



MONSTER'S OBSESSION

BLACKTHORN ACADEMY
FOR SUPERNATURALS

TJ BELL

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BOOK NINE



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BOOK NINE

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TJ BELL

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THANK YOU FOR RESPECTING THE HARD WORK OF THIS AUTHOR.

MONSTER'S OBSESSION

He's obsessed with her; she's obsessed with staying out of Hell.

Daruka is hiding from her oppressive father, who wants to force her to join the family business. The family business? Managing Hell.

Asmoday is part lust demon, part elf. Everybody wants a piece of him, but no one takes him seriously. He's mostly okay with that. Until he meets her.

Now, Daruka and Asmoday are about to take on Satan himself, and Asmoday still isn't even sure if this girl likes him.

Welcome to Blackthorn Academy.

Monster's Obsession is book nine in the Blackthorn Academy for Supernaturals shared world, featuring a snarky mermaid heroine, a slightly obsessed demon hero, a deal with the devil, lots of laughs, hot monster hookups, and more.

CHAPTER 1



RUNNING FROM SATAN'S MINIONS RANKED DOWN THERE WITH a Monday in the dead of winter—during an ice storm.

Which was kind of funny when one considered that Hell was hot as, well, Hell, and every day was a Monday in that place.

My point? I'd prefer neither option, *thankyouverymuch*.

While today was actually Thursday, I was—yet again—trying to dodge a couple of demons fresh out of Hell.

And it was cold as balls.

Which was a stupid phrase. Yet it flowed off the tongue in a weirdly satisfying way when one burst from their apartment in Annapolis, Maryland, on a frigid day in February, not even pausing to grab a coat.

“Hellfire and damnation, it's cold as balls out here!”

See? It worked.

More importantly, why was I analyzing phrases said in frustration when two really ugly and really determined demons were chasing me?

“Get your head on straight, Daruka.”

I heard a muted *pop* and then a chunk of the wall I was running past exploded, sending shards of brick and mortar everywhere. I ducked—nice after-the-fact reflexes there, Dar—and swore.

“Son of a bitch, they’re using guns? Are they seriously trying to kill me this time?”

Dad had been threatening as much for years, but he’d never followed through.

Until now, apparently.

Shit. If he was actually trying to kill me, I didn’t stand a chance. It was one thing to constantly duck his demons when they tried to kidnap me and drag me to Hell; dodging bullets was out of my league.

Of course, feeling out of my league was reason number one why I kept refusing Dad’s “invitation” to join the family business.

“Time for a new plan,” I muttered as I slipped around the corner, into the alley between a fairly recently opened pot shop and a bakery. The ill will from the old lady who ran that bakery had lasted approximately as long as it took for her profits to double. Now, they happily coexisted.

Why couldn’t Dad and I happily coexist? Not a question I planned to ask now that his goons were shooting at me.

Guns! Since I was part demon, I was, generally, pretty hard to kill. But guns? If they got me in the head or the heart, they could definitely do the trick.

And I didn’t want to die.

At the end of the alley, I hung a left, ran behind the bakery, toward the parking lot, lifting the hood of my sweatshirt over my blue hair as I hurried along. The thing with being part demon was, it helped dull one’s moral compass. I *wanted* to be good, but one-half of my being was too damn good at being bad.

Plus, I was being chased by two gun-toting demons.

Stealing a car for the win. Hopefully, it wasn’t the bakery owner’s car. She was a really sweet old lady, and I’d feel bad if she had to go to a doctor’s appointment later this morning and no longer had a ride.

Turning the wheel, I rolled the window down and deliberately drove past my pursuers, hanging my arm out the window and smugly flipping them the bird.

They started shooting again, and I slammed on the gas and squealed out of there, seriously not taking a breath until I was on the bridge, crossing the Severn River.

And then I rolled down the rest of the windows and breathed deeply of the salty air, tempted, as ever, to pull onto the shoulder and dive over the railing into that briny water below.

Did I mention I was part mermaid? Yeah, pining for water was also a thing with me.

Okay, time for a new game plan. Since this sort of thing had happened to me before (minus the guns), I was used to being forced to recalculate midstream. That didn't mean it didn't suck that I had to leave behind my quaint apartment and my cool job as a body piercer.

The problem was, I'd been running since I turned eighteen. Four years of constantly watching over my shoulder, of always being on alert. Hellfire and damnation, I just wanted to relax for once.

Now that Dad had upped the ante, now that he'd basically announced that he wasn't toying with me anymore, the very last thing I could do was relax.

Unless I could figure out a place to hide where he'd never, ever find me.

As I headed north on MD2, I passed a sign for the BWI or, as the tourists called it, the Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

My mom's voice rang in my head as if she were sitting next to me, giving me advice.

I sharply glanced over at the passenger seat. Nope. No dead mermaid there.

Whew.

Still...

I should have told you about this a long time ago, Daruka. Considering a demon knocked me up and then left me to raise his offspring, I'd say I'm not very good at doing what I'm supposed to...

Shit. I hated the memories of Mom. Because that's all they were. She was gone, and now I'd never get to make fresh, new memories with her. And that hurts like hell.

If he becomes too unbearable, if you don't want to do what we both know he's going to want you to do one of these days, there's a place you can go where he can't get to you.

I mashed the heel of my hand into my eye in an attempt to stem the flow of tears and took the exit for I-195. Another handful of turns and I was pulling the stolen vehicle into a space in a giant parking lot. I dropped the keys into the center console, climbed out of the car, and whispered an incantation that wiped away any and all prints I may have put on the steering wheel, the radio knob, whatever. It was all gone. Even if there had been cameras on that lot—because holy shit, there were cameras everywhere these days—my hoodie hid my telltale blue hair and was bulky enough (and *I* was bulky enough, let's be real) that whoever viewed that footage might not even realize I was a girl.

Plus, if the gun-toting demons ended up on camera, they'd be way more interesting to the human authorities; not that they'd ever be found, since they very likely did not even live in this world.

A bright yellow shuttle van pulled up behind my stolen vehicle. "No luggage?" the driver asked as he opened the accordion door to let me climb aboard.

"Nope," I replied. "Quick trip." If I was about to do what I suspected, it definitely wasn't a quick trip, but humans didn't ask so many questions when you told them what they wanted to hear. And I wasn't in the mood to talk right now.

Shuffling to the back of the shuttle bus, I dropped into a seat underneath the heat vent. Lucky me, being half demon meant the hotter the better.

As I was a mermaid, too, it should come as no surprise that hot tubs were my happy place.

“Which airline?” the shuttle driver called out.

I glanced up, caught his eye in the giant mirror above his head.

“Delta.”

I had no idea which airline I was about to take. All I knew was I was about to book a flight across the Atlantic. I was going to take Mom’s advice.

