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LAURA GREENWOOD



TEAM BUILDING  
FOR  
FRIENDLY  
HELLHOUNDS

# TEAM BUILDING FOR FRIENDLY HELLHOUNDS

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OBSCURE ACADEMY #9

LAURA GREENWOOD

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## BLURB

### **Two hellhounds walk into a team-building exercise...**

When Evie's cheer squad goes on a team-building weekend, the last thing she expects is to make a connection with a fellow hellhound.

Ceb didn't know what to expect from the event, but it certainly wasn't a gorgeous cheerleader challenging him to a bet that would change everything.

Will the two of them give in to the romance building between them? And can they put their teamwork to good use for the upcoming Hell Scramble?

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*Team Building For Friendly Hellhounds is a light-hearted shifter academy m/f romance set at Obscure Academy. It features a chance meeting between two hellhounds that grows into more.*

*If you enjoy upbeat and light-hearted paranormal romances with new adult characters, an academy/university setting, guaranteed happy endings, and quirky supernaturals, start the Obscure Academy today!*

# ONE



## EVIE

THERE ARE lots of things I've been looking forward to about the start of the summer term at Obscure Academy, but our first cheer practice is *not* one of them.

The moment I step through the door and I spy the steely expression on Zara's face, I wonder if it might have been better to stay home after all.

I hurry to the back of the room, heading straight towards Amanda, sitting down beside her.

"You thought better of skipping practice?" she says.

"You know I wasn't really considering it," I respond. "Though I'm dreading this."

"I think we all are," Grace responds as she passes us to take a seat next to Henry. The other cheerleader puts his arm around her and I raise an eyebrow. It seems as if they've graduated from weirdly winding each other up all the time to something more.

I suppose it was only a matter of time, they were very obvious in their attraction.

“I hope Zara’s forgiven me,” Mandy says.

“She will have,” Grace assures her. “I’m pretty sure she’s still blaming me more for getting my wings out.”

I close my eyes and try to forget the incident that cost us in the last round of our cheer competition. After Mandy’s wings came out when she started to fall, Grace did the right thing by trying to make it look like it was on purpose, but Zara doesn’t seem to agree with the rest of us about that.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Mandy mutters, looking at the ice-blonde captain standing at the front of the room with her arms crossed looking as if we’re all the most disappointing group of cheerleaders she’s ever seen.

“Third place isn’t *that* bad,” I point out. “We’re moving onto the final round.”

“Yeah, but if we don’t win, Zara’ll end up shifting and burning us to a crisp,” Grace responds. “This is her final chance for the trophy before she graduates.”

“She might decide to stay on and do a Master’s so she can stay and try next year,” I say.

Mandy groans. “Don’t you dare put ideas in her head, Evie.”

“I don’t think she’s going to stick around *just* for cheerleading,” I point out.

“You hear horror stories about it all the time from other squads.”

“It never actually happens.” I glance over to the captain again and start questioning whether that’s true or not. I don’t think Zara is *completely* obsessed with cheer, but she does seem to have become a demon about it, especially when the

inter-academy competition comes up. She really wants to win, and it's become clear to me that she'll do almost anything to have that happen.

Including pushing us to the limits. If I didn't love the sport so much, I'd think twice about whether I want to continue. But as it stands, I love everything about it.

The rest of the squad enter the room, and a flustered Krissi makes her way to sit between me and Grace.

"Everything all right?" Grace asks her best friend.

Krissi sighs. "Too many flatmates with too many friends," she mutters.

Grace lets out a small snort of amusement. "At least you can come to cheer practice to get away from them."

"Which would be fine if we were actually going to practise, but it doesn't look like Zara has that planned for us."

"Mmm, she looks more like she's going to give us a lecture," I say. "I wish we were doing a normal practice though, I was a bit lax over the holidays and didn't do as much working out as I should do."

"Me neither," the leopard shifter agrees. "I kept meaning to, but there was so much to do, and so many people to catch up with. It's a miracle I got my coursework done."

I let out a small groan. "Don't remind me. I'm still behind on mine. I'm going to need every weekend between now and when exams start to work on it if I'm going to finish before the deadlines."

"Maybe we should set up some study sessions," Grace says. "We can buy some pizza and all keep each other focused so we don't get distracted."



A soft snort escapes me. “You think we won’t distract each other?”

“It’s less likely than if we’re all on our own. I don’t know about you, but my flatmates certainly know how to make a lot of inviting noise. And we *all* know what Krissi’s flat’s like. They’re the party flat.”

“Don’t remind me,” Krissi mutters. “I thought it was great at the start of the year, but with exams approaching? Maybe not so much.”

“Ah, so you’re going to start avoiding parties like you avoided admitting you had the hots for Jeremy at the beginning of the year?” Grace asks with a teasing note in her voice.

“I didn’t have the hots for Jeremy.”

I laugh without meaning to, gaining myself a withering look from the other cheerleader. “Sorry, it’s just that I didn’t know you very well then and I remember making a bet with Mandy about how long it’d take you to hook up.”

Her cheeks flame red in response. “We never hooked up.”

Grace raises an eyebrow. “Ah, you’re going to play the loving relationship card.”

“And just what do you call what you have with Henry?” Krissi throws back.

Panic crosses the pixie’s face and she glances back at him. Thankfully for Grace, he seems to be caught up in his own conversation.

“Don’t use that word,” she whispers hastily. “We haven’t said it.”

“I’m sorry,” Krissi says quietly. “I didn’t realise, you said it was going well.”

“It is,” Grace responds. “But we’re just not there yet, it’s no big deal.”

The way she says it suggests that it might be a big deal. But while we’ve become friends since the last round of the competition, I don’t think I’m close enough to her to ask for more details just yet.

“All right, everyone!” Zara calls from the front of the room, effectively cutting off any chances for further conversation. “Now that you’re all here, we’re going to have a talk about the plans for this term.” She clicks a button and the projector whirs into life, revealing a timetable that looks suspiciously full. And far too busy for the final term of the year.

If the murmurs around the room are anything to go by, I don’t think I’m the only one that thinks that.

“Settle down,” Zara says firmly.

It falls quiet. I’m not sure precisely what it is about her, but she always manages to get everyone to do what she wants.

“We did terribly in the last round...”

“We came third,” Jazz says.

Zara glares at her. “Third is bad. If we’d lost ten more points, we wouldn’t have made it through to the next round of the competition. We’re lucky that we didn’t lose more because of Grace.” She flashes the pixie a stern look.

Grace sinks back into her chair.

“That’s not quite fair,” I say. “There were lots of mistakes that led to Mandy falling.”

For a moment, I think Zara is going to take out her anger on me, but she lets out a long breath, seemingly calming her. “No matter whose fault it is, what’s clear is that we’ve failed in working effectively as a team. That’s why I’ve signed us up for a team-building weekend.”

Fabio groans from his seat in the front row. “We don’t have time for that.”

“If you don’t, it’s fine. But I’ll be basing routine assignments based on who puts the time in,” she reminds us.

I sigh and lean back in my chair. “I guess that means we’re going.”

“Only if we care about what parts we get in the routine,” Mandy says.

“I do,” I respond. “I don’t want to be sidelined.”

“It might be fun too,” Krissi says. “I did a team-building thing like that for a school trip once and it was actually pretty good.”

“See, it’ll be fun.” I gently nudge Mandy.

She sighs. “Fine, so long as it’s not too expensive.”

At least that means I’m going to have one of my best friends by my side. It’ll be so much better with her there.

In fact, I’d actually say that I’m almost looking forward to it.

## TWO



### EVIE

A LIGHT SHEEN of drizzle hits me the moment I step off the bus, and I start to regret coming to the team building after all.

“Eurgh, rain? Seriously?” Mandy mutters as she joins me. “It shouldn’t be raining at this time of the year.”

“It’s May, it’s going to rain for months yet,” I point out.

She sighs. “I’m regretting coming already.”

“No, you’re not. Come on, let’s go see where our bunks are.” I thread my arm through hers and head over to where the rest of the Sapphire Sparks are starting to gather. I have to admit that I’m impressed by how many of them Zara has managed to convince to actually come, especially with how miserable it’s turning out to be.

I lead Mandy over to where Krissi and Grace are waiting, the pixie seeming just as displeased as Mandy does about the weather.

“I don’t think I’ve brought the right shoes for this,” she moans as we get to them.

“What did you bring?” I ask.

“Just trainers. I should have gone home last weekend and nabbed Mum’s walking boots, at least then my feet wouldn’t get as cold,” Grace responds.

“It might clear up. I’m sure they’re not going to have us doing our first activity on a Friday evening.” Though I can’t say I actually have much experience with these kinds of things.

Before any of them can respond, another bus with the Obscure Academy logo painted on the side pulls up.

“I thought everyone was here already,” Krissi says.

I do a quick head count. “I think we are. Maybe one of the other teams had the same ideas as Zara. Did Jeremy say anything?”

She shakes her head. “He’s gone to the Shifter Court this weekend.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Why would he do that?”

“He’s the Shifter Queen’s ex,” Grace supplies.

Krissi rolls her eyes. “It’s not like that.”

Her friend gives her a disbelieving look. “How exactly is it *not* that? They were almost engaged.”

“Wait, isn’t Jeremy our age?” Mandy asks.

“He’s a second year, so yes, he’s our age,” Krissi responds. “It was a whole thing. There’s nothing between them and they’re just friends. He’s friends with the Queen’s fiancé too, if that’s of interest.”

“I’m impressed,” I admit. “I know hellhounds don’t fall under the Shifter Court, but everyone knows how impressive the Shifter Queen is.”

Krissi stares at me.

“I’ve never told you I’m a hellhound before, have I?”

“No, you didn’t mention that,” she says.

“That’s a lot cooler than a pixie,” Grace says.

I shrug. “Not really. I’m not the kind of hellhound who can produce flames in my human form or anything like that.” I raise my fingers and snap them to prove that nothing will happen. Or I assume that’ll be the case. I suppose there’s the slightest chance that I’ll suddenly have developed magic I’ve never had and none of my family have access to. Stranger things have happened.

“I didn’t realise there were different kinds of hellhounds in the first place,” Krissi admits. “Though it makes sense.”

“Does it?” Grace asks. “There aren’t different kinds of pixies.”

“Yes, but you fall under fae,” I point out. “And look how many different subspecies of those there are.”

“Mmm, okay, point taken.”

The bus doors hiss and our attention is diverted to the new arrivals, along with just about everyone else. I think we’re all curious about who might be coming.

Several people get off the bus, chatting amicably with one another.

“Recognise any of them?” I ask.

“No, but the one on the left is hot,” Grace says.

I give her a weird look. “What happened to your boyfriend?”



“Nothing. But I can look, especially when I have single friends.” She winks at me. “Though I’ll admit, I don’t know if you’re into guys.”

“I am.”

“Oh good.” A wicked smile spreads over her face. “What do you think?” She nods towards the guy in question.

I look over at him. “He’s good-looking and all, but that’s not exactly the top thing I look for a person to date.”

“Cleverly worded,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “So you’re an anyone girl?”

I chuckle. “Yep. What’s in someone’s pants is the least important thing for me.”

Grace nods. “Good to know.”

“Should I be worried?” I ask Krissi.

“Honestly, a little bit,” she responds.

Grace rolls her eyes. “Please, I’m an excellent matchmaker.”

Krissi lets out an amused snort.

Zara calls for attention, saving her from Grace’s retort. “All right, everyone, listen up. We’ve got the two buildings to the left, the Chess Club has the building to the right.” She gestures to each in turn.

Grace raises an eyebrow. “Chess Club has come for a team building weekend?”

“I think they compete in tournaments,” I say, though in reality, I have no idea how that would work. Do they all earn points for their team, or is it more of a free-for-all? I guess I

might have a chance to find out if we end up spending any time with them.

“All right, go find your bunk, and we’ll be meeting with the camp leader in an hour to get our timetables,” Zara says.

“Guess we should go find our beds,” I say, shifting my bag on my shoulder and setting off in the direction of the sleeping building along with the others.

“Hopefully we can get good ones. I don’t want to get landed with a top bunk,” Grace says.

“You can fly,” Krissi responds.

“So? You’re a cat, you always land on your feet.”

“You know that’s not true,” Krissi responds.

I shake my head in bemusement and turn to Mandy. “Do you think we sound like that?”

“No way, we’re much more civilised.”

I let out an amused laugh. “True. Hey, you okay? You look worried.”

She sighs. “I am. What if Zara still blames me for what happened in the last round of the competition?”

I curse our captain silently. “Look, it wasn’t just your fault. If Nini hadn’t lost her footing, Asher wouldn’t have been distracted, and you wouldn’t have nearly fallen and ended up having to use your wings to steady yourself. And if none of that had happened, Grace wouldn’t have gotten *hers* out to try and cover the issue. As far as I can see, that’s four members of the team who caused us to lose points, and that’s without whatever happened to make Nini lose her footing, I’ll admit I wasn’t watching her very much.”

“I can’t say you’re doing much to reassure me,” Mandy mutters. “You’re saying it’s my fault.”

“I’m saying these things happen. Zara is just being Zara and being hard on everyone as a result. But she’ll get over it, and then we’ll be able to focus on what really matters. Winning the championship.”

“Do you really think we’re capable of it?”

I shrug. “We have months of practice ahead of us before the finals,” I point out. “And most of us are here and willing to put the effort into making sure we’re working better as a team. I think we stand as good a chance as ever at winning.” I’m not sure how much I believe that, but only time will tell whether I’m being truthful with myself.

“I hope you’re right, Evie.”

“How often am I wrong?”

“*All* the time,” Mandy reminds me.

“That’s fair. But this time, I’m not. I’m sure of it.” If I keep saying it, then it’s going to become true. And even if it doesn’t, the fun is supposed to be in taking part, and I certainly still get to enjoy that.

## THREE



## CEB

“HEY, CEB, ARE YOU COMING?” Bennett calls.

“Yeah, one sec.” I finish tying my laces and hurry to my feet and out of the building. My neck’s stiff from sleeping in a weird position, but I know it’ll wear off as the day goes on.

Either that, or I’ll sneak off to the woods around the retreat and have a quick shift. That normally sorts out this kind of thing for me.

“Which checkpoint are we going to?” I ask.

“C, I think. We’re joining one of the other groups.”

“The cheerleaders?” Ingrid asks.

“Yeah, I think so,” Bennett responds. “I’m surprised they’re here.”

“Why? They have to work as a team in order to do their routines,” I say. “It makes perfect sense that they’re here.” Potentially more than it does for us to be here. We’re yet to win anything, but from the rumours around campus, they’ve brought home a couple of trophies already this year.”

“Which is more than some of the other sports teams,” Bennett adds.

“I’m not sure what that has to do with anything,” Ingrid responds. “I’m still not sure why we have to partner with them.”

I shrug. “I don’t see a problem with it.”

“You wouldn’t. They’re hot girls in short skirts,” she mutters.

“Hopefully hot guys in no shirts too,” Bennett responds with a twinkle in his eye.

I let out a soft snort. “I doubt any of them will be wearing their uniforms anyway.”

We turn the corner to checkpoint C and I’m proven right by the fellow students standing waiting for us, without a single pom pom in sight.

“All right, that seems like we have everyone here,” the instructor says, clapping his hands together. “As you can see, there are six of you from each of the groups attending the team building weekend. So I want you to pair up with someone from the other group, and make sure it’s someone you’ve never met before.”

Ingrid groans from beside me.

“It’ll be fun,” I tell her.

“Yeah, yeah.” She waves me off and heads towards one of the guys.

Another approaches Bennett, leaving me to look for a partner alone.

“Hey,” a voice says from behind me.

I turn around to find a pretty cheerleader standing there with her light-pink hair scraped back in a ponytail and an uncertain smile on her face.

“So, we need to partner up,” she says. “Unless you have someone already.”

“Nope, free and single.”

She raises an eyebrow, making me realise what I’ve said.

“That’s not quite what I meant.”

“Isn’t it?” Her lips quirk up into a knowing smile. “I’m Evie.” She holds out her hand.

I take it and shake firmly. “Ceb.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“All right, is anyone without a partner?” the instructor calls.

I look around, noticing that everyone seems to have found someone to work with. Bennett gives me a thumbs up from a few feet away, already seeming happy with his partner. Ingrid isn’t so pleased and is standing next to a dark-haired girl, with her arms crossed and a moody expression on her face.

Hopefully, her partner will prove that she’s got nothing to worry about and that this is going to be fun. Otherwise, I’m going to have to try avoiding Ingrid when we have rest hours.

