.

“Well now I’m worried you’ll be disappointed,” he half-jokes.

I reach out and cup his face in my hands. “In you? Never.” Sensing that the moment is here, I pull him closer and press my lips against his.

He kisses me back with an unexpected tenderness, the conversation seeming to have soothed him of some of his worries.

He moves closer and I shuffle closer to the edge of the desk so I can finally get him out of his clothes.

This time, he doesn’t stop me as I push down his waistband, baring him to me.

He lets out a small groan as I start exploring with my fingers, brushing myself over him and feeling the ridges and swirls that aren’t unexpected, but are an intriguing addition, especially when I consider what they might feel like when they’re inside me.

He breaks the kiss and moves his attention to my neck, grazing his teeth against my skin. I let out a small moan, most of my thoughts fleeing save for the most important ones.

“Will birth control work?” I ask, my voice coming out husky.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me and only turning me on more. Though from the feel of him in my hand, I’m not the only one with that response.

“Yes.”

“And condoms?”

He nibbles at the lobe of my ear. “Special ones.”

I let out a disappointed groan. “I don’t have any of those.”

“I do.”

I freeze. “So you weren’t going to have sex with me, but you *do* have condoms for it?”

He pulls back and looks at me. “Of course I do. When I realised you were my mate, I wanted to be prepared in case we did.”

“Oh.” Warmth fills me at his care. “So when you say you have them, you do mean *now*, right?” If he says they’re in his room, I don’t know what I’m going to do. Maybe send him back for them, potion be damned.

A bemused smile pulls at the corners of his lips, and he pulls away, leaving me disappointed. It only lasts a moment, as he goes over to his satchel and pulls out a box, bringing it over to me and putting it down.

“Happy?” he teases.

“Oh, very. And curious.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Because you know me,” I respond, gesturing for him to come back. The only disappointing thing about him stepping back between my legs is that I can no longer look at him.

“Perhaps I can sate some of that,” he murmurs against my lips, capturing me in a deep kiss.

“Please,” I say through a whimper.

He runs a hand up my leg and beneath my skirt.

“Yes,” I murmur as he pushes my panties aside and finds my entrance.

A gasp escapes me as he pushes his fingers into me and curls them up to hit just the right spot. I grab hold of his arm, bunching up the fabric there and wishing there was none of it.

Warmth spreads through me as a release starts to build.

“Want to try something?” he murmurs into my ear.

“Anything,” I respond, though the word is barely audible.

He lifts up his free hand and lets purple magic the same colour as his eyes run over his fingers.

I bite my bottom lip even as the first of the magic jumps to my skin.

“Tell me when it’s too much,” he says.

I nod, but I’m not really able to focus on anything other than the release building within me. I’m not even sure what his magic is doing until I realise my release is building higher than it ever has before.

Which is why he wants me to tell him when it’s too much. His fingers find the right spot, and between that and the magic, it feels like there’s so much pressure inside me that I’m going to explode.

“Now,” I moan.

I don’t know what he does, but the release crashes through me. My whole body starts to shake and I cry out, far louder than I should given we’re not anywhere particularly private. But right now, I don’t care, the only thing I can think about is how good it feels for him to touch me.

I collapse my head against Cethin’s shoulder, breathing heavily and trying to regain some composure so we can continue.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

“Mmhmm. More than all right,” I respond dreamily. “I’d like more of that.”

He chuckles. “I can give you more.”

“Or you can give me you.”

His eyes flare purple, and I realise that it’s not just his protectiveness that brings it out, it’s his desire too.

Thankfully, he doesn’t even try to argue with me this time, and grabs the box of condoms, pulling one out and putting it on with surprising deftness.

I use the time to pull off my panties and position myself in the right place on the bench, anticipation building within me with every passing moment. This isn’t how I envisaged our first time together, but that doesn’t stop it from being perfect.

He steps close and captures my lips with his, kissing me deeply and only starting to build another release within me just from his touch. If this is what being mated feels like, I'm surprised more people aren't talking about it.

He guides himself to my entrance and I moan against his mouth. We lose our concentration as he pushes into me. He fills me in a way I don't think I've ever experienced before, and every ridge and swirl only making the experience more intense.

I wrap my legs around him and pull him closer. I push my hands under his shirt and dig my nails into his back.

His pace quickens and I can feel myself responding. It's only going to take me a moment for another release to overtake me.

Something shifts deep within me and I can feel a deeper connection to him.

"I'm going to..." I can't even finish my sentence as a second release takes over me. My nails dig deeper into him as I shudder.