I was about to enroll in Blackthorn Academy for Supernaturals.

CHAPTER 2



LONGEST. TRIP. EVER.

It started with the flight from Maryland to London. Mermaids aren't fans of dry heat. We need water to survive. (If Dad wanted to invoke the most miserable, painful torture ever, dropping me in the middle of a desert would definitely do the trick.)

News flash: the interior of an airplane is *dry*. At one point, the attendant got sick of my constant requests and dumped a pile of those 33-ounce water bottles into my lap. I'd been tempted to pour one over my head, except that would have forced me into my mermaid form. Humans weren't supposed to know we existed.

Plus, the transformation would have ruined my clothes, and then what would I have done?

Instead, I drank them. Every single one. The lady next to me was impressed by my bladder capacity.

Finally, we landed at Heathrow. I used my handy demon magic to get myself through customs at breakneck speed—not that I had anything to declare, but neither did I actually have any ID on me, either—and soon enough, I was on a bus, heading toward Liverpool.

Blackthorn Academy, according to my mother on her deathbed, was located on an island in the middle of the Irish Sea. “So I can just swim there?” I'd asked.

She'd laughed, and then a coughing fit took over before she was finally able to answer my question. “It's a magical

place, protected by wards so no one can find it. This is why it's the safest place you can be. And all first-year students have to ride the ferry. It's a rite of passage. Oh, and it's a two-mile walk from the dock to the school—be forewarned.”

Great. Twenty-two years old and I was enrolling in college for the first time. As if I didn't already feel out of place in my own skin.

Lilith knows how many hours later—hell, I didn't even know what day it was anymore—I wandered the docks in Liverpool, trying to figure out how to find a magical ferry I couldn't ask any of the humans about because they didn't know it existed. And so far, I hadn't spotted any other supernaturals. Which I supposed wasn't all that unusual since it was February and the semester had probably started weeks ago.

“Ah, there she is! Yoo-hoo, Daruka!”

I twisted around and watched a blonde, blue-eyed lady who looked to be in her midfifties and entirely human hurry toward me, another lady in her wake. The blonde wore a skirt and silk shirt under a wool coat, with sensible heels on her feet.

The other woman had dark skin, colorful beads and shells woven into the thousand or so braids on her head. The hem of a filmy dress was sticking out the bottom of what looked like a judge's robes. She was definitely a supernatural, although human-looking enough that most people paid her no heed.

“I was getting worried, my dear,” the blonde lady said, pausing a few feet away to catch her breath. Maybe she could do with a few cardio classes. I glanced down at my thick thighs. Then again, couldn't we all?

“Do I know you?” I asked. They weren't demons, but if Dad was using guns, I wouldn't put it past him to use non-demons to get to me. In fact, I was honestly surprised he hadn't by now.

I took a step away. Needed to have enough room to bolt if necessary.

The blonde thrust out her hand. "I'm Mrs. Caldwell, assistant to Headmistress Ophelia Blackthorn." Her chest puffed out, and she smiled widely.

I didn't shake. "Ophelia Blackthorn? Like the name of the academy?"

Mrs. Caldwell's face fell. "You didn't read the pamphlet?" She turned to the woman standing next to her. "Why don't they ever read the pamphlet?"

"Because they're kids?" her friend suggested.

"I didn't get any pamphlet," I said. And I wasn't a kid.

"Oh." Mrs. Caldwell's brow furrowed. "Then why are you here? Didn't you decide to enroll? How did you know to come here if you didn't get a pamphlet?"

"Here's a better question," I said. "How did you know I'd be here, when I only made the decision a day ago and I didn't tell a single soul?"

Mrs. Caldwell flapped her hand like she was waving away gnats. "Every supernatural between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five has an open invitation to Blackthorn Academy. And we are alerted the moment they make the decision to attend. I don't really understand it myself; you'd have to ask Professor Bishop if you really want to know. Of course, you'd also have to take his class, and something tells me plenty of other classes are going to be far more interesting to you. We don't recommend you overload yourself your first year. Too easy to burn out. Plus, you want to have fun, right?"

"Er...there was a lot to unpack in what you just said."

"Come on, come on, come on, we need to catch the ferry." The other person with Mrs. Caldwell spoke in a Jamaican accent and waved like she wanted us to follow her.

"This is Professor Holtsclaw," Mrs. Caldwell explained. "Teaches all the cooking classes. If you want a say in what you eat while at the academy, I recommend taking her class."

"Nice sell, Mrs. Caldwell," Professor Holtsclaw said with a pleased nod.

Mrs. Caldwell preened. “Thank you.” Suddenly, she sucked in a breath, held it, and squeezed her eyes closed, clenching her fists as her side. She struggled not to exhale. What the heck was she doing?

And then she gasped out a breath, and her eyes popped open. “Asmoday!” she shrieked, shoving me out of the way and stalking past me. “What are you doing off school grounds? Again!”

I turned and my gaze caught and held the person I assumed she was talking to.

Yowzah.

Long, thick, luxurious, dark hair. Pale skin with a slight tan. Muscular, sharply defined, tatted up shoulders. In fact, a great deal of ink. He wore a black leather vest with no shirt underneath. The breeze caught his hair, lifting it for a moment to show me pointed ears.

I could have fun decorating those ears with piercings.

My second thought—which was far more important: this guy was a faery or an elf. Except his eyes, under those heavy dark brows and above cheekbones as sharp as glass, were purple. And glowing. Faeries and elves did not have glowing eyes.

But demons sometimes did.

Shit.

I turned, prepared to run, and bumped into Professor Holtsclaw, setting her beads and shells to jiggling. She grasped my forearms and gave me an encouraging smile. “He’s a student,” she said, like she knew I needed the reassurance.

I glanced over my shoulder. Tall, dark, and smokin’ hot was smiling down at Mrs. Caldwell. He was smooth talking her. I knew instantly what he was.

Lust demon.

And elf?

What a fucked-up combination, although I bet the process of creating him had been hella enthralling.

I needed to get out of here. Needed to stay out of the guy's vicinity. Because what I did not need was to fall in lust with some crazy hot guy whose purpose in life extended only as far as the next lay. I didn't know that for a fact about this guy, of course, but I knew demons—my dad was their ruler—so I knew all about his base instincts.

“Wait. He's a student? You allow demons in this school?”

“We're allowing you in, so yes, we do.” Professor Holtsclaw gave me a cheeky grin.

Right. Me. Half demon. I'd spent a lot of time trying to forget that about myself, so I should be forgiven the slipup.