“As I’m sure you’ll have been able to guess from the set-up behind me, this is going to be a blindfolded assault course.”

Evie gasps.

I give her a curious look.



“Sorry, I’ve just always wanted to do one of these, they seem so fun.”

“Even with someone you don’t know being the one guiding you?” I ask.

“The first week I came to Obscure Academy, I let a complete stranger throw me into the air with the understanding that they’d catch me just to prove I was capable of doing the trick. This is nothing.”

“Maybe you can fly,” I say.

“Nope, no wings. Apparently, I’m just reckless.”

“Then I’ll do my best to guide you in a way that doesn’t get you hurt.”

“Perhaps I should go first, then if you make me trip over something, I know that I can get my revenge.” There’s a twinkle in her eyes that suggests she’s going to make sure that happens.

“All right, deal.”

“We should try not to be the first up, though,” she says. “We want to see where other people are making their mistakes first and learn how to avoid them.”

“Smart. But won’t we just make a different mistake then?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Probably. But hopefully, the people who come after us will be able to learn from that,” she says. “Are you competitive?” she asks.

“Reasonably. Why?”

“Because I want the best time.”

I chuckle. “So that’s a *very* for you.”

“I’ve been a competitive cheerleader for five years. You don’t stick it out that long if you’re not a little motivated by competition.”

“Even if it’s a team sport?”

“Especially then. I don’t know how things work in Chess Club, but we’re all still competing against one another up until the final positions in a routine are announced, and then it’s all about pulling together and working through it. You’ll find that most of us are very competitive, but we also know when to work together.”

“I don’t think Chess Club is like that at all. “

Evie raises an eyebrow. “Really? So you’re trying to tell me that you’re not all competing for the best spot on the team? And the best competitors in a competition setting. Though admittedly, I have no idea how that works.” She tilts her head to the side, appearing to be genuinely curious.

“It depends on the competition set-up,” I admit. “Some are about gaining an individual ranking, some are about overall team rating.”

“Interesting. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe that you think you don’t know, but that you secretly know precisely which you like best. Oh look, the first pair are up.” She nods towards the assault course where Bennett is approaching blindfolded.

“How do you think this is going to go?”

“That depends how well your friend follows instructions,” she says.

“I think he’s okay at it.”

“Then everything is down to how well Fabio can give them.” Her gaze flits across to the guy Bennett is partnered with.

“What do you think?” A part of me is curious about what she’ll say, but the rest of me just wants to make sure we carry on our conversation.

“I think they’ll make it through the first three obstacles, but the stepping stones will cause an issue for them and your friend will end up in the water.”

I raise an eyebrow. “That’s a very specific prediction.”

“We can bet on it, if you like?”

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“We each take bets on where each of the teams will end the assault course, the person who gets it right gets a point. Whichever one of us has the most at the end gets a forfeit,” she says.

“What kind of forfeit?”

Mischief glitters in her eyes. “I don’t know. The loser has to run around the lake three times. No shifting allowed.”

“How do you know I can shift?”

“Lucky guess.” She reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

A loud splash pulls my attention away from her and towards the obstacle course where Bennet is sprawled in the water, soaked through.

“Point to me,” she says. “I hope you like running.”

“There are eleven more people to go.”

“Nine. We can’t bet on ourselves, we could just mess up on purpose that way.”

I chuckle. “Damn, you ruined my plan. All right, next up. I think they’re going to get over the wall, but then they’re going to end up accidentally leaving the course.”

“Oh, that’s a good one,” Evie responds. “I think they’ll make it the whole way.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Grace doesn’t like to lose.” She nods towards the blonde taking her position at the beginning of the assault course. “Unless you think your teammate is going to steer her wrong.”

“You’re not going to psych me out. I’m sticking to my gut.”

“It’s your loss,” she sing-songs.

I find myself smiling widely. This is fun, even if we’re not really doing anything other than waiting for our turn and taking guesses on when people are going to fail.

“Oh look, I’m four up now,” Evie says after half the group have taken their turn.

“So you are,” I respond. “But the question is whether our bet extends to just this activity, or every time we end up in the same one.”

“That’s fighting talk.” A small smile quirks at the side of her lips. “And it feels like a challenge.”

“I’m game if you are.”

“Then we’re on. It’s the end of the weekend that counts, not just the end of this activity,” she responds. “But just so you know, it’s not going to change anything. I’m still going to win.”

“That’s what you think.” Despite hardly knowing her, I find myself already hoping that we end up in the same group for other activities.

“Evie, Ceb, you’re up next,” the instructor says, breaking through my thoughts. “Which of you is blindfolded?”

We look at each other, and Evie smiles. “I will be.” She steps forward and takes the blindfold from him. “Will you do the honours?” she asks me.

I nod.

She turns her back to me, and I step closer so I can tie the blindfold around her eyes.

“Can you see?”

“If I could, do you think I’d say yes?”

“I don’t, actually.”

“Then you know me better than people I’ve hung out with for years,” she responds. “Lead me to the starting line?” She holds out her hand.

I slip mine into it, trying not to think about how good it feels to hold her hand.

“There’s a rock to your left sticking out of the ground, be careful,” I warn.

“I see we’re off to a good start,” she quips. “Keep going like this and you might just manage to get me around the whole course.”

“That’s what I’m going to try to do.”

“Faster than everyone else did.”

“You’re asking for a lot, Evie.”

“Then I just hope you can deliver,” she responds with a smile.

I chuckle. “All right, enough talking, more walking.”

“How can I do that without you giving me any instructions?” she retorts.

I glance over at the instructor.

“Go,” he calls.

“Okay, so you need to take three steps forward,” I start, instructing Evie across each of the obstacles. To begin with, I’m surprised that she follows my instructions, but then I remember that she’s said at every turn that she wants to be the fastest and the best at the whole thing.

It turns out she meant it.

She wobbles as she steps onto the first plank that crosses the small puddle of dirty water and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from calling out and distracting her from regaining her balance. I’ve seen it happen three times already today, and I’m not going to make the same mistake.

It takes five minutes and thirty-three seconds, but Evie crosses the finish line with a satisfied smile on her face. She tugs the blindfold off and heads over to me, holding out her hand for a high-five.

I return it.

“We’re a good team,” she says. “And all that watching helped.”



“Ah, that was part of your strategy,” I say, understanding dawning on me.

“How else was I going to make sure you paid attention?”

“I feel like you could have just asked,” I point out.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Her question is one I don’t have an answer for, because there’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that I’ve had a lot of fun doing this, and I hope we get to do something like it again.

## FOUR



### EVIE

I CROSS the camp to the communal hall where we're all able to hang out now that activities are over for the day with Mandy by my side.

"I hope they have a vending machine," she mumbles. "I'm starving."

I frown. "You okay? You don't normally get so hungry."

"It's nothing to worry about." She glances away, clearly trying to evade the question.

It's weird, but I let it slide. Maybe she's not talking about her food-hunger anyway.

I scan the room, only realising once I spot Ceb setting up a chess board on the table at the back that he's the one I've been looking for.

"I'm going to go find food," Mandy says. "Have fun." She gives me a knowing smile.

For a moment, I consider trying to argue, but decide against it. I weave my way through the assembled people and towards the back.

“Need someone to play against?” I ask.

Ceb looks in my direction, surprised delight crossing his face. “Hey, Evie.”

“So, do you have an opponent?”

“You know how to play?”

I let out a soft snort. “It’s just normal chess, right? No strange rules.”

“Just chess.”

“Then you’ll find my skills perfectly adequate.” I sit down and wait for him to do the same.

“You’re full of surprises.”

“I shouldn’t be, you already know I’m good at analysing. That’s why we were the only team that was good enough to get both of us through the assault course.”

“That was impressive,” he admits, taking a seat. “White or black?”

“White has a built-in advantage, so I’ll be black.”

He chuckles. “So you’re going to play against a member of the chess team *and* take a purposeful disadvantage?”

“I like a challenge. Besides, you don’t know me very well. I could be a chess grandmaster who retired at the age of fourteen because there was no one fun left to beat.”

“I suspect you’re not.” He moves one of his pawns into position.

“No. I’m not. But that doesn’t mean you should underestimate me.” I consider for a moment, then move one of my own.

“I may not know you well, but I *do* know not to do that.”

“Good. Then this should be an interesting game.” I move a pawn that will allow me to get one of my knights onto the field. It’s a risky strategy, but one that I find can be quite successful when done correctly.

My chances of winning against Ceb are slim, but that’s not my primary aim of playing anyway. If I’m completely honest with myself, I simply enjoyed his company earlier and want more of it.

“So, Grand Master Evie, how did you get into the game?”

“Wouldn’t that be giving away my secrets?”

“Perhaps that’s what I’m trying to do.” He slides one of his bishops into place and nods at me to indicate my turn.

“No secret. Dad realised I liked this kind of thing when I was little and taught me to play. It’s what we used to do on Sunday afternoons.”

“That’s sweet.”

“It was,” I agree. “What about you, how did you start playing chess?”

“The story is nowhere near as wholesome,” he warns me.

“Ah, so no made-for-TV movie about you then,” I quip.

Ceb chuckles, a warm sound that I want to hear more of. “I very much doubt it. Then again, can you imagine how adorable it’d be for them to animate a baby hellhound?”

“You’re a hellhound?” I can’t keep the surprise out of my voice.

“Yeah, is that weird?”

“Yes and no.” I move my bishop into position, though I’m reasonably sure I’m going to lose the match, I’m not paying enough attention to what I’m doing. But I don’t mind, I’m enjoying the company more than the game anyway. “It’s just funny because I’m a hellhound too.”

He raises an eyebrow. “That is surprising, I didn’t think there were that many at the academy.”

“Probably a few dozen or so. But yeah, it’s strange that we both ended up here at the same time.”

“It is.”

“So, how did you get into chess?”

“I hated the rain when I was a kid, I still don’t like it much now, but I can go out in it. So I used to go into the library and watch the older kids play chess. At some point, they decided to teach me, and that’s how I started to play.”

“That’s adorable,” I respond.

“It is?”

“The idea of a tiny you playing chess is.” I cock my head to the side and study him.

“This is the weirdest kind of flirting I’ve ever encountered.” He takes my bishop, just like I intended for him to do.

“Who said I was flirting?” I respond, quickly removing his piece with my knight.

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

Surprise flits over his face.

“What? You didn’t expect me to be honest?”

“I don’t know what I expected,” he admits. “I can safely say that none of my expectations for this weekend involved this.”

I let out a light laugh. “Okay, that’s fair. I just expected to get a bit muddy. But other than that, I don’t think I had anything in mind. I certainly didn’t think I’d be playing chess against someone I just met.”

“I like to keep things interesting,” Ceb responds.

My lips quirk up into a smile. “I’m sure you do.”

He moves his queen into position. “That’s checkmate, by the way. Point to me.”

“Are you seriously adding this to our point total?”

“Of course. You’re winning at the moment, I need all the help I can get.” He grins widely and starts moving his pieces back into position.

“So if I’d won the game, you wouldn’t have said I’d get a point?”

“You’ll never know, but if you want a chance to win some points back, we can play another game.”

“I can’t decide if you’re trying to spend more time with me, or if you just want a chance to beat me in our bet,” I joke, not really minding the answer when the results are the same.

“Can’t it be both?”

“I suppose it can. But you’ve got a lot of points to make up...”

“Last I checked, I was only trailing by five.”

“So you’re proposing we play five games of chess?”

“I only need four more until we’re even.” He turns the board around. “You should start this time.”

I move one of the pawns without arguing, appreciating that he’s giving up the slight advantage of being the person who opens the game. I know it’s probably not going to make a difference considering how much more experienced he is than me, but that’s not the point.

A loud cheer comes from across the room and I twist around to see that Henry and Fabio have just beaten two of the others at Jenga.

A smile spreads over my face. It’s nice to see everyone relaxing. I haven’t spent much time with anyone outside of practice other than Amanda, which makes me realise that Zara is right about us needing this in order to pull together better as a team.

“Is your friend all right?” Ceb asks.

“Erm...” I search the room for Mandy and find her chatting with some of the others. I wave at her and she glances my way. She picks up her phone and waggles it at me. “I think so, one sec.”

“Sure.”

I pull out my phone and click on our chat. I chuckle. “She’s just being a typical friend, and telling me not to do anything she wouldn’t.”

“That doesn’t tell me much. For all I know, she could be a harpy and want to scratch my eyes out.”

I snort. “I doubt any harpy would do that. But no, she’s a succubus.”

He raises an eyebrow.

My cheeks flush. “She’s not suggesting that,” I say quickly.

“You’re the one whose mind went there,” he reminds me.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.” I move one of my pieces and try to think of the best way out of it.

“If it makes you feel better, you’re not the only one,” he says, a grin spreading over his face.

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re going to tell me that it’s a shame we’re staying in shared dorms and we’re not back at the academy with our own private rooms.”

“Well, that’s true, but not for the reason you think. I hate sharing a bathroom with so many people,” he responds.

I chuckle. “You’re right, that’s not the reason I thought you were going to say.”

His lopsided grin only makes him more endearing to me. “I mean, there are other advantages.”

“I’d be interested in hearing them once we’re back at the academy.”

“I think that can be arranged. That’s checkmate again, by the way.”

“Well played,” I say, though if I’m honest, I have absolutely no idea how the game went, I was barely paying any attention to anything other than him. “You have a chance of winning our bet yet.”

“There’s still time to claw it back,” he responds.

“Then let’s hope we get paired up in some more activities tomorrow.”

“I certainly hope so. And if not, there’s the party.”



“A party? Here?” It doesn’t seem like that kind of place.

“I don’t think they really intend for it to *be* a party, but everyone I know who has been here before says that on the last night, everyone lets loose a little.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that,” I admit. “But it sounds fun. And like the perfect time for the loser of our bet to do their lap.”

“It does,” he agrees. “And if I win another couple of rounds of chess, perhaps you’ll be the loser.” He swirls the board around.

“All right, but no talking this time. I want to win.”

He chuckles. “Fine. I’ll even go easy on you.”

“Oh no need for that,” I retort, though a part of me thinks that it could be my only way of winning against him. If we end up making plans for when we’re back at the academy, then I’m going to have to do some practice rounds of chess so I can figure out how to be a better opponent.

He makes his first move, and I focus on everything I know about chess strategy in an attempt to beat him.

Though I suppose I don’t really mind which of us wins. That’s not why we’re playing, and it’s not why I’m enjoying myself. This time, it’s really not about the winning, it’s about the game.

Somehow, I don’t think that’s what Zara wanted me to learn about this weekend, but I don’t even care.

## FIVE



## EVIE

THE LIGHT DRIZZLE isn't all that welcome as I make my way down to the side of the lake. At least it's not too bad and I still have my footing, but I can tell that the borrowed wetsuit I'm wearing is going to get deeply unpleasant in the next few hours.

“What do you think we're going to be doing?” Mandy asks as we approach the group huddled around the instructor.

“I think it said raft building on the timetable,” I respond.

“Eurgh, I don't think I have the energy for that, I slept horribly.”

“That's because Jazz kept snoring. You'd think she'd have done something about that.”

“Or that one of the witches would have stepped in and cast a noise-cancelling spell,” Mandy responds. “I wish I could do cool things with my magic.”

“You have wings though,” I point out.

She sighs. “And what good do they do?”

“They stopped you from falling and hurting yourself during our routine,” I point out.

“Yes, and caused Zara to hate me *and* make us all come here.”

“Here isn’t so bad, I’m enjoying myself.”

“That’s because you have the hots for the chess club guy.”

“I do not,” I protest a little too hard, especially considering that I’m scanning the assembled students for him as we speak.

Mandy scoffs. “Are you seriously trying to tell a succubus that you don’t fancy someone? That’s not going to work on me.”

My gaze lands on Ceb just as he turns. He waves, and I return the gesture as soon as he does. Excitement fills me at the prospect of getting to spend more time with him.

“I can feel the desire rolling off you in waves,” Mandy mutters.

“Ew, you *have* to know how creepy that sounds.”

“I do,” she admits. “But I don’t have any other way to describe it.”

I frown. “Tell me more. You’ve never really talked about your magic.”

“Oh, erm, no, I suppose I haven’t.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I guess it’s just what I’m describing. I can feel when someone is attracted to another person. Or thing, I suppose, but that’s not one I’ve come across before.”

“Huh, handy for knowing if your dates are actually interested in you.”