Everything disappears from my mind and I start to see purple stars behind my eyes, though I know it's only my imagination.

I'm dimly aware of Cethin joining me in a release of his own.

We lean into one another, neither of us saying a word, only breathing deeply, the connection between us undeniable. I don't need him to explain that it's the mating bond. He said there was no going back from this, and now I get why.

Though I'm not entirely sure why I'd *want* to go back from that. There's so much more that I want to do with him.

"Are you okay?" he asks, trailing his fingers over the bare skin of my back.

"Very okay." I lean my head against his shoulder, not doing anything to move away from him. "That was..."

"Intense?"

“Mmhmm.” I touch his cheek and move his face so I can look into his eyes. “So, I’m now properly your mate.”

His eyes darken. “Yes.”

“Does it have to be sex that seals the bond?”

“No. And just having sex wouldn’t be enough either. It only works because of our emotions.”

“So you were worried about sleeping with me because of how strongly you felt?” I ask.

“Yes.” He pulls back and starts sorting himself out.

“And if I hadn’t felt the same...”

“Then it wouldn’t have worked,” he admits.

I’m not sure what he’s been worrying about if that’s the case, but I appreciate it all the same, especially now.

A loud noise blares through the room.

Cethin chuckles. “It’s my alarm. The potion’s ready.”

I start laughing. “Well, that’s a downer. I was starting to plan round two.”

He leans in and kisses me softly. It’s tender and only increases the intensity of the emotions I’m feeling towards him. “That can wait.”

“I have to admit, I’m disappointed.”

“I’ll make it up to you later,” he promises. “But now we should sort out your potion.”

I nod, though really, all I can think about is what later might bring.

CHAPTER 17



ANJA

I DRINK THE POTION, hating the smell and taste even more than before. It's like someone heated up bathwater and decided to make me drink it.

Cethin takes the cup away from me and pulls me to him, letting me lay my head on his chest while he leans against the bench. The warmth of his arms makes it almost pleasant as I let the effects of the potion take hold and I find myself vanishing into sleep. It's a shame that we haven't been able to enjoy the aftereffects of sleeping together without the interruption, but I know this is good for me, and for him in the long run.

The mist comes immediately, but this time I'm ready for it. If I thought everything was sharper the last time I was here because of a potion, it's even more intense this time around. Or maybe that's just because I'm thinking more clearly about things and coming into this with the knowledge that I might be a banshee.

A coolness drifts through the air that I haven't felt before, but I ignore it. For all I know, it's just a breeze in the Charms and Potions classroom and not in the dream.

The mist clears and several of the figures who have been just out of sight before make their way towards me.

I turn in a circle, but not out of fear, I just want to see their faces and to know if what I'm thinking is correct. Everywhere I look, there's someone who shares some of my features. I'm not being visited by one ancestor but by many of them.

"Hello, child."

I whip around to find the woman from the book standing in front of me. Every other banshee from my past is part of the circle, but not her.

"My name is Anja," I say.

"*Anja.*" The whisper rushes around the circle.

The woman smiles. "You are back sooner than I expected."

"You told me that I needed to accept what I am. I'm here to do that. There is no one to teach me what to do or who I am. I don't even know who my mother is."

"Your mother does not matter," she says. "You are one of us. We are all part of the chain of magic."

I nod. "I understand that." Mostly because I spent the rest of my classes after the library secretly reading the book on banshees that Cethin got for me. "I want to know how to accept my powers. How do I use them?"

"You simply have to trust," the woman says. "You must heed what your magic tells you when it comes to death."

"And foretelling it? Is that really something I have to do?"

"It is part of us." There is a mournful note in her voice. "But it is not who you are."

"My mate told me that," I respond, the words feeling somewhat foreign on my tongue. Probably because I haven't told anyone what Cethin is to me yet. "That I am more than just a banshee."

To my surprise, the woman smiles. "You are more than just a banshee. That is your bloodline and your birthright but it is not you. Perhaps you are more ready for the knowledge we bear than I first thought."

"What knowledge?" Should I be nervous about this?

“There are things that you may know that you are not aware you know. Have you not been able to tell when things are going to die?”

The hamster.

“Yes.”

“That is part of the ancient powers we have,” the woman responds. “Have you met your familiar?”

“Yes. Thistle, she’s a raven.”

She nods approvingly. “An excellent companion for a banshee. You must accept her and bond with her. Bring her into your life properly. Sometimes she will be able to help and guide you in ways that nothing else can.”

Like bringing Cethin to me when I was upset.