“Can we take a different ferry?” I asked as the demon hottie and Mrs. Caldwell made their way toward us. I could already feel the guy's pull and he was still a good twenty feet away. This wasn't good. Lust demons messed up people's heads. Convinced them that all they wanted was sex, all the time. Lust demons were worse than succubi. Probably because they created succubi.

“Don't be silly,” Professor Holtsclaw said. “We're only here to pick up the two of you—I think—and that would be a waste of resources.”

They were getting closer. He hadn't noticed me yet, which wasn't surprising. I was still in my hoodie and sweats. My hair was greasy; it's been more than two days since I've showered. The faint scent of incense from my demon side I am always trying to cover was starting to come out in full force. I was getting hot, like combustible hot. I could barely restrain myself from rushing to the edge of the dock and diving into the cool, briny sea.

Damn it, why had I listened to Mom?

Okay, that was a dumb question. She'd never once steered me wrong in my entire life. Of course I was going to listen to her. Hell, I should have done so two years ago, when she first told me about this place.

If I had, I wouldn't be bracing for a meeting with a lust demon right now.

A lust demon with incredibly muscular legs wrapped in tight leather pants. And that vest did little to hide the plains and valleys of his finely cut chest. There were so many tattoos drawn on his arms, they looked like sleeves. My gaze was drawn to the leather cuffs on his wrists. They had silver buckles.

Were they for sex play?

Gah! This was insane. I wasn't even that into sex, normally. I'd tried it, found it lacking, and rarely felt revved up enough to want to do it again.

Now, suddenly, all I wanted to do was strip naked and beg him to have his lusty way with me. Repeatedly.

Not cool.

I was here for a purpose. To hide from my father. It wasn't a permanent solution, though. School wasn't my thing. That would become painfully obvious pretty quickly no doubt, which meant I needed to work out a plan B. Or was it plan Z at this point?

Whatever. My point was, I needed a permanent solution to my family issues. As soon as I figured out what that was, I was checking out of Blackthorn Academy before they figured out how terrible I was and kicked me out.

That meant there was no time to get freaky with Mr. Hottie Demon Guy. I knew what happened when women fell for overly good-looking men. That's what happened to my mom.

She hadn't known who or what my dad was—he was a master at camouflaging himself. Big surprise there—when she fell for him. And he hadn't been smart enough to wrap himself up when he seduced her. Hence my appearance in the world.

I remembered overhearing them arguing when I was fourteen. Mom said, "But, Lucifer, she isn't even a full-blooded demon. Why would you want her in the business?"

“That’s exactly why, sweet Marissa. She’s *more than* a demon.”

At the time, I’d thought being *more than* a demon was a good thing. Until Mom told me, “He’s just sugarcoating his words to make the idea sound alluring. He knew you were listening.”

And then Mom had gone into an entirely too detailed description of Hell—he’d taken her there, once—and, yeah, I’d lost interest in the idea of helping with the family business pretty quickly.

If only dear old dad would tire of trying to force me into joining his team, we’d all be happy.

The sexy demon student didn’t seem to notice my presence until he and Mrs. Caldwell stopped in front of us. If I thought his pull was bad without his gaze catching on me, I was in way more trouble than I thought.

Because the moment those glowing purple orbs caught mine, I felt a *thing* zap between us. A jolt. A surge of energy that sped up my heartbeat and sent my pulse into the stratosphere and increased my already-high body temperature by approximately a thousand degrees. Hellfire and damnation, I was *sweating*.

Neither demons nor mermaids sweated. Not normally.

Mrs. Caldwell smiled. “Daruka, this is Asmoday. He’s a fifth—”

“Sixth.”

Ack! That voice. Like honey and whisky and campfire smoke all curled up together. It stroked over my skin. I shoved my hood off my head and lifted my arms to let my pits breathe.

Mrs. Caldwell furrowed her brow. “You’ve been at Blackthorn for six years now?”

“I have.” Now he sounded like he was purring. And he was staring like he wanted to eat me.

Gulp.

“That’s a terribly long time,” Mrs. Caldwell noted.

“I can stay until I’m twenty-five if I want,” Hottie, er, Asmoday, said.

Asmoday. Even his name was sexy.

He thrust out his hand, and thank Lilith I’d set a precedent by not shaking Mrs. Caldwell’s. No way in hell was I touching this guy. No good would come of any sort of touching between me and Asmoday.

A boat horn blasted. Mrs. Caldwell raised her arm. “That’s us! Come along, students.”

She shunted us toward a dock I would have sworn wasn’t there five minutes ago, where an honest-to-goodness pirate ship, complete with skull and crossbones flag tied to the mast, was moored. The person I assumed was the captain stood at the end of the ramp, assisting us onto the boat. She wore a sweeping red hat with a giant feather plume and a red coat complete with a lacey cravat and ruffles at the wrists and along the hem. Her legs were encased in leggings and absolutely cool black leather booties with gold buckles. Every bit of exposed skin shimmered like it was covered with faery dust.

Totally unsurprisingly, her right hand was a shiny gold hook, which she touched to her hat in greeting. “Ahoy. Welcome aboard.”

“The ferry is a pirate’s ship?” I blurted.

“When the captain is in the mood to be such,” Mrs. Caldwell said, nudging me forward. “To be honest, I’m not sure if she’s a shapeshifter or she simply uses magic.”

“Not a shapeshifter, because the boat changes too,” Professor Holtsclaw pointed out.

“Excellent point, Professor,” Mrs. Caldwell said. “She’s a graduate of Blackthorn Academy,” she added, as if that might impress me.

I stole a glance at Asmoday. He didn’t even seem to notice the super sexy captain as he stepped onto the ramp and made his way into the boat.

Huh.

Wait. Probably because he was used to her. Mrs. Caldwell said he'd been at the academy for six years. If this place had breaks and holidays just like any other school, that would add up to a decent amount of contact with the captain.

“Where is your luggage, dear?” Mrs. Caldwell asked me as the captain magically eased the ramp into a slot beneath the deck. Then a stiff breeze caught the sails and pushed us away from land, all without a single human glancing our way.

“Oh, uh, I don't have any. Coming here was sort of a last-minute decision.”

“Hm. I suppose we'll need to find a wardrobe for you. I don't imagine you want to wear that same outfit anytime you aren't in uniform.”

“Uniform?”

Mrs. Caldwell's smile turned almost feral. I'm guessing I wasn't the first student to be repulsed by the idea. She nodded at Asmoday. I glanced over and then did a double take.

Gone were the leather vest and leather pants. He stood before me in a white button-down shirt, black slacks that fit his thighs and ass far, far too well, and a burgundy blazer with what I assumed was the school crest on his breast pocket.

And no, he wasn't any less sexy in the school uniform, damn it.

“Girls can also wear skirts if they prefer,” Mrs. Caldwell added.