“Mmm, I suppose so.” There’s something uncertain about the expression on her face, but I don’t know what’s causing it. “Anyway, yeah, that’s it. I can sense that you’re attracted to him.”

I sigh. “I suppose I haven’t been doing much to hide it. I guess you’re not going to tell me whether or not it’s reciprocated?”

“What do you think?”

I glance over at Ceb. “I want it to be, and I think it is, but I have no idea.”

She chuckles. “It’s reciprocated. He likes you about as much as you like him.”

“That’s handy.”

“I thought you said it was creepy.”

“Yes, but now I can use your powers to my advantage. *See* that’s just as useful as being able to cast a noise-blocking spell.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she murmurs.

“Don’t cupids work on a similar principle?” I ask. “They sense love, right?”

“Do they? I’m not sure. I just know that what I can feel is about physical attraction, though I can tell when something is *just* physical, or if it’s something a bit more than that.”

“Is…” I trail off, realising that I’m not sure I want to know the answer.

A smile quirks at her lips. “Trust me, he’s feeling the same way you are about this. But you don’t really need me to tell you that. Just look at what you’re wearing.”

I look down at my wetsuit. “Hey, this is form-fitting.”

“You look like a seal.”

“Seals are cute,” I murmur.

“Exactly. Cute *not* hot.”

“You’re so mean.” I bump into her shoulder, but our conversation comes to an end as we reach the others.

“Good morning, everyone. Welcome to raft-building,” he calls, going into a long explanation about the activity. “You’re going to be working in pairs of your choice, so get into them now.”

People start milling around as they get into pairs.

“Oh look, Grace is on her own,” Mandy says.

“Krissi must have been assigned to a different group,” I respond.

“Well I guess I know who I’m pairing up with,” she says.

I’m about to ask for clarification, but she nods at someone behind me.

“Looks like your partner’s here, Evie.” She smiles and waves, heading over to where Grace is standing.

I turn around and find exactly the person I hoped would be there waiting. “Hey.”

“Hi,” Ceb responds. “I’m guessing you’re in need of a partner?”

“Apparently so, but I guess that works well for us needing a winner still. Isn’t the score tied after chess?”

“It is.” He grins. “A part of me thinks you *want* to lose.”

“Never.”

“So, how are we going to score this one?” he asks as he leads me over to the pile of resources we can use to build our raft.

“Hmm, we could do how long they’re in the water,” I say. “Though that feels a little boring. Maybe it should be about who falls in the water.”

“Ten points if you get it right?” he jokes.

“Nope, that would give one of us a clear victory.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

He grins. “What are you thinking for our raft?”

“We’re going to want some of those water bottles,” I say, pointing to the cloudy plastic camping bottles. “They’re good for buoyancy.”

“All right. You grab those, I’ll get us some of the twine over there.” He points to it.

I nod and head into the pile, pulling out four of the bottles. I’m a little surprised that no one else is going for them, but they all likely have their own ideas.

I take the bottles back to one of the workstations and put them down next to the parts of the raft that Ceb’s collected.

“I wrote down the teams already,” he says. “Now we just have to make predictions about who is going to fall, and who is going to float.”

“Do we have to do that now, or can we keep an eye on people as we work?” I ask.

“Hmm, let’s do the latter, that way we can focus on making sure we’re not one of the teams that ends up in the

water.”

“Good idea.”

The two of us start making our raft, working together with surprising ease considering we haven’t known one another long, and the raft quickly starts taking shape into something recognisable.

“Which of us is going to try and go on the water on the raft?” Ceb asks.

“Hmm, I’m lighter, so I think it makes more sense if I do.”

He nods. “How about another bet to make things interesting?”

“Are you implying that the chance of me ending up in the water and drenched from head to toe isn’t interesting?”

He looks me up and down with an appreciative smile that makes my cheeks heat in a not wholly unpleasant way. “That could be interesting.”

I clear my throat and glance away. “What did you have in mind?”

“If you fall into the water, you have to do two laps around the lake. If you don’t, I have to do them. Regardless of which of us wins the bet.”

“All right, you have a deal.” I hold out my hand.

He takes it, causing my breathing to hitch the moment his skin touches mine. Neither of us move for a moment, we’re too caught up in whatever is happening between us, even if we don’t have a name for it.

Or maybe we do.

A bell rings. “You have five minutes until your rafts need to be in the water,” the instructor calls out to everyone.

We pull away from one another and turn our attention back to the raft.

I sneak a glance at Ceb, only to find him looking at me the same way. Suddenly, I feel a whole lot more aware of what’s happening between us, and the tension building.

I just don’t know what to do with it.

The ring of the bell breaks through my thoughts and we step back, knowing that our time working on the raft is done.

“Time to put it to the test,” Ceb says.

I nod.

“I’ll take it to the water.” He picks it up with ease and I watch as he takes it down to the edge of the lake.

I follow him down, falling into step beside Mandy as I do.

She lets out a low whistle. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re glowing.”

I look down at my arm. “No, I’m not.”

“You are to me.”

“Nothing happened,” I murmur.

“Mmhmm. I’d bet my right arm that the two of you end up kissing by the end of the party tonight,” she says. “Or I would if I didn’t need it. Maybe I’ll bet my wings instead, I don’t really need them.”

“Wouldn’t your tail be a better choice?”



“Nope. Do you have any idea how useful it is to have a tail? You know when you get those hard-to-scratch itches on your back? Not a problem when you have a tail you can use.”

“I can safely say I’ve never even considered that, my tail is too stumpy to do anything.” And I can only access it if I shift fully too.

“It’s a neat advantage,” she says.

“Okay everyone, take your places. I’m going to be timing you for five minutes,” the instructor says. “The team whose raft stays afloat the longest will be the winner. Or, if more than one person lasts more than five minutes, there will be multiple.”

“I guess that’s our cue,” I say, gesturing towards the rafts at the water’s edge.

“Good luck,” Mandy replies.

“You too.” I wave to her and head down to where Ceb has set up the raft.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod.

“Remember if you fall off you have to do laps around the lake.”

“I’m not about to forget.”

“But are you going to fall?”

“That depends on how much you distract me.”

He chuckles and looks at me with an intense expression on his face. “If I do, then we’ll have to call it even for just how much you distract me.”

“I haven’t even done anything.”

“Existing is enough,” he responds.

I let out a loud laugh. “I can’t tell if that’s cheesy or charming.”

“How about charmingly cheesy?” he suggests, holding out his hand to help me get on the raft.

“All right, I’ll allow that.” I take a deep breath and put my hand in his.

He helps me onto the raft, and I spread my feet wide enough that I’m not about to fall off straight away, though it’s all I can do not to think about the way his hand feels in mine.

Mandy’s right. I’m doomed if I think I’m going to be able to avoid ending up with the two of us kissing. Then again, I suppose I don’t really *want* to avoid that, it sounds perfectly acceptable as far as I’m concerned.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod. “As I’ll ever be.”

“All right, I’ll push you off.” He lets go of my hand and crouches down. He pushes on the edge of the raft, and I wobble in response, not entirely sure if I’m going to be able to keep my balance. “You can swim, right?” he calls as the raft floats away from the bank both too slowly and too quickly at the same time.

“I can swim,” I call back.

He gives me a thumbs up.

Despite knowing that I have to stay focused on the raft if I want to win, I keep looking back at Ceb. I don’t know what it is about him, I’m not normally like this around people, but he just seems to have gotten under my skin in a good way.

“Watch out!” someone calls.

I turn a little too quickly and the raft bobs up and down. I stick out my arms and attempt to regain my balance, only for a large black tail to emerge from the water and crash down a few feet away.

I squeeze my eyes shut just as the water hits me, sending me back into the lake. My instincts kick in straight away and I kick for the surface, swimming towards the bank and pulling myself up.

“I am so sorry,” someone says from beside me.

I turn to see one of Ceb’s friends on the bank with me. “For what?” I ask.

She gestures to the lake. “I fell, I panicked, I shifted.” She grimaces as she finishes speaking.

“Ahhh.” I get to my feet, sending a load of lake water rushing down me. “You knocked me off.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I hold out my hand to her and she takes it, letting me help her to her feet.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she admits. “I don’t normally shift in front of people.”

I shrug. “These things happen. You okay now?”

She nods. “And grateful that they gave us the spelled wetsuits.”

Despite barely knowing her, I let out a bemused chuckle. “True, I don’t think there’d be much left of it otherwise.”

“That could have been really embarrassing,” she admits.

“Towels?” Ceb says, holding them out to both of us.

“Thanks,” I say, flashing him a grateful smile. “I guess that means I lose the bet.”

“You’re winning the points though,” he responds, pointing to the lake. “Ingrid’s shift knocked a load of people off.”

I turn around and sure enough, there are only a couple of others still standing. I don’t like to lose, but for some reason, it doesn’t bother me that badly that I have. Maybe because it comes with the promise of spending more time with Ceb, and that’s something I don’t have a problem with at all.

## SIX



## EVIE

MUSIC FILLS the communal hall along with the excited chatter of a couple dozen students.

“This isn’t so bad,” Mandy says as she sits down next to me on one of the worn sofas. “Even Zara seems to be enjoying herself.” She nods over in the direction of our cheer captain.

I turn around, surprised to find her laughing in the corner of the room with some of the others surrounding her. “Miracles do happen,” I murmur.

Mandy lets out an amused snort. “Maybe the weekend went better than she expected it to.”

“It certainly went better than I thought it would,” Grace says as she flops down onto the sofa opposite us with a drink in hand. “I was expecting a lot more mud.”

“Me too, I’m actually a bit disappointed in that,” I say.

“Pfft, you’re just disappointed that your new crush hasn’t arrived at the party yet,” Grace responds.

I open my mouth to counter her, but realise there’s nothing I can say to convince her otherwise anyway. I’m not sure that

I've got an argument that'll convince me either.

"Evie's moved past denial much faster than you did, Krissi," Grace says to her friend.

The leopard shifter rolls her eyes. "If we're going to talk about denial, then let's talk about you and Henry. At least I admitted I liked Jeremy. And we were friends."

I glance at Mandy, surprised to find her sitting there with a confused expression on her face. "You okay?"

"Hmm, yes, fine."

"That was about as convincing as a hellhound in the snow."

"What?" She frowns, clearly confused by my expression.

"It's something Dad always says," I respond. "I guess because hellhounds are supposed to be warm? I don't know, it doesn't make a huge amount of sense now I'm thinking about it."

"It's a funny expression."

"Don't you have anything like that for succubi?"

"Not really," she admits. "Mum takes her powers very seriously, and my father walked out before I was born."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugs. "Don't be. We're better off without him."

"That's a good way to look at it."

Fabio leans over the back of Grace and Krissi's sofa. "Hey, ladies. We need a third for our Beer Pong team, any of you game?"

"I am," Mandy says.

“You sure?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I like Beer Pong. Besides, someone you want to hang out with just walked in.” She gestures towards the door.

I follow her attention to where Ceb and his friends have just entered. He clearly searches the room, his gaze landing on me and a smile lights up his face.

I wave, hoping it’ll let him know that I want to spend time with him tonight. Even if it means I have to run around the lake as a forfeit for falling into it.

“We’re starting in a couple of minutes,” Fabio says to Mandy.

“Just enough time for me to get another drink,” she says, getting to her feet. “Have fun, Evie.”

“You too.” It seems like Zara’s plan for getting everyone to form closer bonds is working.

Even if I’m spending my time with someone who isn’t a cheerleader.

“Is this seat taken?” Ceb asks.

“It is now,” I respond, I gesture for him to sit next to me, ignoring the interested expression on Grace’s face. I’m sure I’ll get teased about this for weeks to come, but I don’t care. It’s worth it.

“I should have offered to get you a drink,” he says.

“It’s fine, I have one.” I point to the cup sitting in front of me. “So...” I trail off, unsure what I want to say. Somehow, it’s been much easier for the two of us to talk when people aren’t so close. Or when our departure hasn’t been as imminent.

“You never told me what you’re studying at the academy,” he says.

“Oh, right. I don’t know how that never came up,” I admit. “I’m studying accounting. What about you?”

“Chemistry. I should make some cheesy joke about why there’s so much between us.”

I let out a loud laugh. “I’m sure there are better chemistry jokes you can come up with.” I slide down the sofa so I’m closer to him. “We could also make jokes about how the hell part of hellhounds is heating us up.”

His deep rumbly chuckle fills the air, sending a warm feeling through my chest. I hope I get to hear it a lot more over the evening to come.

And longer.

“I think we can safely say that good chat-up lines aren’t our thing,” Ceb says.

“I don’t know, they’re working pretty well,” I muse. “Neither of us are running away.”

“True. Though speaking of running, I believe you have a forfeit to do.”

“As do you. I may have fallen in the water, but you lost our initial bet. I believe it was thirty-four to thirty in the end.”

“I think you’re bad at counting,” he teases.

“Hey, I’m a future accountant, you can’t say things like that.”

“Hmm, but you also like to win, right? Maybe you’re cooking the books?”



“And maybe you convinced your friend to knock me into the water on purpose,” I counter.

“I can assure you that Ingrid could have decided that all on her own with no help from me. She doesn’t seem to be the cheer squad’s biggest fan.”

“What did we do to her?” I ask, ready to lay into someone if I need to.

He shrugs. “No idea, maybe she’s just judging you based on a stereotype.”

I let out a loud sigh. “I’d say that’s hurtful, but it’ll never stop people from doing it.”

“I think you guys have done a great job at proving that you’re not like that,” he assures me. “It’s been a fun couple of days.”

“It has,” I agree. “And not what I expected at all.”

“I can’t say I thought I’d meet a gorgeous hellhound with a killer smile and a great sense of humour,” he says.

A blush creeps over my cheeks and I glance away, unsure how to meet his gaze. “I don’t know how to respond to that,” I admit.

“Perhaps by joining me on a walk outside and a chance to do our laps of the lake?” he suggests.

“Is that a thinly veiled attempt to get me alone?”

“I wouldn’t call it thinly veiled in the slightest,” he jokes.

“I think it’s a great idea.” There aren’t a huge amount of people in the room, but there are still a lot, and we haven’t spent any time *actually* alone yet.

So I'm going to take this chance and run with it, knowing that this is a chance for us to take what's been a weekend flirtation into something more.

## SEVEN



### EVIE

STARS TWINKLE in the dark sky and there isn't a cloud in sight. "Isn't it weird that now we don't *have* to be outside, there's no rain?" I ask.

"If you're determined to get wet, I can help you with that," Ceb responds.

I turn around and gape at him. "You did *not* just say that."

He chuckles. "I meant by pushing you in the lake. But before you get too carried away, we should do our laps."

I chew on my bottom lip.

"What is it?"

"It's just that now we have to just run around the lake, it sounds really boring."

He chuckles. "Hmm, true. We could remove the no shifting rule." His eyes sparkle at the idea.

"Is this where I ask if you're just trying to get me naked?"

"That's not how I'd go about it," he responds. "We both know that your clothes are probably spelled to shift with you."

“You’d be right. It makes things so much easier, I can’t imagine what it must have been like for shifters before the eighteen-hundreds, especially with how strict the rules were about propriety. Can you imagine what it must have been like in the era of corsets and not being able to show your ankles? Absolute torture.”

“Is that what you spend your time thinking about?”

“Don’t you?”

“A little,” he admits. “So, shifted run?”

Instead of answering, I take a couple of steps back and call on a shift. My whole body changes shape and size as my other form takes the forefront. Dark fur spreads over my skin and my teeth descend into sharp fangs while a blaze of black fire travels its way from my head all the way down to my admittedly stumpy tail. It won’t burn me, and it shouldn’t do much harm to Ceb either, but it could hurt a non-hellhound.

I shake my whole body, ridding myself of the slight stiffness that comes with keeping my shifted form locked away for too long. I should do a better job at stretching my legs more often so I don’t end up pent up like this.

I look over to where Ceb is standing and study his hellhound form while he does the same to me. He’s much bigger than I am, but that’s not the thing I’m staring at.

He has *three* heads.

I’ve heard all of the old legends about hellhounds like him, but I’ve never seen anyone who can shift into a three-headed form, and he’s magnificent.

His left head tilts to the left and a tongue hangs out of it.

Amusement fills me, coming out as a weird sort of bark-laugh. He jumps up on his hind legs, surprisingly nimble given his size.

Despite the fact we've never discussed this part, I know I want to win the race around the lake, and the best way to do that is going to be to cheat.