“How do I do that?” I ask.

“I do not know the rules of the world you live in are.”

“I’ll find out,” I promise.

“If you believe you are ready, then we shall grant you the information you seek about your powers,” the woman says.

“I believe I am. What will happen if I’m not?”

“Then this will hurt a great deal,” she responds.

“Ah.” It’s a risk, but I fully believe what I’m saying. “I’m ready.” I can’t move into working out how this is a part of me if it isn’t one. I have to fully know what I am and how my magic works in order to make that a reality.

“Close your eyes.”

I take a deep breath and do as she says. I don’t know what to expect from this, but I know it’s the right thing to do.

Wailing starts to build from the assembled women and I feel magic pulse through the air in response. It gets colder and the air swirls, bringing the sound of their voices with it. Something within me tugs towards the sound, wanting to be part of it.

No, not even wanting, it's like I *need* to be part of it. Which I suppose makes sense in that this will one day be me communicating with future banshees of my bloodline.

I open my mouth and begin to let out the same keening wail as the women around me. It isn't the scream from my previous dreams, it's more harmonious and doesn't hurt.

I can sense the old woman step forward and touch my forehead.

Thoughts vanish as all kinds of images flash through my mind. It's centuries of knowledge and use of banshee magic, how to recognise the dying, when to do something about it, and how to deal with the sorrow it causes. Sometimes, I recognise one of the faces as belonging to one of the women who are surrounding me, but without their names, that's useless information. All I really need to know is that they're part of my bloodline and that their magic is now part of me.

The wailing ceases and I open my eyes, surprised to find that all but one of the younger women from the circle has disappeared. She smiles at me with sadness in her eyes and steps forward.

"Anja," she says. "You've grown since I last saw you."

Understanding slots into place. "You're my mother?"

She nods. "I know you may be angry at me for leaving..."

"I'm not. My parents told me that you had no choice but to give me up." A lump forms in my throat. "They always spoke well of you. But if you're here..."

"Yes, I am here because I no longer walk among the living."

"Do all banshees speak so poetically?" I ask. "Do I need to learn how to do that?"

She lets out a surprising laugh. "No, it's just that the older generations speak in a certain way and it rubs off on you after a while. You'll learn to speak this way once your spirit is here."

"That doesn't sound like a fun way to spend eternity."

“I’m only an echo, Anja. Only the banshee part of me resides here. The rest of my spirit is at peace.”

“Oh.”

She steps closer and brushes some hair out of my face. “I’m glad I got to see you.”

“Me too.” I stare at her, seeing how alike we are, but how different at the same time.

“I’m glad you’ve found people who love you.”

“I have,” I assure her, thinking of my parents. And of Cethin. I know we haven’t said that to one another yet, but I can feel it hanging between us even without us needing to.

She smiles. “You’re strong, Anja. I’m sorry that you’ve had to find out what you are alone and that I wasn’t there to guide you, but know that I’m proud and I know you will find the peace you need in order to use your powers.”

“Thank you.”

She steps back. “You should wake now.”

I nod and close my eyes, unsure how I know that’s what I need to do, but it feels right given the circumstances.

I take a deep breath and open them again, already knowing from the warm arms around me that I’m back in the Charms and Potions classroom.

“Hey,” Cethin says softly.

“Hi.”

“No screaming this time?”

I shake my head. “I met my mother.”

Surprise flits over his face. “That sounds heavy.”

“I guess. It’s hard to explain. I came to terms with my adoption a long time ago, but it still feels like I got closure, kind of? I mean, I don’t know anything about her, or why she gave me up, but I guess it’s nice to know that she cares?”

He nods and runs his hand up my arm in a comforting gesture. “What about the rest of it?”

“They did something that they said would give me access and understanding about my magic. My head hurts a little.” I rub my temple.

“I’m not surprised. We should get you back to the dorm. A good night’s sleep should help, especially if you don’t have to worry about nightmares.”

“Hopefully.” I sigh. “I wish there was a bed for us both though.”

“And what would happen if there was?”

“Well...probably sleep, because I’m exhausted, but then I can think of a few other things. Please tell me you know of one?” After everything, I want nothing more than to curl up in his arms.

“Unfortunately not.”

“Eurgh. I guess that’ll be a reason for you to come visit during the holidays, then?” I look up at him, hoping he’ll say yes. And hoping my parents won’t be weird about us sharing a bed, but I don’t think they will be, especially when I explain the entire situation.

“Do you really think I’d be able to spend weeks apart from you?” He brushes hair out of my face.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

He leans in and presses his lips against mine. I sink into the kiss, feeling like everything is finally falling into place.