I glanced down at my black hoodie, stretchy pants, and black, low-top Vans. Did I look like a girl who would prefer to wear skirts?

“I can help with securing you a new wardrobe,” a silky smooth, rich, velvety voice announced.

I flung around to face Asmoday, my eyes narrowed, my mouth curled into a snarl.

“Stay the hell away from me, sex demon!”

CHAPTER 3



I LIFTED MY POINTER FINGER. “UH, IT’S LUST DEMON, actually.”

And elf, but nobody cared about that half of my nature. Well, except for every single one of my family members on that side, but not the point. Especially since I was pretty sure it wasn’t me they cared about but what I was supposed to represent.

“Sex demon isn’t even a thing,” I added. Which this chick ought to know. She, too, was clearly a demon. Not sure what kind, though. She didn’t send off any particular vibes, other than super powerful ones.

She was something else, too, but it was hard to tell with the overpowering scent of incense and the fact that she could very well be cloaking herself. The blue hair and eyes were probably a clue, but I wasn’t savvy enough to pick up on it.

Not that it mattered. All that really mattered was, damn, this chick was smokin’ hot. It wasn’t often I went for my own kind, but when I did, I certainly went all in.

Which was a weird thing to think, because I’ve never even hooked up with another demon before. Yet this girl—I wanted to drown in her. I wanted to dive in and never, ever leave her again.

Aw, crap. Seriously? Was *that* what this was? My dad had warned me. He’d told me I couldn’t hide, that eventually, this would catch up to me.

And yeah, I'd thought hanging here at Blackthorn *would* keep me hidden. Probably because I'd assumed my future mate would be an elf, and not many elves attended this academy, for whatever reason.

This chick definitely wasn't an elf.

"Whatever," she said dismissively. "You aren't helping me pick out a wardrobe."

"Fine by me," I said with a shrug. If I did, she'd be dressed in skimpy lace and leather, and if I was hot for her when she's wearing sweats and an oversized hoodie, I definitely didn't need to see her in something sexy. Not if she wasn't into me.

That was odd, to be honest. Everybody was into me. When I first enrolled at Blackthorn, the headmistress had to cast a spell over all the faculty and students to keep them from hitting on me.

The spell wouldn't go into effect for Daruka until we stepped onto school grounds, so, frankly, she should be pawing at me, begging me to strip her naked and do all sorts of naughty, naughty things to her.

And I'd happily comply.

"Oh, you know what he was doing," I overheard Mrs. Caldwell saying to Professor Holtsclaw. "The same thing he's always doing when he slips off school grounds."

I grinned. Yep, I was seeking a little sexual satisfaction. Thanks to that spell the headmistress cast six years ago, none of the other students were interested in me—well, except for one, and we didn't talk about that, because, hey, everybody made mistakes, right? My point was, lust demons had needs. Despite the spell, I could probably still convince some of my fellow students to enjoy a little hanky-panky, but slipping back to Liverpool and finding a little gratification between a human's thighs was more of a challenge and, frankly, more convenient.

I mean, it wasn't great. Humans were surprisingly fragile, so I always had to keep myself in check, but I still got off, eventually, and then I walked away and never had to see them

again. A fellow student I'd have to see in the halls, day in and day out.

Been there, done that, not recommended.

Until now. New goal: seduce Daruka.

Couldn't wait to get started.

If only she'd let me get close enough to whisper sweet nothings in her ear. But every time I inched toward her, she shuffled five steps farther away.

She also kept glancing at the sea like she was seriously contemplating diving overboard, which would be a terrible mistake. I'd go in after her, of course, but I sure as hell didn't want to. Over here on the human side of the veil, it wasn't too bad, but we were about to cross over into the paranormal world, and the creatures who hung out in the water over there weren't exactly the nicest on the planet.

Right on cue, we hit the fog that obscured the veil between the two worlds. The ship barreled through, and I shivered as the cloaking spell I used to hide my wings was stripped away.

Because I could—and yeah, I was trying to impress the new girl—I stretched my black, leathery wings to their full length.

She didn't even blink, which, belatedly, I realized wasn't shocking at all. She probably saw demon wings all the time.

“Where are your wings?” I blurted.

She shrugged. “My shapeshifter nature keeps them hidden.”

“Your shapeshifter nature?”

“I'm part mermaid.” She glared at me like she expected me to challenge her, when really, all that proclamation did was make me want her more. Mermaids were hot. Not that I'd ever met one in person, but everybody knew some mermaids were sirens, and sirens were practically as lusty as lust demons.

Seven minutes in heaven in a closet? Twenty minutes in a shower? All night in a bed? Sign me up, pal. I'd take whatever

I could get.

“I have so many questions,” I murmured. Could she have sex in her mermaid form? Did mermaids even have sex organs?

If they didn’t, did that mean no sex in the shower? Because that was a little disappointing, I wasn’t going to lie.

“And I have zero answers, so leave me the hell alone.”

Damn, she was prickly. “I have the perfect cure for grumpiness, you know,” I suggested.

“Oh, hellfire and damnation, shut up.” She scurried to the stern of the ship. Was she afraid I might chase her?

Not that I wasn’t tempted, but Mrs. Caldwell might catch wind of our little flirtation, and then she’d warn all the professors and they would make it their mission to keep Daruka and me apart. They were strong believers in first years needing to keep their entire focus on their studies, so they did everything they could to keep the newest students from forming romantic relationships.

Not that the administrators had a chance in hell of stopping nature. All they did was make the chase that much more exciting.

I wandered closer. Again. “You look a little old to be a first year,” I commented.

“Apparently not,” she snapped. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Are you saying you’re only eighteen?” Not that I cared. Eighteen and twenty-four wasn’t that much of a gap. Was she a virgin? Was that why she was so grumpy? I’d hooked up with plenty of virgins; I knew exactly how to blow her mind for her first time.

“No, I’m not. I’m saying I’m a first year.”

“Okay, maybe we should start over. You clearly have an issue with me, and I haven’t the faintest idea why.”

We were nearing the dock at Wellspring, the small town east of the fourteenth century castle that housed Blackthorn

Academy. The town, castle, and the woods to the west were all tucked away on Northumberland Island, a place no humans knew existed. As large as it was—hell, the castle alone had six levels aboveground and who knew how much space underground—this place had felt oppressively small my freshman year.

Especially since I hadn't been allowed to shag any of my fellow students. But then I figured out how to lure the ferry captain—who, by the way, in whatever form she took when she towed students back and forth from the school, had a thing for faery dust, which was wildly prevalent back home—and after that, I could come and go from the mainland as I pleased.

The spires and towers of the castle could be seen in the distance, behind the rooftops of clusters of buildings all tucked together like every small town in the northern UK. What did Daruka think of her new home for the next however many years?