Without a second's warning, I bolt off along the bank, my powerful hind legs pounding against the ground. The crackle of the fire along my back reaches my ears along with the whoosh of the wind.

I glance over my shoulder to see Ceb chasing after me, his large paws throwing up some dirt every time they hit the ground. While I've never raced against him before, I can make an educated guess that I have the edge when it comes to speed, but he'll be able to pull it back because he has more stamina than I do.

But that doesn't mean he's going to win.

An unbridled sense of freedom passes through me with each second of running. It's been a while since I shifted, but even longer since I did something as carefree as this, and it makes me wonder why I don't do it more often. I should see if there's somewhere at the academy for me to do this.

Or maybe for *us* to do this. From the way he's running, it seems to me as if Ceb is enjoying himself just as much as I am.

I complete the first lap with a slight lead. All I need to do is keep going and cross the finish line before him. Which may be easier said than done. Even in this form, my legs are burning from the strain of running at this speed for as long as I am doing.

Ceb stumbles and loses a bit of ground, giving me a larger lead than I had already. Determined to make the most of it, I put on another burst of speed, returning to the spot where we first shifted and turning around to face him so that he knows I've won. I don't suppose it really matters, this is all a bit of fun and we never said that either of us would get anything for winning, but it feels in line with the rest of what we've been doing.

He slides to a stop, panting as loudly as I am from the exertion of the run. I guess I'm not the only one who pushed myself.

I look over at Ceb in time to see a mischievous expression cross over all three of his faces at the same time. Before I can even consider what he's going to do, he nudges against me.

I lose my balance and go tumbling into the lake. I shift back into my human form as I crash through the surface. I break through the water and try to glare at him, but the bubbling laughter within me doesn't make it very convincing.

He charges into the lake, drenching me all over again.

"You're going to regret this," I tease.

He rises from the water still in his hellhound form and shakes himself, spraying me with even more water.

"Ceb!"

He shifts back, shrinking until he's human again, laughing as he does. "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist."

"That's fine." I get to my feet, a devious plan forming as I reach out and push him backwards.

He grabs hold of my arms and drags me along with him. We fall into the shallow part of the lake, and I land on top of

him, bringing the two of us closer together than we've been before.

He reaches up and pushes a strand of wet hair away from my eyes.

My gaze drops to his lips and my breathing becomes shallower. "Should we..."

"Get up?" he asks, though he doesn't move.

"I was going to say kiss."

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me. "Now that's a *much* better option."

I lean in, closing my eyes as I press my lips against his.

Ceb's hand rests on my lower back, pulling me closer and deepening the kiss.

And I enjoy every moment of it. I've been thinking about what it would feel like ever since Mandy mentioned it to me earlier, and maybe even a little longer than that. Despite the fact we've only known one another for a few days, I can tell that this isn't something I can ignore. There's something between us, and I'm determined not to let it slip through my fingers.

## EIGHT



### EVIE

“SO, WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT?” Mandy asks as we head out of the dorm building with our bags over our shoulders. The bus is already parked waiting to take us back to campus.

“What do you mean?”

“I looked for you when I finished my game of Beer Pong, but I couldn’t find you.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to abandon you.”

“You didn’t, I had fun. But you’re not answering the question.”

I bite my bottom lip. “You know Ceb and I have been having our bet?”

“The one where you’ve been picking who’ll fail first?”

“That’s the one,” I respond. “Well we went to go and run around the lake, then we ended up in it, then we kissed.”

“Ah, that explains it,” Mandy responds.

“Let’s guess, I glow?”

“Mmhmm.”



“Can all succubi see me glowing?” I ask, mostly out of curiosity, but partly out of worry that I’m transmitting my feelings so widely.

“I can’t see it, it’s more of a feel,” she responds. “It’s kind of here.” She waves her hand vaguely around in front of my face, as if that’s an answer.

“Okay, I’m not sure how weird I’m supposed to find that.”

“Not at all, I don’t think. Surely you can do stuff that other supernaturals can’t, is that weird?”

“I guess not,” I agree. “But it is pretty weird that I can shift into a big dog.”

“Is that the proper way to talk about hellhounds?”

“Definitely not. I wouldn’t advise calling any of us dogs. We’re a completely different species than dog shifters, we just happen to have some of the same characteristics.”

“That’s fascinating,” she muses. “And so interesting that there’s crossover.”

“I think it’s just normal. What you said you can do sounds a lot like what cupids can do, just with different emotions,” I point out.

“I’m not sure horny counts as an emotion,” she mutters.

“Of course it does. Besides, that’s not what you said you could feel.”

She sighs. “All right, point taken. So, you guys kissed?”

I nod.

“I’m taking it from this...” She waves her hand up and down me. “That it was good.”

My mind goes back to the night before and a smile spreads over my face. “Very.”

“What happens when you go back to the academy?”

“I don’t know. We’ve mentioned it a couple of times, but we haven’t done anything about it. I was a little distracted and forgot to ask for his number.”

“Evie! That’s basic dating stuff.”

“I know, I know.” I cover my face with my hands. “I’m just not that good at this stuff, it’s not like I’ve dated much.”

“Hmm, true. I really thought you were going to go for it with that lioness from your economics class, but then you didn’t.”

“Wait, you know about that?”

She raises an eyebrow. “I can *sense* attraction, of course I know about that. She was into you, by the way. A little wary, so maybe not completely out yet, but she’d have said yes.”

“Just how long have you been spying on my love life?” I mutter.

“Okay, well two things. One, I don’t think you can call it a love life if you never do anything about it. Two, it’s involuntary. Trust me I would much rather not know.”

“That’s fair, I can imagine there aren’t many situations where it’s a useful power.”

“Mmm, tell me about it.” There’s a note of bitterness in her voice that makes it seem as if she’s had all of these thoughts before. I’m sad that she hasn’t had a chance to voice them to me until recently. Hopefully, that will change now, and I’ll be able to help her through whatever it is she’s dealing with in regards to her power.

“I’m sorry you have to sense all that,” I say.

“Not your fault. It’s no one’s fault, really.” She shrugs. “But here’s your chance to make sure you don’t make a huge dating mistake,” she says, nodding over in the direction of the second bus where Ceb and his friends are approaching.

“I’m not sure...”

“Evie. Trust me, you’ll regret it if you don’t do anything.”

I sigh. “Okay, wish me luck?”

“You don’t need it, he’s already trying to catch your attention,” Mandy responds, a told-you-so expression on her face.

I look over to see Ceb waving at me. My heart skips a beat and I know that Mandy is right about this. I *am* going to regret it if I don’t do anything about whatever it is building between us.

She disappears off to talk to some of the others, and I take my chance, heading straight to Ceb.

“Hey,” I say with a weird kind of wave.

“Hi,” he responds.

“So...last night...” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Last night, I forgot to ask for your number,” he finishes for me. “If you want to give it to me.”

“I do. Here.” I hold out my phone so he can scan the QR code that’ll add me as a contact to his phone.

Ceb holds his camera out over it and snaps the image. “Done.” He pulls it back and types out a message.

An unknown number pops up on my screen along with a dog face emoji.

I let out an amused chuckle. “Careful, or that’s how I’ll save you in my contacts.”

“You should. I’ve always wanted to be the mysteriously named contact on someone’s phone,” he jokes.

“Then that’s what you’ll be.” I make the changes I’ve promised and turn the screen around to show him. “Or maybe it should be three of them.”

He chuckles. “That would be fitting.”

I change it, bemused about it.

He grins and turns his phone around so he can see my contact saved with a dog emoji and a flame next to it. “Two can play that game.”

“Now you’re going to say something smooth about the fact the flame is for the fire on my back *and* because I’m hot.”

“I’m going to pretend I said that.”

“Then that’s what we’ll go with,” I respond. “I can’t believe the weekend’s over.”

“Me neither. It’s been fun.”

“It’s a shame there’s nothing like this on campus.”

“The Hell Scramble is coming to town in a few weeks,” he says.

“Huh, I didn’t realise that. I haven’t seen anything about it. Are there enough hellhounds to take part in it?”

“I assume some will travel for it, but I think they opened it up to all shifters a few years back.”

“I didn’t realise that.” Maybe I can find someone to do it with me this year. I’ve always wanted to take part in a Hell Scramble, but my parents wouldn’t let me, thinking that the

high-intensity obstacle course was too much for me. But I guess they don't have to know this time.

"Hey, Ceb, we're waiting on you!" someone calls from the Chess Club bus.

"I guess this is goodbye, then," I say. "Is it weird that it feels really final, even if we're heading back to the same place?"

He chuckles. "I guess because this is where we met, so it feels like things will be different back at the academy."

"Mmm, true. But we can do something once we're back, right?" I meet his gaze, feeling the nerves fluttering within me as I wait for his response.

"I'd like that. Are you free tomorrow?"

I shake my head. "I have cheer practice, and considering Zara dragged us all the way here just so that we can improve our teamwork, I don't think it's one I can skip." Even if I'd prefer a date.

"Ah, fair. What about..."

"Ceb! Stop chatting up cheerleaders and get on the bus!"

He sighs. "I'll message you and we can work it out?"

I nod. "I look forward to it." I go up on my toes and press a kiss against his cheek. I'd love to say goodbye properly, but I don't think that's going to be a good idea. "It was good to meet you, Ceb."

"You too, Evie. I'll see you back at the academy?"

I nod enthusiastically.

He hesitates for a moment as if he wants to say, or do, more, but then heads in the direction of his bus, turning around

to wave at me as he gets to it.

I smile and wave back, feeling like this could be the start of something great.

## NINE



## CEB

I LOOK over my shoulder to see Evie still standing where I left her. It's a shame that one of us can't switch buses to go back to the academy or we could have spent a bit more time together.

I tear my gaze away and let out a loud sigh, heading towards my seat and dropping down into it.

"The love-struck puppy returns," Ingrid quips from her seat opposite.

"I'm not love-struck," I murmur. "Or a puppy."

"Pfft. Puppy, hellhound, same thing."

"Not even slightly."

"Do they call you hellpuppies when you're kids?" she asks, genuine curiosity coming through her voice and replacing the teasing.

"They don't." I lean back in my seat and watch out of the window.

"Who knew Ceb'd be the one to end up obsessed with a cheerleader," Bennet says.

Ingrid lets out a snort of amusement. “Like he’s the only one. Didn’t you hook up last night?”

I turn to my friends in time to see Bennett turn a drastic shade of red. “Don’t look at me like that, I had to try it.”

Ingrid rolls her eyes.

“I didn’t realise that,” I say.

“That’s because you’ve been all wrapped up in your cheerleader,” Ingrid says.

“Evie’s more than just the sport she plays,” I mutter.

She raises an eyebrow. “Love-struck is right.”

“She must have magical...”

“Bennett!” I cut my friend off before he can say anything completely inappropriate.

“Are you going on a date when you get back?” Ingrid asks.

“I hope so.”

“I suppose I can be on board with that, she seems nice enough.”

“You’ve changed your tune,” I say.

She shrugs. “She wasn’t catty or horrible after I knocked her off the raft,” Ingrid says.

“Glowing praise,” Bennett responds.

“I promise to reserve judgement until I’ve run into her in the kitchen a few times,” Ingrid says. “Assuming that Ceb’s able to seal the deal.”

“You mean if he hasn’t already,” Bennett jokes.

I groan and close my eyes. I should have known they’d be insufferable. Hopefully, Ingrid will keep her open mind if Evie



ever does spend any time in our flat.

The bus doors close and the rumble of the engines starts beneath us, signalling the true end of the weekend. I glance out of the window at the other bus, which doesn't seem to be moving just yet. I don't suppose it matters, we probably can't arrive back at the academy at exactly the same time anyway.

Unable to help myself, I pull up my phone and click on her name. Well, on the emojis I used to represent her. Even looking at it brings a smile to my face.

< The merciless teasing has started on this end already. I hope you're not being subjected to the same! > I hit send, hoping that it's okay to message her already.

< Most of the attention seems to be on Fabio at the moment. I think he hooked up with your friend. > Her response is almost immediate.

I chuckle and glance over to where Bennett and Ingrid are engaged in an animated conversation about something that I assume isn't related to the weekend.

< Lucky! >

< It'll be my turn soon enough. But it's worth it. I should have kissed you goodbye properly though, regretting that now. >

< Same. But I'll make it up to you when we next see each other. >

< I'm going to hold you to that. I had a good time this weekend. Especially last night. Who knew that running laps could be so fun? >

A wide smile spreads over my face. < It was, wasn't it? >

< Even if you lost. >

< Only because you cheated. >

< I did no such thing. >

I shake my head in bemusement.

My phone lights up again before I can respond. < And you're the one who pushed me into the lake, I think we're even. >

< I'm sorry, I didn't think that through, I hope I didn't ruin your shirt. >

< I thought you'd have been more worried about me catching hypothermia. Then again, I suppose I had you to keep me warm. >

< The benefits of being a hellhound. >

< Except in summer. >

I make a noise to the affirmative even if she can't hear me. Most of our kind run hot, I think that's how our species got the *hell* part of our names.

< Just an excuse not to wear clothing in summer, > I message back before I can think about whether it's the right thing to say to someone I want to date.

< True. And summer is just around the corner. >

I swallow hard, trying not to think about how close the two of us had been last night in the lake. It had been enough to make me aware of how attracted I am to her, but not enough to make us rush things and regret the results.

I stare at the screen, trying to work out how to reply. It's easy to talk to her, just like it is in person, but I'm also conscious that I don't want to say the wrong thing and scare

her off. Even if we've managed to hit it off well over the weekend, we barely know one another.

< So, dates... > I hit send.

< What about them? >

< I have no idea what kind of thing is good for a first date.  
>

She sends back a shrugging emoji. < Depends on us, I think. We already know we have fun doing things together. >

< You have to know how that sounds. >

A wink emoji comes back as a response and I let out a small laugh. I don't know if she *actually* meant it the way it sounded, but she's leaning into it, which has to be a good sign.

I glance out of the window at the passing motorway, thinking through all of the places we could go that would be fun, but will also mean that we can spend time talking and enjoying one another's company. Which means that the cinema is out. It'd be fun to sit in the dark with her, but it doesn't really let us talk, and that defeats the point.

< There's a BBQ place in the town centre that always smells good. > I don't know if she's going to enjoy that kind of thing, but I can see her enjoying it, and that's the main thing.

< Oh, yes, that place is nice. My parents took me last time they visited. I'm up for it if you are. >

I let out a sigh of relief and start to type out a reply only for a pop-up to appear on my phone telling me that I'm out of battery. "No, not now," I mutter.

"What's up?" Ingrid asks.

“My battery’s dying. You don’t have a travel charger, do you?” I cross my fingers and hope that one of my friends has planned better than me.

She shakes her head. “Sorry, mine broke a couple of weeks ago and I haven’t replaced it yet.”

My phone powers off before I can type out an explanation to Evie. I know it’s only going to be a couple of hours until we get back to the academy, but I hope she’s not going to think that I’m ignoring her because I don’t want to go on a date when that’s the furthest thing from the truth.

TEN



EVIE

ZARA CLAPS TWICE. “All right, take a break.”

Instantly, everyone around me relaxes and several of the other cheerleaders disappear off to get drinks.

“Eurgh, I thought Zara would be better after the weekend,” Mandy mutters. “She’s working us harder than ever.”

“I think she wants to make the most of what we learned,” I assure her as I grab my towel and wipe the sweat off my forehead. “And she just wants to win the next round.” Which I get. Why wouldn’t she when that means winning the entire competition?

Mandy lets out a loud sigh. “I suppose. At least we’re not having to do as much practice as Jazz and Fabio.” She nods over to where the two of them are getting pointers on a trick from Zara.

“They have a more important part of the routine to do,” I point out.

“Mmm, yes, Zara is punishing us over what happened last time.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Especially as I had nothing to do with the whole thing. “Maybe she hasn’t choreographed our part of the routine yet.”

“Hmm, maybe. Hey, did Ceb message back yet?”

“I don’t know,” I say, heading towards my bag so I can check my phone. “I still don’t know what happened. Everything seemed to be going great then he just didn’t reply.”

“His phone probably died, that’s what happened to Henry.”

I sigh. “I know that’s logical, but I can’t help worrying that it’s something more than that.”

“Just check,” Mandy tells me. “And if he hasn’t messaged and you still want to go on your date, then maybe *you* should do something about it yourself.”

“Ah, the wisdom of someone who isn’t in this situation,” I murmur as I pull my phone out of the front pocket of my bag and touch my finger to the back of it.