CHAPTER 18



CETHIN

THE CLASSROOM IS ALREADY full of chatter by the time I arrive, but Anja isn't here yet. I push aside my worries that she's not going to show up and take a seat. She seemed fully into sealing the mating bond between us last night, but I still worry that there might be regret this morning.

It's strange to think that the two of us shared something life-changing last night, and this morning, we've just got to go through the motions of normal life. Though I suppose there are two things that have changed now Anja knows for sure what she is.

I check my phone behind my bag, but don't have a message from her yet. I try not to let that bother me. This is the first class of the day and it doesn't mean anything that she's not here. Or that I couldn't see her in the dining hall. There's got to be a perfectly good reason for that.

The door opens and I look up, locking eyes with the gorgeous banshee making her way inside.

Her whole face lights up as she spots me and she hurries over, glancing towards the front to make sure Professor Wainwright isn't paying any attention before leaning in and kissing my cheek.

Warmth fills me at the gesture, and I'm reassured that I haven't scared her off. I just wish we could be having our first

morning-after conversation somewhere a little more private. Preferably somewhere with a bed.

“Morning,” she says brightly, pulling her chair a little bit closer to mine and starting to unpack everything.

“Hey. I looked for you at breakfast,” I blurt without meaning to.

“Oh, I had a meeting with Professor Dunlop this morning,” she replies. “I should have messaged you about it, but I just got so nervous.”

“How did you manage that so quickly?”

“I emailed him yesterday afternoon after you gave me the banshee book hoping that he’d have some suggestions for me. I woke up this morning with a response saying that he had a free half hour during breakfast if I wanted a meeting urgently, so I took it.” The relief on her face makes it clear that it was the right decision.

“What did he say?” I ask.

“He’s letting me drop The Practical Applications Of Curses so I can take Familiar Training and given me the paperwork to allow me to have Thistle with me on the academy grounds. I didn’t even realise that was necessary, apparently, I’ve been breaking all kinds of rules by bringing her inside.”

“Because those are the only rules you’ve been breaking,” I quip, thinking of all our curfew breaking. I’m fairly certain there’s probably an academy rule about having sex in the classrooms too.

A blush rises to her cheeks. She reaches out and puts her hand on my leg. “I’ll break *that* rule with you as many times as you want.”

I don’t need a mirror to feel my eyes flare purple at the insinuation. “No regrets?”

“Not even a little one,” she responds. “Or maybe one.”

“Oh?”

“That there are other people in the room right now.”

I let out a bemused laugh. “I can see that one being a regret.”

“All right, class, settle down,” Professor Wainwright calls. “Before we get started, there’s just a housekeeping rule. It’s come to the faculty’s attention that some students have been using classrooms after hours. You’re reminded that not only does this break the rules with you being up and about *after* curfew, but it is not what classrooms are meant to be used for.”

Anja smothers a laugh and I look in her direction, only making it worse.

“Is everything all right, Ms. Greystone?” Professor Wainwright asks, giving Anja a look that I’m surprised she has in her arsenal.

“Sorry, I’ve got a feather stuck down the neck of my shirt and it tickles.”

“I’ll get it,” I say, leaning over and quickly making a feather appear by magic, pulling it out from behind her collar.

“Hmm.” The professor turns away and looks towards the board, not seeming convinced by Anja’s lie. “Today’s lesson will be about locking charms, though I think perhaps some of you could do with a lesson in when to respect them.” She starts to go over the lesson plan.

“For you,” I say, brandishing the feather to Anja.

“Thanks. I should have thought of a better lie.”

“It’s okay, I could work with this one,” I assure her. Though if she’d come up with something different, I might have struggled.

“Do you think she knows it was us?” She takes the feather from me, her fingers lingering as they brush against mine, sending a bolt of desire through me. I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to get enough of her.

“I don’t think so, or we’d have been in Professor Dunlop’s office for a very different reason this morning,” I assure her.

“Do you think they’d have expelled us?”

“I hope not, I don’t think Dad would be very happy about that.”

“My parents either. They were so excited about me coming here,” she responds, glancing at the front to make sure we’re not about to get in trouble again. Luckily, we seem to have gotten fairly good at covert conversations.

“Have you told them that you figured out what you are yet?”

She shakes her head. “It might not surprise you to know that when I got to bed last night, I collapsed into a heap and went straight to sleep.”

“Any dreams?” I don’t want her to have had more nightmares after everything we did to stop them.