I didn't hate this place. It was the polar opposite of the sprawling, vast forest I grew up in, but I'd gotten used to it over the years. Kind of a shame, really, that they'd kick me out next year and I'd have to make my way back home.

Although discovering that a demon-slash-mermaid was my mate put an interesting twist on things. Would my family still welcome me back with open arms? Would they still expect me to rule with a not-even-remotely-tied-to-elves supernatural by my side? Hell, my offspring would only be a quarter elf. If I took over as ruler, my children would be my heirs.

Children who hardly qualified as elves.

Okay, I was getting wa-a-a-ay ahead of myself. The woman I suspected was my mate wouldn't speak to me. I couldn't even tell if she was attracted to me.

Maybe I needed to step back and start at the beginning. Maybe I needed to recall how to woo a woman.

We reached the dock, the captain sidling her ship up alongside the single wooden walkway like the expert she was. After using her magic to secure the ropes to the pilons, the

captain directed the ramp to slide out of its hiding place; it landed with a *thunk* on the dock, and then she offered her assistance as we disembarked.

Daruka shied from the proffered golden hook, which was wise, since that hook contained magic that allowed the captain to see into one's head, which, yeah, I learned the hard way.

I strutted past, hanging a small bag filled with faery dust on the end of her hook. She smoothly tucked it away in an interior pocket of her red coat before Mrs. Caldwell or Professor Holtsclaw noticed.

As we made our way up the path that would take us through town and into the woods surrounding the castle, Daruka said, "What did you give the captain?"

I chuckled to myself. Finally, an in! "I'll tell you if you tell me something about yourself."

She rolled her eyes. "Your elf is showing. And I don't care that much."

Wow. I may have just fallen in love. I kicked up my pace until we were walking side by side. "So you know about elves. And, I presume, demons. But I know nothing about mermaids. Except what people whisper around campfires. Care to enlighten me, or are you going to leave me with my assumptions?"

"News flash, lust demon. I don't care what anyone thinks of me. To clarify, you are definitely on that list. Now, leave me the hell alone."

She speed walked ahead of me, and I let her go. I knew in only a matter of seconds—

She stopped. Before her, the road forked, and the signpost read:

THIS WAY

That way

SHE GLANCED BEHIND HER, her brow wrinkling. Probably just realized Mrs. Caldwell and the professor were no longer with us.

“Where are they?” she asked, peering around at the nearest buildings and the handful of supernaturals wandering about, entirely minding their own business and not paying a single bit of attention to us.

“Probably in the pub if I had to guess,” I supplied. “They don’t have to trek up to the castle like you do. They can use mirrors to get there.”

“Mirrors?”

I nodded, thoroughly enjoying this lesson. She needed my help, and yes, I relished every single moment of her mild helplessness. Probably the dominant in me. I didn’t need full-on BDSM, but I did like to be in control.

Although, just to be clear, I’d never turn down a good spanking.

“You’ll learn,” I assured her. “In the meantime, first years have to walk up to the castle.”

“Unaccompanied?”

“You have me.” I spread my arms wide, imagining for a moment that she might leap into them. If she did, I had no issue with pressing her against that signpost and banging her into next week.

“And what if you weren’t here? What if I had been the only student they picked up today?”

I shrugged. Professor Holtsclaw really liked the pub’s current featured beer—Demon IPA, ironically. And Mrs. Caldwell *really* disliked walking. “I’m sure they would have given you directions.”

“This is insane,” Daruka muttered. “Which way?”

“What will you give me if I tell you?” I asked automatically.

“Don’t play games with me, lust demon.”

“Actually, that was probably more my elf nature.”

She flung around to face me, her blue eyes sparking with what looked like actual flames in the pupils. Clenching her fists and her teeth, she ground out, “Do. Not. Test. Me.”

I think I just orgasmed a little. At the very least, my attraction to this woman increased by tenfold. Suddenly, I was all about being dominated, which was not normally my forte.

Closing those gorgeous, flaming eyes, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “All I did was turn you on, didn’t I?”

I laughed. “Sure did.”

She shook her head. “Just lead the way.”

I opened my mouth.

“To the school,” she said waspishly.

“My pleasure.”

With a giddy kick in my step, I did just that.

CHAPTER 4



BLACKTHORN ACADEMY WAS HOUSED IN AN HONEST-TO-goodness castle. Early fourteenth century if I knew my architecture.

I did, for the record.

As Asmoday led me across a wide, wooden bridge spanning the moot that surrounded the castle, he said, “Normally, I’d slip in using a mirror or one of the secret passages I discovered my first year here, but I figured you’d want the full effect of the main entrance.”

Again with the reference to mirrors. Clearly, I needed to do a little research so I knew what I was up against. As for secret passages, I’d been keeping two steps ahead of Dad’s goons for years now. I knew how to sniff out secret passages.

Arched double doors swung open as we drew closer, and for just a moment, I considered turning around and running away. This wasn’t me. I didn’t do academia, and honestly, I was beginning to wonder if maybe I shouldn’t just give in to Dad. How bad could the family business really be? If he put me in charge of something, it would probably be a pretty cushy job, right?

“Everybody has the jitters the first time they walk into this place,” Asmoday murmured, far too close to my ear. I couldn’t suppress the shiver.

He noticed, of course. The lecherous grin spreading across his face told me so.

Damn it.

And double damn it, because I was now hurrying over the threshold instead of hauling ass back to that captain's ship. She probably wasn't there anymore anyway, and I'd gotten some seriously dangerous vibes off that water once we'd passed through the fog, so I probably didn't want to swim with the fishes in my attempt to get back to the human world.

As I stepped into a massive foyer with domed ceilings and tall, narrow windows, I felt a jolt, not unlike when I'd touched Asmoday, except without the lusty bonus. Glancing down, all I saw was stone floor, but there was definitely something down there. Something powerful.

"Ley lines," Asmoday supplied helpfully, and damn it, I did not like that he could tell what I was thinking.

I moved deeper into the hall and paused to take in my surroundings. Five passages stretched out from the entrance hall, and a massive staircase was straight ahead, leading up and up and—I craned my neck—how many levels were there to this place?

"Six," Asmoday said.

I gave him my most furious glare. "Stop getting into my head."

He shrugged. "As much as I love the idea of a secret connection with you, I have to disappoint you. Every first year has the same thoughts while they're standing here."

"I'm not disappointed." Hellfire and damnation, the last thing I needed was some sort of connection to this guy. My lusty reaction had dulled somewhat once we walked into this place—probably some sort of spell to keep students' focus on their studies—but it was still there. That urge to shove him up against the nearest wall and climb him like a freaking monkey.

Gah, I was starting to sweat again.

"Just tell me where to go from here," I ground out.