The screen lights up, along with a notification message preceded by three dog head emojis.

A wide smile spreads over my face.

“I take it he’s messaged?” The amusement in her voice is impossible to ignore, but I manage, clicking on the notification.

< So sorry, my battery died. I know you’re not free tonight, but what about later this week? >

I let out a sigh of relief. “You were right,” I say to Mandy.

“I had no reason to think I wasn’t,” she responds. “He was really into you.”

“He wants to go on a date this week,” I tell her. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“How about yes?”

“Well, yeah, I know that much. But is it bad to say I’m free tomorrow, or should I be making him wait until next week? This stuff confuses me so much.”

She gives me a bemused look. “And you think I know better? Have you ever seen me date anyone?”

I frown. “No, actually, I haven’t.” But I never gave it much thought because I’ve not been dating myself.

“Well then, you know how little of a clue I’ve got. I know there are supposed rules about this kind of thing, but I can’t see how waiting and making both of you a bit miserable will help matters. Tell him you’re free when you are and have done with it.”

“Okay, I will do.” Partly because that’s what I actually want. Saying yes to a date and then waiting a week doesn’t sound good at all. I pull up the message properly so I can type out my reply.

“Watch out!” someone calls.

I turn around just in time for Jazz to come tumbling into me.

I lose my balance and start to fall, my phone flying out of my hand and crashing to the floor. I hit the ground, wincing as pain shoots up through my tailbone.

Jazz scrambles to her feet and offers me a hand up. “I’m so sorry, Evie, are you okay?”

I take her hand and let her help me up. “I’m fine.” I grimace as I move wrong, that’s going to sting in the morning,

but I don't want to make her feel any worse than she already does.

“Are you sure? It looked like a hard fall.”

“Nothing a shift won't fix.” That isn't quite true, but it will help, and that's a good thing given the situation.

“I'm still really sorry.”

I shrug. “Seriously, don't worry about it,” I assure the dragon shifter. “These things happen. It's not the first time I've been knocked over.” And I doubt it's going to be the last either, it's just one of the dangers of being a member of a cheer squad, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

“If you're sure...”

“Jazz, I'm fine.” I flash her what I hope is a reassuring smile.

She finally manages to relax. “Okay, if you're sure, then I'll get back to practising.”

I chuckle. “I'm sure, Jazz.”

“All right, then.” She gives me a tight smile and heads back over to where Zara and Fabio are waiting. No doubt our captain will have more than a few pointers after the fall, even if these things happen all the time.

I have to admit that I'm glad it's not me that Zara's going to be directing for the next five minutes. I head over to where my phone landed and lean down to pick it up, regretting the act immediately when another shot of pain travels through me. This is going to get old very fast. I grab my phone and turn it over.

“Arghhh.”



“What’s wrong?” Mandy asks.

I turn my phone towards her, showing the large crack down the screen. “Not what I needed, that’s not going to be cheap.”

“Does it turn on at least?” she asks.

“I hadn’t even thought of that.” I press the home button, but nothing happens. Hopefully, the fall will have just caused it to switch off and it’s not because it’s damaged. I press the power key and wait for longer than I need to, but nothing happens. I let out a long groan.

“Not good?”

“Nope.”

“Did you at least reply to Ceb?”

I close my eyes and try not to feel too much panic about that. “Nope.”

“That’s okay, you can just message him with...”

“Nope. Can’t do that,” I say, cutting her off. “I only have his number.”

“You haven’t added him on ObscureConnect?”

“No, I guess we never got around to that. I’ll try to find him when I get home, it can’t be that hard to track him down, right?”

“I don’t think so, you can probably just go to one of the Obscure Academy student groups and look through the members.”

“Mmm, good idea.” I sigh. It’s not perfect, but until I get a new phone, it’s all I’ve got. Even if I get one, I’ll need him to message me again before I have his number.

I need to back things up much better in the future, that way I can avoid issues like this. With all things considered, it's a surprise that my phone hasn't had a cheerleading-related breakage before this.

I put it back in my bag trying not to get too frustrated about the fact I can't respond to Ceb. But it shouldn't be too much of a problem. He took a while to message me after getting back from the team building weekend last night, so it's not the end of the world if I don't reply until I can get home and find him on ObscureConnect.

And if that's all it takes for him to decide he no longer wants to go on a date with me, then I know he's not worth my time.

## ELEVEN



### EVIE

STEAM CURLS into the air from the top of my hot chocolate. I pick it up and take a sip, almost scolding my tongue in the process. Which is just how I like it. I'm not sure whether my appreciation for things extra hot is a hellhound thing, or just because I think it should be, but there's really nothing better than a freshly made hot drink.

I lean back against the kitchen wall and let out a loud sigh. It's proving more difficult than I expected to find Ceb on ObscureConnect, I thought it'd be as simple as searching for his name and comparing the various photos, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

I let out a loud sigh just as the kitchen door opens and Sera steps inside. I raise my hand to greet my friend.

"Hey," she says. "I didn't realise you were back from practice."

"I got back about fifteen minutes ago, I'm waiting for dinner to cook." I nod needlessly towards the oven.

“Ah, that makes sense.” She heads towards the fridge and opens it. “So is your expression because you’re hungry, or because something’s bothering you?” She grabs a bottle of orange juice and pours herself a glass.

“Both.”

She puts the bottle back in the fridge and then heads over to me. “Want to talk about it?”

“I really do. You know that guy I told you about?”

“You mean the one you barged into my room last night while still covered in grime to talk about for hours? That one?” Her lips quirk up into a bemused smile. “I was late to meet Hugo because of that.”

“I’m sure he forgave you. Haven’t you known each other forever?”

She lets out an amused snort. “Since we were twelve, but it definitely feels like that. I made him my Phoenix-buddy before we came to the academy.”

“I don’t even know what that is.”

“Okay, so you know how phoenixes regenerate?” she asks.

“Not really, I’ve never met one until you.”

“Ah, right. Well basically if we have a near-death experience, our powers kick in, but it wipes our memories at the same time.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not great,” she admits. “I’ve never experienced it myself, but I’ve seen it happen a couple of times. Everything comes back, it just takes time.”

“That must be annoying.”

“I imagine so. But that’s why we have Phoenix-buddies. It’s supposed to be another phoenix that you trust implicitly, and they promise to guide you through regaining your memories by taking you to places you’ve been together, that kind of thing. Up until I came here, it was my Mum who was mine, which is pretty normal. But with both me and Hugo coming so far away from home, we talked to our folks and decided that it was better if we named each other, so we have someone close by.”

“Ah, that makes sense. It’s a lot of trust to have in someone.”

“I know. But as soon as we started talking about it, I knew that it was the right thing to do. He’d never let me down,” Sera says. “And considering if I need him, it’ll be the most vulnerable time of my life, that’s the most important thing.”

“That’s a beautiful thing.” And I can definitely see why she chose him. I’ve only had brief conversations with Hugo while he’s been visiting our flat, but he seems like he really cares for Sera. They’re great friends.

“Anyway, that wasn’t what we were supposed to be talking about. What happened with the guy?” she asks.

“He messaged me earlier, but there was a cheerleading-related incident that meant my phone ended up broken before I could respond.”

“Ah, not good.”

“Nope, it won’t turn on. I’ve ordered a new one, but it won’t be here for a few days and even when it does, it won’t have any of my numbers stored on it.”

She grimaces. “Okay, I can see how that’s a problem.”

“Mmhmm. So I’m trying to find him on ObscureConnect but I’m having absolutely no luck. I’ve been to all the groups and none of the profiles match.”

“Have you tried his full name?” she asks.

I grimace. “I don’t actually know it. I’ve been looking for Sebastians, but none of the photos match and I can’t think of anything else that it could be short for.”

“Hmm, not great. It could be a nickname of some kind?”

“It could be, but that doesn’t help. Short of posting a call for help in one of the groups, I’m not sure what to do.”

“Maybe don’t do that.”

“I know, I know.” I groan and cover my face with my hands. “I’m such an idiot. I was so caught up in spending time with him that I never thought to ask for more information so I could track him down. I barely managed to get his number to message him in the first place.”

“That’s a good thing, though. You don’t want to be distracted when you’re spending time with someone like that.”

I sigh. “Yeah, I suppose. It’s just making things hard now.”

“True.”

“Is there a chance he didn’t tell me anything else about himself so he didn’t have to meet me again?”

“Erm, no. I saw the messages you two had already sent, and you said he messaged again. He wants to see you again. Besides, you didn’t tell him any of that information either.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that. At least that makes us both idiots.”

She chuckles. “Yep. Hey, if all else fails, you can find out when and where Chess Club meets and go try to see him there.”

“Don’t you think that would make me a little bit of a stalker? I don’t want to scare him off.”

She shrugs. “Some people would find it romantic.”

“It doesn’t matter what some people think, it matters what Ceb thinks.”

“But your phone broke. It’s not like you’re going there because he didn’t respond to you, you’re going there because you didn’t respond to him yet. There’s a difference.”

“I’ll think about it.” Because I’m definitely not convinced. But without more information to go on to try and find his ObscureConnect profile, I don’t know what else I can do. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

“You won’t,” Sera assures me.

Despite her reassurance, I already feel like I am. But campus isn’t that big, hopefully there’ll be a chance for the two of us to run into one another before too long.

I just hope I haven’t ruined our chances of having something together by breaking my phone. But I guess Sera’s right, if he holds that against me, then he’s not worth it.

## TWELVE



CEB

I PULL out my phone and check it even though I know that I'm not going to have a response from Evie. It's been three days and she still hasn't replied. And that means she's probably just not that interested, I have to move on and stop continuously checking my phone and hoping that things have changed.

I sigh and rearrange my backpack into a more comfortable position. The late spring sunshine warms my face, and I turn onto the path that leads down the side of the sports fields. A few different practices seem to be taking place all at the same time, which is pretty impressive considering how scattered classes can be.

Despite knowing it isn't a good idea, I find myself searching to see if the cheerleaders are practising too. I don't know enough about their schedule, other than that their captain keeps them busy, but I still find myself hoping that Evie will be there all the same.

“Ceb!”

The sound of my name stops me in my tracks and I turn around, not quite believing the blur of blue and white running



across the field towards me.

Evie waves furiously, and I tentatively lift my own hand to return it, unsure what's happening.

She comes to a stop in front of me, barely breaking a sweat. From spending the weekend working with her, I already know she's in shape, but with her standing in front of me in her cheerleader uniform, it's even more evident.

"Hey," she says.

"Erm, hi."

She bites her bottom lip, drawing my attention to it and making me think about our kiss. All kinds of emotions barrel through me, including confusion. Am I supposed to be thinking about that? Or is she about to reject me?

"I'm sorry I didn't message you back," she blurts out.

"It's okay, I just figured you weren't interested..."

"I am," she cuts me off. "I'm going to sound like an idiot, but my phone got knocked out of my hand during practice on Monday and it broke."

I raise an eyebrow. "You have to know how that sounds."

To my surprise, she let out a light laugh. "Yep, it sounds like I'm making stuff up. Almost as much as saying that my battery died." She raises an eyebrow, but I can tell from her expression that she's only teasing.

"Touché. That really did happen."

"And my phone really did break. Like I lost all my numbers and everything broken. I tried to look you up on ObscureConnect so I could message you, but no matter what I

tried, I couldn't find you. What's Ceb short for? Because I know it's not Sebastian now."

Understanding dawns on me. "You've been spelling it with an s, haven't you?"

"Only in my head, but yeah."

I let out a bemused laugh. "My name's Cerberus."

She blinks a couple of times. "Ceb with a c," she whispers.

"Yep."

"Well, no wonder I couldn't find you. But also, your parents called you Cerberus?" She can't keep the disbelief out of her voice. Which is fair. I never thought anything of it as a kid, but as soon as I started Classics classes, I realised that it was a little ridiculous.

"They did."

"That's an...interesting choice. Now I feel better about Evelyn."

I let out an amused snort. "Well, that's why I go by Ceb and don't really tell people my full name until they need to know it."

"You know there's a theory that Cerberus means spot, right?"

I chuckle. "I do, yes. But I prefer the version that simply means guardian of Hades."

"Though spot comes with less work."

"Ah, so I should start introducing myself as Spot then."

She smiles, clearly amused by the implication. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be teasing you about this, especially when I'm trying to say that I'm sorry for not messaging you back."

“I guess we’re even then, considering my phone died while I was on the bus.”

“Even sounds good. So about your last message...” Someone calls her name and she looks over her shoulder, a frustrated expression on her face. She clears her throat and turns her attention back to me. “If you’ve not completely written me off because I didn’t message you back, I’m free tomorrow.”

“You’re not going to make me wait a few days?” I joke.

“Technically, I already did that without meaning to. But even then I wasn’t planning on it, no. I like you. And according to Mandy, you like me too.”

I raise an eyebrow. “That’s a bold thing to say.”

“She’s a succubus, she can feel it.”

Ah. So that means that Evie is completely aware of my reaction to her. “I didn’t realise that.”

“Me neither until she said something. In the creepiest way possible.”

I let out a deep laugh. “Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything different.”

“Me neither. If you’re going to tell your friend that you can sense when they’re attracted to someone, then you should at least do it in a way that creeps them out. She told me I struck out with a cute lioness too. Though all things considered, I’m not too bothered by that.”

“I can’t say I am either, otherwise I’d have competition.”

She brushes a strand of hair out of her face and smiles. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. I’m a one-person-at-once kind of girl when it comes to dating.”

“Same. Well, kind of guy.”

Someone shouts her name again.

Frustration flashes over Evie’s face. “I’m really sorry, but I have to go. I’m surprised no one’s come to drag me back to practice already. But tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow sounds good. Still want to go to the BBQ place?”

“Definitely. I could do with some flame-grilled ribs. I’ve been thinking of them ever since the bus.”

I chuckle. “We can get all kinds of things.”

“Message me?” she asks. “I have the same number, I just have no idea who is actually sending them to me until I ask.”

“Absolutely.”

She turns to go, but hesitates. “I’m glad I saw you again. And thank you for not holding my cheerleading mishap against me.”

“I imagine it happens all the time.”

“More often than anyone wants it to, less often than you’d think considering all of the people doing flips and kicks and stuff.” She shrugs. “It was just bad luck.”

I nod, understanding what she means.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m looking forward to it.” She gives me a half-wave and hurries back to where the rest of the cheerleaders are practising.

I wave goodbye to her, and watch as one of the others peels away and seems to start telling her off. I never considered how cutthroat the game of competitive cheerleading could be, but it’s becoming clear that there’s a lot

more to it than I first expected. And if I continue seeing Evie, I suspect there'll be a lot more for me to learn about it.

I pull out my phone and type out a quick message. < Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow! > It's only after I've hit send that I remember she has no idea who it is messaging her. < This is Spot, by the way. > I smile at my own joke, hoping that it'll give her a moment of amusement when she next checks her phone.

I wait for a moment longer, then pull my attention away and continue down the path towards the library, admittedly feeling much better than I had before.

## THIRTEEN



### EVIE

I CHECK the map on my phone and turn the corner that'll lead me to the restaurant. My heart skips a beat as I see Ceb standing outside it and I find a smile spreading over my face.

I slip my phone into my bag, no longer needing it now I'm sure I'm in the right place.

He turns towards me, an equally large smile spreads over his face. "Hey."

"Hi."

"You look gorgeous," he says, the expression on his face leaving no doubt in my mind that he believes it. Which is good with how long it took me to pick out the dark blue lace dress I'm wearing. Trying to find the balance between cute and easy-to-eat-BBQ-in is surprisingly hard.

"Thank you. I like your shirt." Without thinking, I reach out and touch his chest where the buttons of his shirt meet. It fits him well.

"Shall we head inside?" he asks.

“Please. I’m starving. I hope they don’t take too long with our meals.”

“You’re in luck, this is one of those all-you-can-eat places where they bring fresh dishes to the table for you to pick from.” He pushes open the door and holds it open for me.

“Well that sounds perfect. Though is it a strange place for us to go on a first date?”

“That depends,” Ceb responds.

“On?”

“Whether this is actually our first date. We did spend three hours playing chess, and then we spent a few more at the lake.”

A small blush rises to my cheeks as I recall how good it was to spend time with him by the lake, even if all we did was kiss.

“Hi, I’ve got a reservation under Burns,” he says to the server waiting at the entrance.

They tap on their screen then gestures for us to follow them.

“Cerberus Burns?” I ask.

He sighs. “I know, it’s simultaneously really cool and really lame.”