She gives me a knowing look. “Yes. But not the kind you’re insinuating.”

“So nothing vivid?”

“Oh, it was very vivid,” she responds. She looks to the front where the professor is going through copious amounts of information surrounding locking charms.

I try to focus on what the professor is saying, but I can’t help my mind from wandering and wondering what Anja dreamt about.

“You were the star,” she says when there’s the perfect break for a conversation.

“I hope I was good.”

“Very.” She grins. “It definitely gave me some ideas.”

“I look forward to finding out more about them.”

She gives me a look that makes me certain there are fun things in our future.

Though maybe we’ll skip the classroom next time.

CHAPTER 19



ANJA

I GROAN and rub my temples, already wondering how I'm going to be able to cope with Familiar Training as well as everything else.

I look up, unsurprised to find Thistle soaring above me. I don't think she's ever going to stop going off and doing her own thing, but she's definitely keeping an eye on me more.

"We need to go back up to the academy," I say to the sky.

She caws loudly.

"Oh, shhh," I tell her. "You're the one who is making me go through all of this." Even from this distance, I see her give me a look and she flies off.

"You'll get used to it," Nati promises.

I jump, not having expected to find my friend here. "What are you..."

"The snakes count as familiars," she responds. "Or they do to an extent. I'm not sure I buy it myself, but they're magically attached to me, so I suppose it counts."

I frown. "I think that makes sense?"

"It doesn't really. Are you ready to head to the dining room? I'm always starving after Familiar Training."

"What did they make you do?" I ask.

“Oh, just the normal stuff about controlling the snakes so they don’t eat people.”

“Is that likely?” I adjust the strap of my bag over my shoulder so it doesn’t dig in as much.

“Only if they don’t like you. But you’re safe.”

“I feel totally reassured.”

Nati lets out a bemused laugh and sets off towards the academy. “So what did you do?”

“Just bonding stuff. They won’t let me do anything else until I’ve mastered my bond with Thistle.”

“She seems pretty bonded to me,” Nati responds, watching as the raven swoops down and lands on my shoulder.

“Not according to any of the testers,” I murmur. “It’s fine.”

Thistle taps her beak against my shoulder and I raise my hand. She drops something onto it.

“Thank you,” I say, bringing the item closer to inspect it. The seashell must have come from the shore around the island, and is entrancingly beautiful. “I’ll put it with my other treasures,” I say to the raven.

She caws again and flaps her wings.

“Oh, so that’s what the bowl of random crap by your bed is,” Nati muses.

“It isn’t *random crap*, it’s treasure.”

Thistle caws in agreement then flaps her wings again.

“All right, go do your thing,” I say to the raven.

She doesn’t need telling twice and jumps into the air, flying away without a backward glance.

“Seems like she understands you just fine,” Nati says.

“Yeah, I can’t say I really understand any of this,” I admit. Despite my ancestors promising me that I’d understand my magic, the familiar part of it really hasn’t been easy to get used to.

We pass through the front doors and pass a group of four students with dark hair and pale skin.

I freeze, the feeling coming from the group is different than from what I can feel coming from Nati.

She keeps walking, only seeming to notice that I'm not with her when she's halfway down the corridor. She follows my gaze to where the group of students are heading into one of the classrooms.

I shake my head and hurry to catch up with my friend.

"Why the sudden interest in vampires? I thought you were all loved up already." She raises an eyebrow.

"I'm not loved up," I murmur, though I can tell that it's a lie. I haven't said the words out loud to anyone, least of all Cethin, but I can certainly feel them. "But wait, vampires?"

"Yeah. You've been here a couple of months already, surely you know how to spot a vampire?"

"I guess? I've never thought about it." I try to shake the feeling that I'm missing something, which is surprisingly easy given the way my stomach rumbles.

We pass into the dining hall and my gaze immediately lands on the table where Cethin normally sits with his friends.

He raises his hand and waves at me.

Nati sighs. "We've got to sit with them, haven't we?"

"We don't have to," I assure her. "Look, there are some free spots there."

"And have you spend all of lunch sneaking looks at your boyfriend?" She heads right over to them without giving me a chance to protest.

I shrug, not about to complain about the fact that I get to sit next to Cethin. I slide into the seat next to him and lean in to kiss him hello.

"Nathara, it's good to see you," Cethin's friend says.

She rolls her eyes, and I swear I hear Frank hiss from within her nest of snakes. “Lunch will go much better if you keep your mouth shut, Meic,” she responds.

“I don’t know, I’d think anything would be improved by my commentary.” He picks up an apple and bites into it.