He pointed at a wide doorway to the left of the staircase. "Dining hall. Meals are when you'd expect them to be, although if you miss one, you're screwed until the next time it

opens, so I'd make friends with the students who have stashes of snacks."

"Good advice." I'd miss breakfast on the regular. I wasn't a morning person. "How do I find these students?"

"Don't worry; they'll find you. They're entrepreneurs, always looking for more sales."

Which meant I needed to figure out how to come up with some cash, since I'd left without my wallet.

He pointed at another corridor. "Offices over there. Kitchen over there. If worse comes to worst, you can always try to sneak in there to steal something to eat. Just be aware that the kobolds who run the kitchen seem super friendly on the surface, but they're tricksters through and through."

"And that's a half demon talking."

"Exactly."

Noted. Don't mess with the kitchen staff. Back to figuring out how to earn some currency, stat.

"Upstairs, on the residential floors, girls are to the right, guys to the left. Professors and staff all live here, too, in the middle wing. Bathrooms are unisex."

"Seriously?"

He chuckled and winked. "Only if you're sneaky."

"Yeah, I'm good. So, which floor will I be on?"

"All first years sleep on the sixth floor."

I glanced up and up and up. "Where's the elevator?"

He smirked.

Ugh. I was so not a fan of cardio. "Great. What's next? I assume I need to check in with an administrator or something."

He tsked. "Such a rules follower. I'm mildly disappointed."

"Good." Hopefully, that would dull this crazy attraction even further, because let me be clear, I was not hooking up

with Mr. Lust Demon, no matter how hot or how helpful he was or how desperate I became.

Not. The. Plan.

“Ah, there you are.”

Mrs. Caldwell was suddenly standing in the hall, in front of a giant mirror tucked into a darkened corner. I swear she hadn't been there two seconds ago.

The surface of the mirror began to swirl and twist, like a spinning top, sort of. And then a leg was stepping through the swirling mass.

What the hell?

An arm thrust through, bumped into Mrs. Caldwell, gave her a little shove. She moved out of the way, and Professor Holtsclaw slid through the mirror like she was slipping through a waterfall.

So that was the deal with the mirrors. I needed to figure out how to do that.

“First years can't use mirror travel,” Asmoday whispered. His breath stirred the fine hairs on my neck.

I swatted at him like he was an annoying bug. He caught my hand and gave the fingers a quick kiss, and I snatched it back so quickly, we probably both had whiplash.

Smoke swirled up from my fingers. Damn it. The only time my body reacted like that was when my emotions were heightened.

I inched away from Asmoday.

“Come, come,” Mrs. Caldwell called out, waving me forward. “Let's go get you registered for classes. Asmoday, thank you for getting her up here safe and sound.”

He grinned wolfishly. “Entirely my pleasure.” And then he bowed, like he was royalty or something. Or thought I was, I guess. “Until we meet again, Daruka.”

I did not like the way he said my name.

Because I really, really liked the way he said my name.

I followed Mrs. Caldwell down the hall that Asmoday said led to the administrative offices. She chattered the entire way.

“I’ll take you down to Professor Dunlop in a moment so he can get you registered for classes, but first, we need to stop at my office. Unfortunately, you’re sort of doubly screwed—you’re a freshman coming in after the semester has already started, so you aren’t going to have much choice over the classes you’ll take. Hopefully, you’re a good student, because you’re almost a month behind. You have a great deal of catching up to do.”

I didn’t give a rat’s ass about classes. All I needed was a place to lay low so Daddy couldn’t find me.

“Hey,” I interrupted as she was telling me I wouldn’t have much choice of roommate either, since pretty much everybody was paired up already. “This place is, like, super secure, right?”

“In what regard?” Mrs. Caldwell asked, pausing in front of an arched wooden door and thrusting a skeleton key into the lock.

It wasn’t a good idea to tell these people I was here hiding from the Devil, who also happened to be my father. Most people were deathly afraid of the guy, with good reason.

“I just want to make sure all the students are safe, that’s all,” I said lamely.

She paused before pushing the door open. “Daruka, are you afraid your true self will come out and you will be a danger to the other students?”

That hadn’t actually occurred to me.

“If that is the case, rest assured, we will handle it. That is one of the reasons you are here. To learn how to manage your inner monster. Our goal is to send you out into the world as a happier, healthier, secure version of yourself. We have a 99 percent success rate.”

“Wait, 99 percent? You mean, there’ve been students who haven’t graduated?”

If they didn’t graduate, what the heck happened to them?

Mrs. Caldwell pushed the door open without answering me.

Her office looked like any school administrator’s inner sanctum: lots of framed diplomas and awards hanging on the wall, a filing cabinet off to one side, a giant desk parked in the middle of the room with somebody sitting behind it, pilfering through the drawers.

“Selina!” Mrs. Caldwell yelped. “What are you doing *now*?”

Selina didn’t even jump or act guilty or surprised that she’d been caught digging in the administrator’s desk. She simply closed the drawer and stood.

She was probably six foot and model-thin, with a curtain of crazy long black hair. I couldn’t see where it ended because the desk blocked my view.

She wore what I assumed was the school uniform, based on the fact that Asmoday also had been wearing something similar. White, button-down shirt, burgundy blazer, pleated black skirt. The length definitely broke the fingertips-rule. Hopefully, that was due to her height.

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Caldwell. I didn’t expect you back so soon,” Selina practically purred.

“Clearly,” Mrs. Caldwell snapped before tossing a bit of magic at the other girl. Her skirt immediately lengthened, and I admit, I blew out a sigh of relief. Not because she didn’t have legs to carry off that look but because *I* didn’t.

Selina pouted, and I tried to determine what she was. A witch, I suspected, mostly because it wasn’t obvious. Every supernatural had some sort of magical imprint. Most, you could tell by looking at them; nearly all demons, for example, had wings. Elves and fae had those pointy ears. Orcs had green skin. That sort of thing. My blue hair and eyes were from my

mermaid heritage, while the glowing aspect of my eyes were totally demon.

Witches, by contrast, appeared entirely human. You either had to touch them or catch them casting a spell to confirm their nature. Since I wasn't keen on touching people, I wasn't about to walk over there and shake her hand just to confirm my suspicion.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Mrs. Caldwell asked Selina in an icy tone.

"Nope."

"Good. Get out. I need to register our newest student."

Selina finally gave me her full focus, narrowing her eyes as they swept over my person. "You allowed a demon into the school? Really?"

Guess I knew where I stood with Selina. Good to get it out in the open right up front.

"I did no such thing," Mrs. Caldwell said primly. "As you are fully aware, the headmistress makes those decisions. And she has a strict belief that all supernaturals, regardless of heritage, deserve a place at Blackthorn Academy."