“I like it,” I assure him. “And it fits with you being a hellhound.”

“Mmm, true.”

“Evelyn Day doesn’t exactly say anything.” I take a seat in the booth the server has brought us to, glad to see that it’s one that will allow for lots of privacy.

“It’s pretty, though.” He slides into the booth, sitting close enough that it sends a small thrill through me.

“Thanks.”

The server clears their throat. “You can help yourself to the salad bar and the meat will be brought around for you.” They gesture around the room where several other servers are visiting other tables with huge platters of food.

My mouth waters just at the notion of it.

“Can I get you any drinks?”

“Just water, please,” I say.

“Same,” Ceb adds.

The server gives us a tight smile and disappears to get our drinks.

“So, going back to your theory that this is our third date,” I prompt.

He chuckles. “That isn’t precisely what I said.”

“But it is how it could be interpreted,” I point out. “And I wouldn’t mind if this was our third one. At least it means that our first one was unique. Unless you always take people on a first date that involves chess.” Now I’ve said it, I realise I’m not actually sure I want to know the answer.

“You would be the first,” he says quickly. “It’s not normally something I’d share about myself so early.”

“Would you believe me if I said the same about cheerleading?”

To my surprise, he nods.

“Most people just make snap judgements about it. They think I’m going to be mean, or that I’m an airhead who goes



crazy over dating.”

“Maybe not the best thing to say on a date,” he points out.

I chuckle. “Maybe not. But it’s too late, the hellhound’s out of the bag on that one.”

The server reappears with our drinks, placing them down without saying a word to interrupt our conversation.

“Why do you do it?” he asks.

“Do what?”

“Cheer.”

“Oh, right. When I was younger, Mum was desperate for me to do ballet, but I hated it. The other kids there were so much better than me and made it look effortless, but nothing I could do was good enough. I tried to convince her to let me try out for the netball team instead, but she refused. In the end, we compromised on cheer. I didn’t think I’d stick it out and I certainly didn’t think I’d still be doing it at nineteen. I almost didn’t go to tryouts at the beginning of the year, but then I realised I was already starting to miss it. Some of it is being part of a team that I like, but it’s also the challenge. You have to be fit, flexible, and a little reckless to pull some of the moves off, and there’s a part of me that likes that. It’s why I want to do the Hell Scramble too.” I take a sip of water, trying not to act too surprised by myself that I’ve told him that. Normally, I keep it to myself. Especially the ballet part.

“Did you sign up for the one here?”

“The Hell Scramble?”

He nods.

“No, I don’t have anyone to do it with.”

“Is it presumptuous to suggest that we should do it together?” he asks.

“I suppose if our first two dates were at a team building weekend, and our third is at an all-you-can-eat restaurant, our fourth being the Hell Scramble makes sense.”

He lets out a bemused laugh. “I’d hope for a fourth date *before* the Hell Scramble.”

My heart skips a beat. “I think I could be on board with that.”

“You don’t have to say yes until after you’ve seen me eat. That could be a deal breaker.”

I let out a light laugh. “We’re about to find out.” I nod towards the server approaching us with a large spit of meat. The savoury smell fills the air and makes my mouth water. It’s difficult to think about anything else, even the charming company that Ceb is, with how good it smells.

My stomach rumbles, only adding to that.

“What is it?” Ceb asks.

“This is pork rib with a teriyaki glaze,” the server responds. “Would you like it?”

“Please,” I say, pushing my plate closer to him so he can put some of the ribs on it. I need to go and get some salad to go with it, but I’ve been too into the conversation we’ve been having.

The server leaves us to move on to the next table.

“This looks really good,” I say.

“It does,” Ceb agrees. “Though now I’m starting to question whether this is a good idea for a date.”

I shrug. “I guess we wouldn’t be on a date if we didn’t think this was potentially something, right?”

“Right,” he agrees without a moment’s hesitation.

“Well, I’m not about to give up eating tasty ribs just for a relationship, so might as well check you can deal with it now.”

He chuckles. “That’s one way of looking at it. Maybe you’ll hate the way I chew.”

“And you might hate my snoring, but I think that’s something for us to check on a different date.” I pick up my ribs, enjoying the way he’s staring at me as if surprised by my statement. “What? Are you trying to tell me that you haven’t thought about it?”

“I didn’t think I was supposed to admit to it.”

I shrug. “Better to talk about these things than not. And if this is our third date, then perhaps you’ll be finding out sooner than you thought you would be.” I bite into the rib and let out a small ill-timed moan of enjoyment. Perhaps not the best sound to make given the way the conversation is going, but never mind, I don’t mind if he thinks about what happens when we take whatever this is between us further. “These are good,” I say.

“They look good,” he responds, picking one up and biting into it.

Neither of us say anything as we eat the ribs, lost in the delicious taste. This place is everything I remembered it being, and I like that we’ve been able to come here, even if it might not be the best kind of date.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” I say once we’ve finished eating.

“With the ribs?” Ceb asks.

A soft snort escapes me. “Not the ribs. The conversation.”

“You didn’t make me uncomfortable,” he assures me. “I think it’s more that I was taken off-guard. I’ve not been on many dates since I came to the academy. And certainly not any third dates.”

“Me neither. I don’t really know what I’m doing, I think I have a habit of blurting out what I’m thinking without considering the consequences. Right now, my mind is on how we can get more of those ribs.”

He lets out a good-natured laugh. “I think there’ll come round again, but there’ll be other stuff to try too.”

“Now that makes it hard. Do I fill up on the stuff I really like, or do I try everything?”

“You try everything and then we come back so you can have more of what you like then.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I say. “And I’m serious when it comes to delicious food.”

“I’m glad to hear it, because I am too. I love finding new places to eat.”

“Then we’re going to have a lot of fun. Though our student budget might not,” I joke, though it’s half-serious too.

“Would it please you to know that I’m a good cook then?”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I respond. “I’m okay at it. Mum gave me a simple student cookbook before I came to the academy, which is about the extent of my cooking skills. I make a good pasta bake.”

“I look forward to trying it,” he responds.

“You might regret saying that.”

“I don’t think I will,” he responds with a surprising amount of certainty.

And I get it. I feel the same way, even if this is only the first step in whatever there is between us.

## FOURTEEN



CEB

I HEAD towards the sports fields, trying not to feel too nervous about being here, especially when Evie is the one who invited me to meet her after practice.

I head over to where the cheer squad is going through their routine, stopping in my tracks as two of them are thrown into the air, only to be caught by those standing on the ground. I search for Evie amongst them, but I keep getting distracted by the rest of the routine. I've never watched them before, and now I am, I'm starting to realise what the big deal is. Their routine is clearly part dance and part gymnastics, and while I can't pretend to understand what I'm watching, it looks impressive.

A whistle sounds and one of the squad puts her hands on her hips. It takes me a moment to recognise her as the captain.

“All right, good practice, squad dismissed,” she calls.

The cheerleaders break apart, several of them splitting off into small groups. I scan the small crowd, a smile spreading across my face as my gaze falls on the one person I'm looking for. Evie says something to the blonde girl next to her who I

vaguely recognise from the team building weekend. I think Evie said that her name was Grace, or something like that.

She turns and spots me, waving as she heads in my direction.

“Hey.” She goes up on her toes and kisses my cheek, making me feel more than a little smug in the process.

“Good practice?”

“It’s better now,” she responds. “Let me just grab my bag, then we can head to Pixie Cups.” She heads over to the bench where her stuff is and picks it up, slinging it over her shoulder and heading straight back to me.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Yep. I’m all yours. No one else needs me until tomorrow, so we can take all the time we want.”

“You mean other than the impending deadline to sign up to the Hell Scramble?”

She nods. “I didn’t realise registration ended so soon.”

“Same, I only know because I looked it up last night,” I say as she falls into step beside me.

“I’m glad you did, otherwise we’d have had to wait an entire year to sign up again.” She rearranges her bag on her shoulder and lets out a small wince.

“You okay?”

“I think I pulled a muscle, nothing bad,” she responds. “I’ll shift when I get back to my room and it should sort it out. It’s one of the risks of having people stand on them.”

“It looks good though.”

“It does,” she agrees. “How long were you watching for?”

“Longer than I ever have before, but a few minutes at most. It’s amazing, I never realised how much work you all did.”

“No one does.” She pauses, clearly wanting to say something else.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“Well, we have the final round in our competition in a couple of months, I thought you might want to come watch. You don’t have to or anything.” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and glances at me. “Sorry, it’s probably too much, we’ve barely started dating, forget I said anything.”

Seeing an opportunity, I reach out and catch her hand in mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’d like that.”

“Even if it feels really serious?”

“It’s watching you do impressive tricks in a short skirt, I’m not sure how serious that is.”

She lets out a light laugh. “Well when you put it that way, I can see why you might be interested.”

“Are you seriously telling me you don’t think it’s hot?”

Amusement dances over her face. “They’re my teammates,” she points out. “I don’t think of them that way. It’s like asking you if you think your chess club friends are hot.”

“Hmm, good question, I’ve never really considered that.”

“And that’s exactly my point.”

We arrive at the coffee shop and she opens the door, holding it there so I can step inside.

“Thanks.”



The way she smiles at me makes my heart tighten. “What would you like to drink?” I ask.

“Green tea, if you don’t mind.”

“Why would I? It’s your drink.”

She frowns. “I don’t have a good answer to that. I guess because it’s not the normal kind of drink. I only ever really have it after cheering, it helps me to relax.”

“That’s as good a reason as any to have it,” I say, approaching the counter.

“Welcome to Pixie Cups, what can I get for you?” the barista asks in a cheery tone.

“A green tea and a cappuccino, please,” I say, pulling out my phone to pay.

“I can get these,” Evie says.

“If you want, but you can get the next ones instead, if you want?”

She chews on her bottom lip, then nods.

I touch my phone down onto the payment machine and wait for the beep.

The drinks appear in front of us within a couple of minutes, and I smile at the barista as I pick them up. “Where do you want to sit?” I ask Evie.

“Over there would be good.” She gestures to a table at the back of the coffee shop with a comfortable-looking sofa next to it. “We’re going to need to both be able to see the screen at the same time, right?”

I let out a hearty chuckle. “Is that your way of saying that you want us to sit close together?”

“It’s an added benefit.” She heads for the table and drops her bag onto the floor so she can sit.

I set the mugs down on the low coffee table, putting them in place so it’s clear I’m planning on joining her on the sofa.

The moment I sit down, she shuffles closer, turning her tablet so I can see the screen.

“I already pulled up the registration form. We need a team name.” The Hell Scramble logo flashes across the top of the screen, and even the concept of joining fills me with excitement.

“Cevie,” I joke.

She grimaces. “Absolutely not. For one, it sounds terrible. And for two, everyone will think that it’s a couple name.”

I snort. “Is that a bad thing?”

“It doesn’t exactly strike fear into our opponents,” she points out.

“Okay...then Chess Leading.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I can’t tell if you’re terrible at making up team names, or if you’re doing this to try and wind me up.” She moves even closer, and without thinking about it, I put an arm around her.

Evie glances up at me, her eyes filled with affection.

“I’m just bad at making them up,” I admit. “What would be a cool name for a hellhound team?”

“That’s a bad thing to consider, most of the teams are going to be made up of hellhounds,” she points out.

“Mmm, okay. Oh, what about calling ourselves the Greenfield Hounds? After where we met.”

“Super cheesy,” she says. “But I’m going to go with it, otherwise the timer will run out and we won’t have finished our submission.”

“That’s fair.” I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

She clicks through a few new screens, filling in the information we need.

“You are over eighteen, right?”

“I’m twenty next month, I took a gap year,” I assure her.

“Oh good, because this could have gotten really awkward,” She grins. “Okay, now I just need to pay, then we’re done.”

“Do you want my card?”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine, I’ve got mine saved in my browser anyway. You can just get the next sixteen coffees for us.”

“So long as that means we’re going to have sixteen more, I’m okay with that.”

“Then my devious plan is a success.” A cute smile spreads over her face, warming me all the way through. “Okay, we’re all signed up. I’ll forward the welcome email to you, and I think there’s an ObscureConnect group that we can join where people will post photos afterwards.”

“So long as you’re not tagged in them so your parents don’t know you’re doing the Hell Scramble, right?”

Evie lets out a snort of amusement. “I’m an adult, they can’t stop me, even if they want to.”

“Mmm, true.”

She slips her tablet back into her bag and turns her attention to her green tea. “I’m looking forward to it,” she says. “I don’t actually know what to expect. We should probably have done some training.”

“We can pretend that’s what team building was for.”

“I suppose that’s true. And thanks to that, we already know that we work well together,” she says.

“That’s true. I had no idea what to expect when I got on that bus, but I’m glad it went the way it did.”

“Me too. I think it’s really helped the squad in general, actually. Though I hope no one tells Zara that or she’ll make us do all kinds of things that take up the time I’m going to need to study.”

“Isn’t it good that it worked, though?”

“Oh, definitely. It’s a shame that we’ll lose some of the squad when they graduate at the end of term. It’ll change the whole dynamic.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll end up as the new captain, then you can shape the new recruits the way you want.”

She lets out a surprised laugh. “I don’t think I’m cheer captain material. Especially when I’m only a first year. It’ll be one of the new final years who takes over and I don’t mind that,” she assures me. “It sounds like a lot of stress that I don’t want.”

“Mmm, fair.”

“Would you take on the head of the chess club? I don’t even know if that’s a thing.”

“It is. But I feel the same way you do, it’s not a responsibility that I want, and I think there are other people

who are probably much better suited to it.”

“Like your friend Ingrid? When she’s not busy knocking people off rafts, that is.”

“I don’t think it’s Ingrid’s thing. And I’m still surprised she shifted, I don’t even know what kind of shifter she is.”

“Other than a big one, you mean,” Evie responds. “That was a large tail that knocked me off.”

“I didn’t even know that. She’s told me she’s a shifter, and hinted that it’s some kind of water creature, but not told me anything other than that.”

“How cryptic.”

I shrug. “I don’t think about it very much. She’s not the only friend I have whose species I don’t know. Not everyone likes to share.”

“I know, I’ve known plenty of people and not known that, though a lot of people seem to be more open about it here.”

“Probably because the academy is all supernatural students. And there are so many societies and groups to join. People just naturally end up sharing more,” I say.

“Perhaps. I don’t know enough about psychology to be sure. I’m a numbers person.”

“It’d be interesting to know if there’s a link,” I respond.

She lets out a sigh and leans into me. “This is nice, by the way.”

“What is?”

“Just you coming to meet me after practice and coming for a coffee. It’s not something I ever thought about much, but I like it.”

“Same.” I smile at her, enjoying the moment as much as she is.

I hope we have many more of them to come.

## FIFTEEN



### EVIE

I SMOOTH down my dress and make my way into Krissi's kitchen for pre-drinks, surprised by how busy it is inside. It seems like we're not the only ones who got an invite.

"Hey," I say, waving at my fellow cheerleaders and taking a seat next to Mandy.

"Evie! Hey," Krissi responds. "We're just starting a game of *I have never*, so you're just in time."

"Great," I mutter.

Mandy lets out an amused snort from beside me.

"I know how you feel, I hate this game," someone says from my other side.

I turn and offer her a smile. "Zoya, right?"

She nods. "Good to see you again."

"I didn't realise Krissi was having a party," I admit. "Just pre-drinks."

"I don't think she is, she cornered me in the kitchen this morning and invited me."

I frown. “You don’t live here, though, right?” I think through Krissi’s flatmates, but the only one I haven’t met is the one no one has ever seen.

“No, but my boyfriend does.”

“Oh, right, you started dating Cyprus, I remember Krissi saying.”

Zoya lets out a small laugh. “Yeah, news travels fast around here.”

“Especially when *I have never* is being played. I hate that this seems to have become our favourite game,” I admit.

“It gets everyone drunk fast, isn’t that the point?” Mandy says.

“Mmm. You don’t have to convince me, I know *why* we play. But that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Okay, who is starting?” Krissi calls.

“I will,” Jazz responds from a few seats down. “I have never...stolen milk from a flatmate.”

At least I’m not the only one who can’t come up with a good one. A few people drink, but it doesn’t cause the same ruckus as some of the ones I’ve heard before.

“I have never shifted into another form,” Grace says.

I take a drink.

“Oh no, now it’s my turn,” Zoya mutters. “Oh, I know. I’ve never been a cheerleader.”

I let out a small laugh. “You had it easy.” I take a sip.