Nati glares at him from across the table and I try to smother my amusement.

“Enjoying yourself?” Cethin asks.

“They don’t realise how amusing they are,” I respond softly.

“Mmm.”

Someone passes behind us giving off the same sense as the vampires before. I freeze, causing Cethin to look at me with concern written all over his face. “What is it?”

“I just got a weird vibe from some vampires and then again just now. It’s like they feel different from most people.” I frown. “It’s probably nothing.”

Cethin laughs, surprising me. “Or it’s just your magic.”

“I’m supposed to be able to prophecise death,” I point out. “Though all the research I’ve done seems to be suggesting that it’ll take years before I’ve mastered that ability.” I’m still not entirely sure if that’s a good thing or a bad one.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t already *sense* death,” he points out.

“Vampires aren’t...oh.”

“Yep.” He offers me a drink and I take it.

“You think it’s my banshee magic sensing that they’re kind of dead?”

“It makes sense. You were able to sense your hamster almost being dead when you were a kid.”

“Hmm, true.” I look around the room, trying to hone in on how each of the people surrounding me feels. My eyes widen as my gaze lands on Meic. He doesn’t feel the same way the

vampires do, but it's also not the same as what I feel coming from the others.

"Meic's a ghoul," Cethin supplies.

"How did you know what I was going to ask?"

"It was fairly obvious," he admits. "But there's your answer."

"Huh." I'm going to have to pay a lot more attention to the people around me if I want to hone this skill. I'm not sure precisely what I could use it for, but I suppose understanding my magic is important regardless of if I can think of a specific use for it.

"Are you free later?" Cethin asks.

I nod. "What did you have in mind? More breaking and entering classrooms?"

He chuckles. "Something much less likely to get us into trouble."

"I don't know whether to be disappointed or not."

He brushes his hand against my leg under the table. "I'd like to think you won't be disappointed." The way his voice dips makes me think it's full of the promise of what's to come.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Meet me by the statue of the sneezing gargoyle after dinner," he responds. "All will be revealed."

"I'm intrigued."

"You should be." He waggles his ears at me.

"I'm going to be trying to work out what you have planned all afternoon."

"I can give you a taste." Magic jumps from his fingers to my leg, sending a bolt of desire through me.

I let out a small gasp, having to hide it when several people look at me. "Bit my tongue," I lie.

Nati's expression says that she doesn't believe me, but that she also doesn't want to ask me for more information, but she

soon goes back to her verbal sparring match with Meic.

Cethin's amusement is written all over his face.

"That was mean," I chide him.

"But it'll give you something to think about during class." The corners of his lips curl up into a knowing smirk.

"And now you'll be thinking about what I'm thinking about," I tease. "Two can play at that game, Cethin."

"I've been thinking what you're thinking almost every moment since I met you," he responds.

A small shiver of desire travels through me at the idea. Later can't come soon enough.

My stomach rumbles and he pulls his hand away from my leg. "You should eat."

I nod. Though I have no idea how I'm going to be able to focus on food with some of the thoughts he's put in my head.

CHAPTER 20



ANJA

NERVOUS EXCITEMENT FILLS me as I make my way to the sneezing gargoyle statue. At first, I wasn't sure which one he meant, but when I passed it on the way to Ancient Runes earlier, I realised *exactly* the statue he meant.

My heart skips a beat the moment I see him standing by the statue.

He smiles at the sight of me and I hurry over. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me in a way that makes me feel like we're the only people in the world.

"What do you have planned?" I ask when I pull back.

"Follow me, and you'll find out." He takes my hand in his and leads me down a corridor I don't think I've ever been down before, only coming to a stop when we're in front of what looks almost like a door, but could just be an oddly shaped crevice.

"Where are we?"

"You said you wanted a bed for the whole night, right?" A devious expression crosses his face.

"I did..."

He pushes open a door and gestures for me to head inside.

My curiosity is almost as high as my trust in him, and I slip past, making sure to brush against him as I do.

A small gasp escapes me as I step into a small room with blankets and pillows spread all over the floor.

“Cethin...” I turn around to find him looking at me with a surprising amount of hunger in his eyes. “You didn’t have to do this.”

He closes the door behind him and seals it with a quick spell. “Believe me, I wanted to.” He steps closer and pulls me into his arms.

“Where even are we?”

“One of the many secret rooms the academy has,” he responds. “Luckily for us, I knew someone who knew someone who told me where one was.”

“That’s a very complicated way of getting to spend time with me.”