"Not demons," Selina said.

"Mermaids are allowed, however."

Selina sniffed.

"Not to mention, one of our current students is part demon, which you are also fully aware of."

Selina arched a single brow. I'd always wanted to do that but had never been able to accomplish it, despite spending hours in front of a mirror trying.

Although Mrs. Caldwell had told her to leave, Selina didn't. All she did was move out of the way when the administrator walked around behind the desk and flapped her hands before dropping into the chair Selina had been sitting in.

Selina blatantly looked over the other woman's shoulder as she flipped open a gigantic, leather-bound book and dragged

her finger down one of the pages, pursing her lips.

“I suppose it is kismet that you’re here, Selina,” Mrs. Caldwell said. “Looks like there’s only one available room for Daruka.”

“No,” Selina snapped.

“Yes,” Mrs. Caldwell calmly replied. “Daruka, I’d like you to meet your new roommate.”

Selina scowled.

So did I.

CHAPTER 5



I ALMOST GAVE UP WAITING, BUT FINALLY, FINALLY, DARUKA came stomping up the stairs toward the third floor. Well, she'd be on her way to the sixth, but she had to pass this one first, right? I'd planned to invite her down to my room, let things fall into place casually if you know what I mean.

Except Selina the Bad Witch was slinking up the steps in front of her and generally, I tried my damndest to stay out of Selina's way.

We'd had a little fling last summer—nothing special, just two supes blowing off steam together. Or so that's how I saw it. I guess I should have checked with her first, made sure we were on the same page.

I didn't, which would have been fine, actually, because the chances of us ever running into each other again were pretty slim—or so I thought.

I certainly hadn't expected her to show up last fall, a freshman here at Blackthorn Academy.

Oops.

I made a move to step into the shadows so hopefully they'd pass me by without notice, but Selina glanced up and spotted me.

"Asmoday," she said with this weird, fake as hell Southern accent. She'd been born and raised in the UK.

Daruka was breathing heavily, her breasts lifting and falling under that black hoodie, and I could picture her doing

exactly that while she was on her back and I was balanced on my elbows, thrusting deeply, over and over.

She made a gagging noise.

For a scant moment, I thought she was expressing her displeasure at my fantasy, which was crazy because she couldn't see what was inside my head.

And then I realized she was responding to Selina's greeting.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"Hello, ladies. What brings you this way?"

Selina simpered.

Daruka rolled her eyes. "You're the one who pointed out to me that I'd have to climb these steps six levels every time I need to go back and forth to my room."

Right. This was exactly the reason I was hovering here, waiting to *accidentally* bump into her.

I was usually much smoother than this. Something about Daruka made me into a bumbling idiot. It probably wasn't that bad, but it felt like it to me. I was a king of seduction. I was a literal lust demon.

Selina trotted over and stroked my arm. Her skirt was inching up her thighs.

"Careful," Daruka warned. "It's going to end up over your head if you keep going."

Selina threw her a sour look. I took the opportunity to edge out of reach. I should have taken off for my room, but I was too curious for my own good.

"What are you two doing together?" I asked.

"Definitely not together," Daruka piped up.

"Caldwell saddled me with a roommate," Selina said.

She was the only freshman I was aware of who hadn't been assigned a roommate. She'd made it clear on numerous

occasions that I was more than welcome to join her in her roommate-less room anytime.

I'd not taken her up on her offer, but I had asked Mrs. Caldwell a few questions, including, "Why the hell was this woman all over me when there was supposed to be a spell to keep this from happening?"

Yeah, that was the first time in my life I'd gone out of my way to get a woman off my jock.

Turned out, because we'd already had sex before she stepped foot into the castle, the spell didn't work quite as well as if she'd not ever ridden my magic dick before.

Lucky me.

I nodded at the pile of folded clothes in Daruka's arms. "Looks like Mrs. Caldwell hooked you up with a wardrobe."

Selina gave her new roomie a bored once-over. "We definitely couldn't share clothes."

"I guarantee we don't have the same style," Daruka replied.

Selina sniffed.

I tried to direct my next comment to Daruka and Daruka only. "If you need anything, come find me."

"Not gonna happen," she said before turning on her heel and stomping up the steps toward the next level.

Selina hesitated, her gaze dropping to my groin. "I'd be happy to come find you."

"Not gonna happen," I said and then got the hell out of there.

My dorm room was pretty cool if I did say so myself. I had a roommate, Poe. He was a vampire, which meant during the day, if he wasn't in class, he was sleeping. And at night, well, I didn't ask where he went off to, but he was gone pretty much every single evening, and I was reasonably confident that whatever he was doing helped ensure he didn't try to take a nip from my veins. Although during our first year rooming

together, he told me that while elf blood was a delicacy, demon blood gave him heartburn, so I pretty much had nothing to worry about.

Thus, I'd requested him as a roommate every year.

He was graduating this year, though, so I'd have to figure out something else in the fall. Because, yes, I was definitely hanging around for one more year. Anything to put off heading home to the elfin forest and honoring my legacy, as my father would say.

It was Saturday, about an hour before dinner. I could study, but nah. All my classes were repeat by this point—most people didn't stick around for more than the requisite four years—so I could ace them all without opening a single book.

Poe was on the other side of the room, tucked behind a wall of thick blackout curtains, snoozing away. My elfin nature needed a healthy dose of sunlight on the regular, so that had been our solution instead of covering the windows.

On my side of the room, I'd paid one of the arty students to paint a mural of a forest on the walls. Not the forest surrounding this place, which was full of scary as shit creatures, but the elven forest, which had a much more benign feel.

I lasted all of five minutes before I slipped out of the room again, heading who knew where. I'd like to go up to the sixth floor and check on Daruka, but I wanted to see Selina less, so I wandered down to the main level instead. I could hang in the kitchen; the kobolds actually liked me and would probably offer me a snack. It was tempting. I'd worked up an appetite earlier, skipping lunch to do so, and now my stomach rumbled.

As I made my way toward the narrow, hidden doorway underneath the stairs that would take me to the kitchen undetected, I heard voices.

“...has enemies.”

“Don't we all?”

“Yes, but these enemies are the exact sort we deliberately keep out of this school.”

That was Mrs. Caldwell. The other voice belonged to the headmistress. I wanted to hear the rest of this conversation, so I pulled on my elf magic, which allowed me to sort of fade into the background behind the potted palm to my left.

“She came here to escape those enemies, correct?” the headmistress asked.

“Well, I don’t know. That’s your forte,” Mrs. Caldwell pointed out.

The headmistress sighed. “I was looking for you to agree with me, not looking for you to tell me what I already know.”

“So, do we need to enhance the wards or set up alarms or something?” Mrs. Caldwell asked.