“Only this time around, next time it’ll be harder again. And now it’s your turn.”



“Oh, erm...I have never been in the academy lake while drunk,” I say.

Some of them others drink.

“I know!” Mandy says, seeming excited. “I have never dated a guy with three heads.”

I let out a loud snort, and take a drink, knowing she’s aiming that at me.

“I think we need an explanation,” Grace says.

“Remember the guy Evie met at team building?” Mandy asks.

“You mean the one she kept ditching us for?” Grace responds, amusement written all over her face.

“That’s the one,” Mandy confirms. “He has three heads.”

“Wait, what?” Grace looks between us.

“She means in his hellhound form,” I explain.

“Are we talking up here or down there?” Grace points to her head first, and then at her lap, a wickedly amused grin on her face.

My cheeks flush. “I wouldn’t know.” But now it’s something I’m going to be worrying about now. I wouldn’t even know how to start dealing with something like that.

Or how to bring it up with Ceb.

“Well when you do find out, I want to know,” Grace says.

“And you’re not going to,” I retort.

She leans back and crosses her arms, giving me a knowing smile. “Mmhmm. I bet you end up telling us.”

“See what kind of trouble you’re getting me in?” I ask my best friend.

Mandy snorts. “Sorry, I don’t often come up with good *I have nevers*, I was excited to have one.”

“It’s fine, but don’t think I’m not going to get you back on the next round.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And how are you going to do that?”

I open my mouth to respond, but realise I don’t actually have an answer for that, especially not one that’s fun and in line with the game. “You don’t have many dating stories.”

“No.”

“Or stories of disastrous one-night stands.”

“Because you have lots of those yourself?” She picks up her cup and drinks to Krissi’s go.

“Well, no, I don’t suppose I do.” But it does give me an idea for something I can say.

Jazz clears her throat. “I have never done ballet.”

I take a drink, along with several of the others. It seems that I’m not the only one who is struggling to come up with some good ones.

The alcohol starts to make me feel warm and fuzzy inside as it takes hold. This is why the game makes sense.

“I have never had a one-night stand,” I say when it’s my turn, watching Mandy for her response.

Unsurprisingly, she doesn’t drink. Several of the others don’t either, which isn’t particularly surprising either.

The game slips away as everyone gets a little drunker, and the room fills with excited chatter.

“The taxis are here,” Jazz calls. “We need to go if we want to get to Jungle before they up the price.”

“Isn’t that the club for shifters?” Zoya asks.

“They have rooms for everyone,” I respond. “But there’s a shifting room.”

“How does that even work?”

“You can shift inside it and then dance shifted. It’s fun,” I respond.

“Now I’m disappointed I’ve never tried it,” Zoya muses.

I frown. “I didn’t realise you were a shifter. You don’t smell like it. Wait, no, forget I said that, it was rude.”

“It’s fine,” she assures me, her words not nearly as slurred as mine. “I’m a ghoul, I can shift, but I’m not a shifter.”

“Oh, same. I’m not *technically* a shifter. But I also am. It’s very confusing.”

She chuckles. “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Most shifters aren’t on fire,” I muse.

“You’re on fire when you shift?”

“Yeah, kind of. On my back. It doesn’t hurt. I think I’ve drunk a bit too much.”

“I think you have,” she agrees. “Let me grab you some water before we go down to the taxis.” She heads over to the sink and fills up a cup, bringing it back to me.

“Thanks.” I sip it slowly, not wanting to rush it down and end up making myself sick.

“Are you going to be okay coming out?” Zoya asks. “I can take you back to your flat if you want?”

“I’ll be fineeeee,” I promise. “I can go and shift, then I’ll feel better.”

“That’s certainly an advantage.”

“I think I’m going to go home,” Mandy says. “I don’t feel so good, and hours of feeling other people’s horniness doesn’t sound appealing to me.”

I frown. “Don’t you eat that?”

“Horniness?”

“Yeah.”

“No? What would make you think that?”

“Well, I don’t know how succubi work,” I admit. “You’ve never told me much.” A pang of hurt passes through me, which is interesting because I didn’t realise I felt that way. I know I need to give her time to talk to me about this kind of stuff, and that she has started to, but I guess it makes me feel as if she doesn’t trust me. But pushing her also isn’t the best thing for me to do, especially when we’ve both been drinking.

“I don’t want to have this conversation,” Mandy murmurs.

“Okay, I’m sorry.” I make a zipping motion over my mouth. “Love you, Mandyyyyy.”

She gives me a sad smile. “Love you too, Evie.”

“Come on, let’s get to the taxis before they go without us,” Zoya says. “Will you be okay, Mandy?”

She nods. “I only live in the next building over.”

“Message me when you get home still?” I say.

“Of course. You’d better do the same,” she responds.

“Always. Safety first,” I say. “Sleep well.” I hug her.

She embraces me in turn, reassuring me that I haven’t completely put my foot in it by pushing her on how her powers work.

“See you tomorrow,” I say.

“Yep, I want to hear everything about the rest of the night.”

“You know I will.” I wave goodbye to her, hoping she’ll be okay. Most likely, she’ll end up passing out in her bed and sleeping off the drinks. If I was a sensible hellhound, I’d do the same, but a night of dancing and fun sounds too good for me to pass up.

## SIXTEEN



### EVIE

THE LIGHTS FLASH and the music pulses, filling the club with an atmosphere like no other.

The only problem is that my head is already starting to spin. I should have followed Mandy's lead and gone back to my flat to sleep off the drink, but I didn't think about that.

I reach out and touch Krissi's arm. "I'm going to the shifting room," I shout over the music once I have her attention.

She nods in understanding, probably realising that I need to get rid of some of the fuzzy feeling in my head.

I slip off the dance floor, weaving my way through the partiers with surprising ease. I climb the stairs and head to the back where a large door waits. A neon sign flashes the word *shifter* above it and I find my excitement building.

I push through it and enter the cloakroom, heading to one of the lockers so I can store my clutch bag. While my dress can shift with me, my bag doesn't have the option to, and I don't want to lose it. Or worse, have it stolen. I type in the

keycode and carry on into the next room, choosing one of the cubicles and going inside. I've only done this once before, but thankfully, it's fairly straightforward.

I call forth a shift, feeling the haziness of drinking slip away as it takes hold. I take a deep breath, letting the energy of the shift travel through me, helping my head to clear even further. It's nice to be able to have somewhere in the club itself where I can do this, rather than having to wait until I get home.

I step out of the cubicle and into the club room. It isn't as packed as the human room, but there are shifters everywhere I look. An elephant is in the corner shaking their trunk in time to the music, while a pair of big cats seem to be chasing one another across the floor.

The plants that line the dance floor are full of smaller shifters, with several birds and a monkey making their way through them. It's a surreal sight, and like nothing I've ever experienced anywhere else. There are other places where a lot of shifters congregate and shift together, but this feels a little different because it comes with such a human activity.

I make my way onto the floor, completely ignoring everyone else. This might be more fun if I had someone else with me, but it's still nice to be here in my hellhound form. It's freeing in a way that I don't really have words to find.

I turn around, stopping in my tracks as I recognise a larger hellhound with three heads and a very familiar scent, one that I'm surprised to come across here, but am glad about all the same. My heart skips a beat and I let out a loud bark to gain Ceb's attention.

One of his heads turns in my direction, and even in the dimness of the club, I can see his eyes light up. He bounds towards me, surprisingly light on his large paws.

I push my front paws forward and stick my tiny tail in the air, using the momentum to bounce around.

He lets out what seems like an amused bark.

For a moment, I consider trying something similar to what the big cat shifters are up to, but that's not what I want. I didn't think I'd get to see him tonight, and now that I have, I want to spend time with him in my human form.

I gesture with my head towards the cubicles for us to shift in and hurry towards it, hoping he's going to follow. I slip inside, glad there's enough space for two of us in here, especially if I shift back into my human form before he enters himself.

Excitement zips through me as I change back, turning to face the door as soon as I'm human again.

Ceb makes his way inside, shifting back almost immediately too.

"Hey," I say, feeling suddenly surprisingly nervous.

"Hey." He steps closer and reaches out to pull me into his arms without waiting a moment, sending a warm fuzzy feeling through me that has nothing to do with how much I've had to drink. Especially since I've had a shift and chased most of it away. "I didn't think you'd be here."

"Same. I had a night out with the squad."

He frowns. "Where are they? It looked like you were on your own in there."

"Oh, they're on the dance floor. Except for Mandy, she went home already."

"Ah, so no awkward comments about how attracted to you I am, then?"



“Only if you make them yourself,” I counter, aware of how close together we are. We’re probably not supposed to be in the shifting cubicles like this, but I don’t care. I’m enjoying the moment too much, especially now the effects of drinking have been chased out of my head.

“Mmm, I could do that, you look amazing.” The way he’s looking at me makes the entire club has disappeared. Despite not having planned this, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here.

“Thank you.” I reach out and place a hand on his chest. I press myself closer to him, hoping he’ll get the hint that I want him to kiss me.

As if he read my thoughts, he pulls me closer, and I know what’s coming next. He leans in and captures my lips with his. I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss and letting myself sink into it.

We break apart, but don’t move away from one another.

“Come back with me,” I murmur.

“To the dance floor?” he asks.

I shake my head. “To my flat.”

“Evie...” He reaches up and brushes a strand of hair out of my face. Indecision wars over his face, as if he wants to say yes but feels like he should say no.

“The shift cleared my head,” I say in case that’s what he’s worrying about. I’m not sure whether it is or not, but it’s good to get that out in the open.

“You’re very tempting.”

“I’m trying to be.” I bite my bottom lip, but don’t say anything else. I don’t want to push him if he doesn’t want this,

but I'm trying to make it clear that this is what *I* want.

"Okay," he whispers.

"Really?" I can't keep the excitement out of my voice.

Ceb chuckles. "Yes, really." He leans in and kisses me again, taking me far away from any thoughts of him not wanting this. "If you're sure?" he murmurs against my lips.

"I've never been more certain." I pull back and take his hand in mine, pulling him towards the exit. "I need to grab my bag so I can message my friends," I say as we pause at the lockers, getting my stuff out of it. I type out a quick message to Krissi and hit send. Now that's done, I can focus on the more important part of my evening.

And without the lingering effects of alcohol in my system, I'll get to enjoy every moment of it with a crystal clear head.

## SEVENTEEN



### EVIE

I KNOCK on Mandy's door and push it open. "It's me."

Mandy groans. "Please tell me you brought coffee."

I chuckle. "I did." I enter the room and head over to her bed, setting one of the takeaway coffee cups on her bedside table.

She shuffles up in the bed, sitting up properly and reaching out for it. "Thanks, Evie."

"You're welcome."

She frowns and looks in my direction, studying me intently. "You're very bright."

"Oh, I shifted at Jungle last night, it got rid of the drunkenness."

"Uh, no, that's not what it is." She gasps. "You saw Ceb, didn't you?"

A blush rises to my cheeks. I hadn't considered that she'd be able to tell. "Yes, I saw Ceb, we ran into each other in the shifter room."

“Please tell me you didn’t do something dumb at the club.”

“No, of course not. We went back to my flat, and I can assure you that it was anything other than dumb.”

“Mmhmm, I can tell. The glow you’re sporting is doing more for my hangover than the coffee,” she murmurs.

I don’t even know how I’m supposed to feel about that. “You’re welcome?”

She shrugs. “It’s weird, right?”

“A little,” I admit. “But it’s not like you’re doing it on purpose.”

A sad expression flits across her face, but she forces a smile on.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“For what? Coming here after you spent the night with Ceb? That’s a weird thing to apologise for, especially if you’ve showered.”

I let out a low chuckle. “I showered. But I was actually apologising for last night. I asked questions that made you uncomfortable, and I shouldn’t have. I guess I was just aware that you haven’t talked much about your magic before, and I was curious. But that’s no excuse for pushing you the way I did.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “But I’m sorry too.”

Confusion floods through me. “What for?” I take a sip of my tea while I wait for her to elaborate.

“Because I’ve been giving you weird bits of half-information, but not elaborating on anything. If someone was

doing that to me, I'd get really frustrated about it. It's no wonder you wanted answers."

"I don't need them," I promise. "And it's not that weird. I was going to tell you about what happened last night anyway, you just get to beat me to the punch."

"That's true. I take it that things went well."

I let out a loud sigh. "That's one way of putting it."

"So nothing weird, you-know-where?"

"Eurgh, Grace got into your head, didn't she?" I ask.

She lets out a gravelly chuckle. "I have to admit being curious, but only from an intellectual standpoint."

I roll my eyes. "I feel like everyone's going to be really disappointed to learn that everything was perfectly normal. Though Ceb might not be pleased to realise that everyone's been asking."

"You should probably give him a heads up before he comes to practice again."

"Argh, I hadn't even considered that. *Please* keep Grace away from him next time he comes."

"I'll do my best, but I'm not sure that anything can stop her when she's on a mission."

"Don't remind me," I mutter. I can't say I'm particularly enthused by the idea that Grace has decided I'm her mission.

Mandy fiddles with the hem of her oversized t-shirt, seeming distracted.

"You okay?" I ask.

She sighs. "I drank a lot last night."

“I know. But you did the sensible thing and came home to rest. We can go get hangover food from Chicken Hut or Desserts After Dark if you want?”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine. I have some bacon in the fridge, I’ll just cook that up.”

“So what’s bothering you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she mutters.

“Okay.”

She looks up at me, confusion written all over her face. “Okay?”

I nod. “If you don’t want to talk about it, then that’s okay. You can change your mind at any point and I’ll be ready to listen.”

Relief flashes across her face. “Thanks, Evie.”

“What are friends for?”

“Distracting me, I hope. What are you doing for the rest of the day?”

“I’m meeting Ceb later for some last-minute Hell Scramble prep. I don’t even know how, but it’s next week and I’m not ready.”

“I don’t have a clue what the Hell Scramble even is.” Mandy takes a sip of her coffee.

“It’s an assault course, basically. But it’s intended to be done in both human and shifter forms. All of the obstacles need different skills.”

“Huh, that sounds fun. Impossible for me, but fun.”

“I’ve always wanted to do it, and now I finally have a chance to. I’m excited, but I’m not prepared.”

“And Ceb’s doing it with you?” she asks.

I nod. “You compete as a pair.”

“So things are getting serious between the two of you.” It’s clearly a statement and not a question.

“I don’t know if they’re serious yet, we haven’t really had the conversation. But I like him, and I want to spend more time with him, so I guess I’m at least most of the way to serious.”

Mandy chuckles. “And most of the way in denial too.”

“What? No, I’m not.”

She raises an eyebrow. “How long have we known each other?”

“Erm, since September, so nine months, give or take. Why?”

“Because in all that time, I’ve barely known you to go on one date, never mind multiples with the same person,” she says.

“I guess so. I’ve just never been interested enough in anyone to go on multiple dates. Ceb is just different. Maybe it’s because we met at the team building weekend so neither of us were thinking about meeting anyone. I don’t think anyone went to that with the intention of ending with a date.”

“True.”

“I can’t tell you why he’s different. He just is. But I’m having fun, and that’s the main thing, right?”

“It is,” she assures me. “And I’m happy for you. As are the others, I’m sure.”

“But they’ll be disappointed when they learn that everything is anatomically normal.”

Mandy lets out a loud snort. “Probably. What’s the point in having three heads if everything else is normal?”

“I regret telling you that,” I mutter. “But it’s only in his hellhound form. His human form is like ours, completely normal.”

“Mine’s not,” Mandy replies.

“It isn’t?” I study her, but can’t see any hint of her horns on her forehead.

“You’ve never spent much time looking at my back, have you?”

“Unsurprisingly, no. I’ve never had a reason to.”

“You can see my wings against my skin even when I don’t have them out,” she says. “They just look a bit like a tattoo.”

“Huh, that’s cool.”

“Yeah, I suppose. It’s more of a reason not to wear backless dresses.”

“You don’t want people to see that you’re a succubus?”

“Not if I can help it,” she responds. “It just leads to a lot of questions I don’t want to answer.”

I nod in understanding. She seems to be having a problem talking to me about some parts of her nature, so I doubt she wants to talk about it with strangers, particularly those who recognise what she is.

She leans back against the wall and takes another sip of her coffee. “Okay, I’m starting to feel more normal, now,” she says. “I might even try to shower.”



“That’s a good idea.”

“But the coffee and your glow have definitely helped the hangover, I appreciate it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time we’ve been drinking, even if it’s a bit weird,” I promise.