“But it’ll be worth every minute.” His voice drops low. “We don’t have to leave until the morning.”

“I hope you don’t plan on sleeping much,” I murmur against his lips.

“Not even a little.” He kisses me deeply, unrestrained desire pouring from him in waves and permeating every part of me.

I pull away, but only so I can unbutton my shirt and drop it to the floor.

“I was planning on doing that,” Cethin says, his eyes flashing purple.

“I’m saving time,” I respond, already a little breathless just from the way he’s looking at me. I drop my bra to the floor and push down my skirt and panties, only realising once I do that this is the first time he’s seen me naked.

I expect to feel exposed, or like I’m revealing something I shouldn’t, but that’s far from the way I’m feeling right now.

I sit on the pile of blankets, enjoying the way he’s watching me, feeling desired beyond any measure I’ve ever felt. I didn’t know I could feel like this, but I do.

Cethin seems to break out of a haze and strips off his clothes, coming to join me on the makeshift bed. I stare at his bare chest, reaching out to run my fingers over the dark grey skin. He doesn't say anything as I explore further down, finding him already hard and ready.

I run my fingers over him, exploring each of the ridges and grooves. I haven't been able to stop thinking about how they felt inside me, and what it would be like to feel them again.

Cethin lets out a low groan.

I continue my exploration, seeming to find a particularly sensitive spot.

"You're going to have to stop that," he murmurs.

"This?" I ask with as much innocence as I can, repeating the motion as I do.

A low growl rips from his throat. "Anja."

"Yes?" I bite my lip, knowing exactly why he's saying my name.

"I need you."

I suck in a sharp breath and pull my hand away, nodding.

I lean in and brush my lips against mine. He tangles his hand in my hair and draws me closer, deepening the kiss and leaving no doubt about how much he wants me. Not that I had any. He's made it *very* clear how he feels, and I have every intention of making the most of it.

He breaks the kiss and reaches to the side. For a moment, I'm confused about what he's doing until he shows me the condom packet.

I bite my lip and nod even as he opens the packet and rolls it onto himself.

I don't give him time to do anything else and straddle him, reaching down to guide him into me. I sink onto him and gasp at the way he fills me. I can feel every inch of him, and every ridge. I start to move, but only slowly otherwise I think I

might explode from the pressure. The release is already building within me, desperate to get free.

Cethin places his hands on my hips to guide me, but I don't manage to maintain concentration for long enough to build up a steady rhythm.

He shifts and flips us over so I'm lying beneath him. His eyes glow even deeper purple than I think I've ever seen before. I wrap my legs around his waist, letting out a loud groan at just how well he fills me.

He starts moving with an almost punishing speed, as if he's desperate to have me. I can feel that same need growing inside me.

My vision goes unfocused and all I can concentrate on is the feel of his body against mine and the way we fit together.

"Not yet," I murmur as my release threatens to tip over the edge.

Cethin manages to let out a throaty laugh. "I can..." He trails off, but I can feel the tingle of his magic where his hand brushes against my leg. I don't need to ask him what he's done, I can feel the release building higher within me but not taking over, letting me enjoy it for longer.

My whole body is kind of fuzzy in the best possible way. I rake my nails down his back and he lets out a low growl, the sound vibrating through me and only sending me higher until I can't take any more.

"Now," I whisper. "Please."

I'm dimly aware of the brush of his hand against my arm, but I'm overtaken by the breaking of the dam and the intensity of the pleasure ripping through me.

I grasp at Cethin's arm, wanting more and more until the world goes black and all I can focus on is how good it feels.

He lets out a low cry as he thrusts into me for the final time and I know he's found his release along with mine.

He collapses back onto the blanket and the two of us lie there for a moment, unable to say anything.

I roll onto my side when I finally feel as if I've regained the ability to speak. "Hey."

"Hi," he responds. "Are you okay?"

"Mmhm. More than okay." I look at him with what I hope is obviously emotion. "That was amazing."

He chuckles, looking at me with adoration in his eyes, the haze of lust gone, though I suspect that it will be back before long. "It was."

"We can do it again, right?"

"I plan on doing that many more times before morning," he promises. "Were you okay with the magic?"

"I asked for it," I point out, shifting closer so I can trail my fingers over his chest.

"I thought that was what you were getting at."

"Words weren't exactly coming."

"You were, though," he teases.

I laugh. "Yes, I was."

"You're beautiful when you fall apart."

"You always think I'm beautiful," I point out.

"Mmm, that's true." He pulls me into his arms and I nestle into him, enjoying the warmth of lying next to me.