“I won’t hold you to it.”

I smile, knowing that it doesn’t really matter if she does or not. She’s the person I’m going to turn to when I want to talk about my relationship with someone other than Ceb himself, so it’ll happen by accident anyway. And now I know what to expect from Mandy, it’s going to be a whole lot less weird to deal with.

## EIGHTEEN



### EVIE

EXCITEMENT ZIPS through every part of me as I stand at the entrance to the Hell Scramble, and I can hardly believe that we're here and really doing this.

"Here," Ceb says, handing me a bottle of water.

"Thanks." I take it from him and unscrew the cap so I can take a drink. "I'm weirdly nervous."

"Because you want to win."

"It didn't take you long to learn that about me, did it?"

"Not even slightly," he agrees. "You know we're not going to, right?"

"I know, I know. One of the teams who does this all the time will win. But it doesn't mean that I'm not going to try."

He lets out a good-natured laugh. "Then we'll do our best. I think we're up in five."

I nod and drink some more water. I set the bottle down on the floor and start some stretches. My muscles should be fairly safe from strain so long as I don't do any damage to them

when I'm in my hellhound form, but I want to warm myself up well enough to avoid any issues.

A number flashes up on the board above the entrance to the course.

"That's us," Ceb says.

"Okay. I'm ready." I hand him my bottle and he sticks it into the locker along with our phones and other stuff. "This is going to be fun."

"I think that's the point." He reaches out and takes my hand in his.

We head towards the entrance, only pausing to give our registration numbers and names.

"Go on the whistle," an automated voice says as we approach the starting line.

We share a look, both of us grinning like crazy. I can tell from the tension in his arm that he's feeling the same sense of anticipation as I am. This is going to be good. Not just for our budding relationship, but also because it'll be a lot of fun for us too.

A countdown blinks in front of us and a whistle sounds the moment it gets to zero.

I drop his hand and start to run, not shifting just yet. I don't know precisely what the course is going to need, but it's good to get the lay of the land first.

The barriers on either side of us herd us towards the entrance to two small tunnels, making it good that we didn't shift straight away as neither of our hellhound forms would have fit inside it.

I go down on my stomach and start crawling, dragging myself forward with my arms while I assume Ceb does the same in the other one. My heart pounds with the excitement of the event, and the determination that I have to win.

I know we're not going to get the best time for the entire Hell Scramble, successfully completing it will be enough for me.

I reach the end of the tunnel and find myself in a thick puddle of mud. I pull myself to my feet and look up at the next obstacle.

"We're going to have to shift," I say to Ceb as he joins me.

"Yep," he agrees as he looks up at the huge slope in front of us. It's too steep for me to be able to get enough continuous traction in my human form.

Which is the point. We're supposed to have to compete in the course in both our human and shifted forms. I don't wait another moment and call forth a shift, shaking out my fur as my hellhound self takes over.

I back up as far as I can and run towards the hill, gaining as much speed and momentum as possible. The muscles in my legs scream against the movement, but I ignore it, spurring myself on to the best of my ability.

It takes some doing, but I soon manage to get myself to the top. I glance back down to see Ceb making slightly slower progress up the hill. His paws and claws are stronger than mine, but his bigger size is giving him a slight disadvantage.

While I wait, I scan the rest of the assault course, impressed that I'm able to see so much of it from this vantage point. Though maybe that's intentional.

I let my human form take to the front, as does Ceb when he reaches the top.

“That was harder than I thought it would be,” he says.

I nod. “Hopefully, the rest won’t be too bad.” I gesture out towards the rest of the assault course.

“The flames over there could be a problem for me,” he says, pointing to where several bursts of flame shoot up into the air.

I watch as a hellhound slips through them and hits their paw against something. The flames disappear, and a second hellhound goes to join them.

“Okay, it looks like I’ll be able to do that one,” I say. “I’m guessing the button they just pressed will turn off the flames and let a non-fireproof partner through.”

“That sucks if neither of you are.”

I chuckle. “True. But maybe they take that into account and switch off the fire?” I shrug. “Either way, it doesn’t really matter for us, I won’t be burned.”

He nods. “All right, what are we thinking for the next part?”

I glance down at the ground. “Hellhound. We need to jump, and I don’t know about you, but I’m much more bouncy when I have paws.”

Ceb chuckles. “Yeah, I get that. We’ll have to shift quickly to be able to dodge through those.” He points to a group of swinging balls that are trying to knock a pair of contestants off a thin pathway.

“Is it bad that I’m excited about that? I’ve always wanted to do one.”

“I’d be worried if you weren’t,” he counters. “We’re supposed to be here to have fun.”

“Good point. You ready?”

He nods and before either of us can say anything else, he’s regained his hellhound form.

I follow suit and dip my head at him, signalling that I’m ready to jump.

I count down in my head and catapult myself off the top of the hill. Wind whistles past my ears and I land deftly on all four paws at the bottom.

Ceb thuds down beside me, not quite as elegantly landing, but still managing to get where he needs to be, which is the main thing.

All three of his heads seem to be grinning widely, and I imagine that I look the same. This is already a lot of fun, and I know the rest of it is going to be the same.

We race off through the course, the thrill of the challenge pumping adrenaline through my veins. I can’t believe this is the first time I’ve ever taken part in the Hell Scramble, and I’m certain that it’s not going to be the last.

A large body of water appears before us as well as a wall with handholds and a thin walkway. I switch back to my human form, already soaked in sweat and mud and not caring in the slightest. Perhaps I should, considering this is technically a date, but that’s what makes it perfect. I’m comfortable around Ceb, and that’s the most important thing to me. I *should* be able to do something like this with him and not worry about how my hair looks or if my makeup is perfect.

And from the way he’s looking at me, I don’t think any of that has even crossed his mind. He seems to be enjoying the

challenge and the time we're spending together just as much as I am.

Which is all I can ask for.

## NINETEEN



CEB

I PULL myself out of the huge pool of mud and spit out some of it that got in my mouth.

Evie reaches the side and starts to pull herself out but slips and falls backwards. I head over and hold out a hand. She takes it, smiling up at me in a way that makes my heart skip a beat. Even covered in mud with at least three scratches on her face and slightly red-faced from the exertion of the course, she's gorgeous.

“One last run,” I say, gesturing towards the finish line.

She nods and sets off jogging. I fall into step beside her, neither of us having the energy for much more. Even with the practice and mostly being in shape, it's still been a tough event. I'm going to make sure we're more prepared next year.

Though Evie seems to have suffered much less than I have, no doubt her cheer training has put her in good stead.

I stumble over the finish line, half tempted to collapse.

“We did it,” Evie says, half jumping up and down.



“We did.” A wide smile breaks over my face as I take in the absolute joy on hers.

Someone clears their throat from a few feet away, calling our attention to them. “Congratulations on completing the Hell Scramble,” the woman says.

“Thanks,” Evie responds.

“It’s my honour to present you with these medals.” Her words are good, but I can tell from her tone and expression that she’s bored of saying them over and over again.

It’s no matter, it does nothing to dampen my enjoyment of the afternoon.

“Thank you,” Evie says as the woman slips the medal over her neck, then moves on to me.

The metal is heavy, but has that tang to it that makes it clear that it’s cheap. Which is to be expected, considering that they’ll have had to buy hundreds of them.

“Your scores will be posted in the ObscureConnect group once the course has closed this evening,” she says, clearly dismissing us.

Evie slips her hand into mine and gives me a cute smile. “What now?”

“I guess we go get something to eat? I think I saw food vans on the way in.”

“Ah, I thought I smelled a hog roast. I could eat.”

“Then hog roast it is.” I give her hand a squeeze and we make our way from the Hell Scramble course exit and towards the tents that have been set up as a kind of festival kind of thing.

It's easy to tell who has already completed the course and who hasn't just from the amount of mud on their outfits, but it doesn't seem to matter much for the atmosphere. Everyone is chattering away happily and it feels as if something exciting is going on.

"You have mud on your nose," Evie says.

"Oh?" I turn to face her.

She lets go of my hand and steps closer, wiping it away. "There you go," she whispers.

"Was that just an excuse to be closer to me?"

Her lips quirk up into a bemused smile. "Do I need an excuse?"

"Hmm, maybe not. You are my girlfriend after all." The words slip out without me meaning them to, and for a brief moment, I panic that I've said something wrong and made her uncomfortable in the process.

But then her whole face lights up. "I am?"

"I should have asked, shouldn't I?"

"This is cute too," she responds.

"So we're making this official?" I check.

"I'd like that." She wraps her arms around my neck. "I'd like it a lot."

"Me too." I rest a hand on the small of her back and pull her closer.

Her eyes close as I lean in and kiss her, hoping that she can tell just how much I mean it. I suppose we should have had this conversation a week ago, but I don't think it matters,

especially not when I know neither of us has been dating other people either.

We pull apart and a wide grin spreads over her face. “That was a lot of fun.”

“The kiss, the conversation, or the assault course?”

She lets out a light laugh. “All of it.”

“Was it what you expected it to be?” I take her hand in mine again and head over towards the hog roast stand, assuming that’s what she wants.

“Better,” she responds. “And I think we made good time. Though we’ll do better next year.”

“I think so, we’ll know what to expect then.”

“You didn’t get burned, did you? Those flames came close to your arm.” She reaches out to touch me even though it doesn’t do anything.

“I don’t think so, but I can let you check me over later just to be sure.”

She lets out an amused snort. “I’m going to hold you to that. Though I’ll need a shower the moment we get back to the academy. I have mud in places I don’t want to think about thanks to that last part of the course.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.” A knowing smile spreads over my face about just how I can make that possible.

“Ceb!”

“What?” I tug on her hand and bring her closer to me.

She comes willingly, placing a hand on my chest. “You can’t just say things like that.”

“Oh, but you can check me over for injuries?”

“Hmmm, well, when you put it like that...”

I chuckle and lean in to kiss her again, enjoying just how easy it is to spend time with her and have moments like this. I felt it from the moment we met at the team building weekend, and the more time I’ve spent with her, the more certain I’ve felt that spending more time together is right.

“I’ll warn you that I may just fall asleep,” she murmurs as we break apart.

“That’s okay too,” I promise, reaching out and brushing a strand of loose hair away from her face. “Even if you snore really loud.”

“Not too badly, I hope.”

“I think it’s adorable,” I assure her. “But I might also buy some earplugs.”

She rolls her eyes. “I *know* it’s not that bad.”

“Then you’re in denial,” I joke.

“Well, I’m not the only one. You snore too. And you drool,” she teases, but I can tell from her expression that she’s not actually annoyed.

“How can I not when you’re next to me?”

“Please tell me you didn’t just say that?” Amusement dances in her eyes.

“You are the hottest member of the Sapphire Sparks.”

“You’re biased.”

“Correct.” I grin like a fool.

“And you’re charming,” she admits. “But I need you to put the charm away so I can get some food, because I’m starving.”

“Me too.” We join the back of the line to get food and I keep stealing glances at her.

I didn't go to the team building weekend for any other reason than it sounded fun, but it's easily one of the best things I've done since coming to Obscure Academy. And Evie is one of the reasons why.



## EPILOGUE

EVIE

NERVES FLUTTER through my stomach as I wait for our team to be called to the stage. I hate this part of competing. No matter how many times I think through the routine and the moves I need to make, I always find myself worrying about if I'm going to manage to do it right.

I take a deep breath and try to centre myself.

"You've got a visitor," Mandy says, nodding towards the door.

I look over and my heart skips a beat when Ceb waves at me.

"I'll make sure Zara doesn't notice you're missing," Mandy promises, amusement clear in her voice.

"Thanks." I ignore her smugness, pleased that Ceb is here, and that she's going to cover for me. "I'll be back soon."

She nods and waves me off, while I hurry to the door. I grab hold of Ceb's hand and pull him to the side.

"You came."

"I did. I'm looking forward to seeing you compete, I know you've been working hard for it."

"We have." Warmth spreads through me. I know we've been together for a couple of months now, but it still feels like a big deal that he's here.

He steps closer and places a hand on my waist. I lean into him, enjoying the way he smells and feels when he holds me

in his arms.

“I love you,” he says. “Maybe right before you perform isn’t the best time to say it, but I need you to know.”

My heart swells to several times its normal size. Or it certainly feels like it does. “I love you too,” I respond, certain in the words. “And now is good, it distracts me from being nervous.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re nervous?”

“Wouldn’t you be? We’ve been training for this for months. For some of the squad, it’s their last chance to win the competition. It’s a big deal.”

“I know that, I guess you just always seem so confident.”

I reach up to try and sweep some hair out of my face, only to remember that it’s tied up neatly like it’s supposed to be. “This is the only time I don’t feel it,” I admit.

He nods. “Well if it helps, I believe in you. I don’t know the first thing about cheering, but I’ve seen you practising, and it looks good.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “That’s something, though I don’t think it’ll calm anyone down.”

“Not even you?”

“Maybe.”

“You did once tell me that it wasn’t about the winning, it was about playing the game.”

“And that was clearly a lie, I like winning as much as anyone. Remember how disappointed I was that we didn’t win the Hell Scramble?”

“We were never going to win that.”



*“Exactly. And yet I still sulked about it.”*

“Adorably,” he assures me.

“I’m glad you think so, because you’re the one who is going to have to cheer me up later if we lose today.”

“I thought you were going out with the squad?”

“If we win, sure. If we lose, I’m going to want to eat my weight in ice cream. And that’s my hellhound weight, not my human weight.”

He chuckles. “I’m not sure we can get hold of that much ice cream at short notice, but on the off-chance, you lose, I promise that I’ll make a stop by Desserts After Dark on my way back to my flat so I have all of your favourites.”

A warm fuzzy feeling comes over me and I step closer to him. “Now with that offer on the table, I might be tempted to lose on purpose.”

“I’ve met Zara, I recommend you don’t.”

My lips quirk up into a smile. “Then perhaps we can have a dessert date tomorrow anyway? Win or lose?”

“That can be arranged,” he promises.

The door to the dressing room opens and Mandy pops her head around it. “Zara’s ready to start her briefing.”

“All right, I’ll come in a second.”

She nods and disappears back inside.

“I have to go,” I say. “But thank you for coming, it means a lot that you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything,” he promises.

I lean in and press my lips against his, kissing him deeply, safe in the knowledge that everything he's saying is true. I don't need him here in order to perform well, but it gives me a boost to know that he's come to support me.

And I can't ask for any more than that. It's funny how a team-building weekend for the cheer squad ended up with me creating another team too. Even if there are just the two of us in it, I'm excited about what adventures we'll discover together.

\* \* \*

THANK you for reading *Team Building For Friendly Hellhounds*, I hope you enjoyed it! You can continue the series with Mandy's story in *Finding Answers For Confused Succubi*:

<http://books2read.com/findinganswersforconfusedsuccubi>

You can also download a free bonus HEA scene from Ceb's point of view here:

<https://books.authorlauragreenwood.co.uk/u9xtu2nheo>

## AUTHOR NOTE

Thank you for reading *Team Building For Friendly Hellhounds*, I hope you enjoyed it.

Evie and Ceb came into my life (and my head) at a point where I really needed something fun and light, and I'm so glad that they did. I love to write and it's always an escape for me, but this one was probably more so than any of my others. While Evie and Ceb aren't saving the world, or even dealing with a complicated relationship, they are upbeat and fun, something I needed, and I hope other people will too.

Several of the other characters who appear in the book have had their stories already, including Krissi ([\*Shifting Forms For Clumsy Felines\*](#)), Grace & Henry ([\*Minor Inconveniences For Annoyed Pixies\*](#)), Jazz ([\*Bonfire Night For Flammable Dragons\*](#)), and Zoya ([\*Cooking Classes For Vegetarian Ghouls\*](#)), while several of the others have up-coming stories, including Mandy ([\*Finding Answers For Confused Succubi\*](#)), Sera ([\*Recalling Memories For Forgetful Phoenixes\*](#)), and Zara. Zara's book will include the final round of the cheerleader's competition. I may also write a future book for Ingrid (which will reveal what she is!)

I never originally intended for the cheer squad to have such a prominent role in the series, but the more I wrote about

them, the more clear it became that they had lots of stories and antics to tell - and it's a fun thread through the whole thing!

If you want to keep up to date with new releases and other news, you can join my [Facebook Reader Group](#) or [mailing list](#).

Stay safe & happy reading!

- Laura

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You can find out more about each of my series on my [website](#).

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## ABOUT LAURA GREENWOOD

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!

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