"Mine," he murmurs against the top of my head.

"Yes," I respond softly. "And you're mine."

"For as long as I live."

I sigh, knowing that even if we technically have to sleep apart because of the dorm rules, this is still the first of many nights in his arms.

EPILOGUE



ANJA

THE SECRET ROOM is surprisingly cosy with all its blankets and pillows, especially considering we only get to set it up for a night at a time. Not that I'm complaining when the alternative is that we don't get to spend *any* nights in the same bed.

I stretch out my legs and lean against Cethin as I read over the final section of our essay for Professor Wainwright, enjoying the simplicity of working with him, even if we're up against a tight deadline.

"I can't believe we ended up doing this so last minute," I grumble, correcting a couple of mistakes we've made. "It's due in a couple of days."

He lets out a bemused laugh. "We've been busy."

"Mmm, you keep ripping my clothes off every chance you get."

"It was *one* button."

"That was my favourite button." I flash him a teasing smile so he knows I'm not being serious. I set down my tablet and shift onto my knees beside him.

"You had everything that was going on with your magic too," he reminds me.

"Mmm, but it's under control now."

“No more dreams?” Concern fills his eyes and is almost enough to distract me from his bare chest.

“I still get them, but they’re different,” I promise him. “They’re more peaceful. It’s hard to explain.” But I don’t wake up screaming from them any more. It’s like they’re just part of coming to terms with exactly how my magic works even if it will still be years until I can fully use it.

“Good.” He reaches up to cup my cheek and draws me to him to kiss me deeply.

I return it, even though I know we should be focusing on finishing our essay.

“Cethin,” I murmur against his lips.

“Ten-minute break,” he responds, his words vibrating through me.

“No. But only because you know it won’t be ten minutes.” I force myself to sit back.

“I’m blaming you, have I told you how good you look wearing only my shirt?” He looks me up and down, the desire in his gaze making my pulse race and my blood heat.

My lips quirk up into a teasing smile. “How else am I going to stop you from wearing it?”

He lets out a bemused laugh. “Temptress.”

“You’re the one who took it off. I just took advantage of the situation.” I bite my lip at the memory of just why he’d done that and what had come after. One of *many* ten-minute breaks. “Maybe we should have gone to the library to do this instead of a secret room.”

“No way. This is a *much* better place to study.” He picks up the book he’s checking as one of our references and pretends to read.

“I do like it. No one can disturb us here.” I don’t know precisely what deal he’s made to make sure we can use the private space when we want, but I’m grateful for it. It would be too hard to wait for stolen moments when we can get them.

I want to know that I don't have to leave him for the whole night.

“Oh, Mum sent some more gingerbread cake for you.” He picks up the tin and holds it out to me. “I meant to tell you when we got here, but...”

“I know what happened.” I take the tin from him and pull off the lid. The sweet scent of the gingerbread spices fills the air and I pick up a piece and take a bite. “Mmm, your mum is a cake genius.”

“I'll tell her you said that.” He takes one for himself and starts eating it.

I blush and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. It's still weird to think that he talks to his mum about me, especially when I'm yet to meet her. Though I suppose that'll change soon when I visit over the holidays.

I pick up my tablet and start reading through our essay for what feels like the fiftieth time. Despite the fact we've written it, I'm still not sure I understand the point of teaching evil in the curriculum. Maybe it's something I'll learn in time.

I finish my slice of cake and realise that I'm reading the same words over several times and none of it is going in. I sigh and put down the tablet, turning to Cethin.

He raises an eyebrow. “Ten-minute break?”

“Maybe twenty,” I respond.

He draws me to him and kisses me, the taste of ginger and cinnamon lingering on his lips, feeding a different kind of hunger within me. We break apart and I trail my hand down his chest, enjoying the way it feels to touch his bare skin.

“Have you ever heard a banshee scream?” I ask.

“I have a feeling I'm going to,” he responds, his eyes glowing purple as he looks at me with obvious desire written all over his face.

“Only if you make me.” I lean in and brush my lips against his. He captures them and deepens the kiss.

I melt into him, knowing that no matter how much I still have to learn about my banshee magic, I'll have someone by my side who will help me. And what more could I ask for from my mate?

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Laura is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal, fantasy, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance. When she's not writing, she drinks a lot of tea, tries to resist French macarons, and works towards a diploma in Egyptology. She lives in the UK, where most of her books are set. Laura specialises in quick reads, whether you're looking for a swoonworthy romance for the bath, or an action-packed adventure for your latest journey, you'll find the perfect match amongst her books!