“If we do, some of our own students could set them off.” The headmistress paused. “Let’s do nothing for now. She didn’t tell a single soul she was coming here. I do not think this would be the first place her enemies would look for her. Maybe, if she’d enrolled at eighteen like most supernaturals, yes. But she’s never hidden her dislike for schoolwork, and she’s never expressed any interest in attending Blackthorn. She may well and truly be safe here.”

“Good,” Mrs. Caldwell said, and they moved on to far less interesting topics as they also moved down the hall.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that they were talking about Daruka. She was the only recently enrolled student. Most started in the fall, with a handful joining us in January, after winter break. And she’d said she wasn’t eighteen.

So who was she hiding from?

And how could I use this to my advantage to get closer to her?



DARUKA AND SELINA did not come down to dinner together. And neither was Daruka in her uniform, which meant the moment she tentatively stepped foot into the dining hall, Mrs.

Caldwell swooped in on her, quietly chiding her and demanding she go back upstairs and not come down again until she was dressed properly.

Daruka pursed her lips, plucked a passing student's plate out of their hands, and promptly strode from the hall.

Unsurprisingly, she did not make a reappearance.

My roommate did, though, yawning widely and slumping down on the bench next to me. No idea why he bothered. All he ever ate were the specialty smoothies the kobolds made for those students who couldn't eat regular food or needed something special in their diet to keep them alive.

Well, I was reasonably certain he got his meals while he was out all night, but I never asked because I really didn't want to know.

"Hey, man," Poe said in between smoothie slurps. That was one seriously bloodred smoothie.

Gross.

"Buddy of mine says you've got the inside scoop on getting over to Liverpool without being detected."

"I don't know about that, since I was caught just today, as a matter of fact." Although if Mrs. Caldwell hadn't been there to pick up Daruka, I was certain I wouldn't have been caught.

"What's that? Your first time in six years?"

He wasn't wrong.

"And did you even get in trouble?"

Actually, now that he mentioned it, I hadn't been summoned to the headmistress. Was that an oversight? Normally, when students were caught breaking rules, they were, at the very least, reprimanded by the formidable and intimidating headmistress.

"Exactly," Poe said when I didn't respond. "So help a guy out. We'll pay you."

Payment definitely made the offer tempting. I was always on the lookout for quick ways to make a few bucks. Elves

didn't have a form of currency; everything operated on a barter system. Which meant I never had enough greenbacks.

“Why do you want to go to Liverpool?”

“One of the guys has never drunk from a human. Can you believe it?”

I shrugged. I knew as much about vampires as my roommate had told me over the years. “What does he do for sustenance?”

Poe waved his long, elegant fingers. “These smoothies help, a little. Beyond that, well, all beings carry blood in their veins. And they all taste different. Remember, I told you that elven blood is delicious, while demon blood is disgusting?”

That wasn't how he'd put it four years ago, but I got the gist.

“Human blood is...I don't even know how to accurately describe it. Orgasmic. That's the best way to say it.”

“Damn. So why don't you drink human blood all the time?”

Poe rolled his eyes. “Humans aren't nearly as amenable to someone stabbing their fangs into their veins as supernaturals are.”

“I hadn't realized you asked permission first.”

“Some of us don't.” He wrinkled his nose. “But most of us aren't savages. We prefer our dinner to be a willing entrée. Always makes it taste sweeter.”

“Huh.”

“But there are ways to convince humans to be willing participants. While none of us could ever compete with a lust demon”—he winked—“most of us are very good at the art of seduction.”

“So you seduce your, er, dinner, and then feed from them? While you're fucking them?”

“Often, yes. It enhances both experiences, I can assure you.”

He gave me a once-over that made me question his insistence that he didn't like my blood, but then he said, "If you're ever interested in trying it, I have a friend who claims he really does enjoy drinking from demons."

"I'm good," I said quickly.

"So, tonight? Liverpool?"

I could use the distraction. Otherwise, I'd lie in bed all evening and think about Daruka, and that would undoubtedly lead to some poor, not well thought out decisions.

At least this was a poor decision I'd made a hundred times before, and I'd only ever been caught once.

"I'm in."

CHAPTER 6



THE UNIFORM SUCKED.

The skirt and blazer were made of wool, for fuck's sake. Of course, it was February, and as it turned out, it was even colder here in the middle of some sea between England and Ireland than it was in Maryland, USA, so I supposed, for the moment, it was tolerable. But what the hell were we supposed to do in freaking May?

Hell, maybe I wouldn't even be here by then.

Hopefully.

Since I'd now missed dinner anyway, I quickly shed the dreaded uniform and replaced it with my leggings and hoodie, and then I headed out to explore. I had thirty-six hours before I had to report to my first class, and I wanted to figure out how to get to each one before then.

No way was I going to look like the new kid, helplessly wandering the halls, having no clue where to go next and desperately afraid of the tardy bell going off before I figured out which classroom I was supposed to be in.

I had no idea if there even was a tardy bell in this place, and this was college, not high school—or the supernaturals' equivalent to it, anyway—but it didn't matter. My pride was still at stake.

Speaking of stakes, was it just me, or were the only people out and about at this hour vampires? I'd passed three of them since leaving my dorm room.

I'd presumed no one would be wandering the halls at this late hour; that's why I'd waited so long to take my tour. Or if they were out—such as my roomie, who had returned for maybe ten minutes after dinner and I hadn't seen her since—they weren't wandering the halls.

Except the vampires. There went another one. Was there a convention or something? Although, let's be real. Vampires slept during daylight hours. So vampire students wandering the halls at one in the morning probably wasn't all that odd.

I'd already scoped out my own floor. There was a staircase at the far end, on the boys' side. It took me down to the kitchen, which wasn't bustling with activity at this hour, but there was a student observing while a kobold explained how to baste some sort of heavenly smelling roast that he'd pulled out of a contraption that billowed smoke as he removed it.

Well, hell. I'd signed up for cooking class because I'd figured it would be an easy A. Plus, Mrs. Caldwell had said I'd get a say in what entrées were served each day.

I hadn't counted on having to do kitchen duty in the middle of the night.

Quietly tiptoeing past them, I slipped into the dining hall. It was cavernous, row upon row of long, narrow wooden tables filling the space.

I headed toward the other end of the room. It was so clean in here, you could probably eat off the floor. I sure hoped the kobolds were responsible for keeping this room spick and span; I couldn't imagine any students who would have the ability or desire to clean it to this standard after each meal.

I was just about to slip through the door into the entry hall when I heard voices whispering on the other side.

“Who else is coming?” someone asked.

“Oden. He's the last one. Oh, here he comes.”

“Oden,” someone called out and was immediately shushed by a bunch of others. Were these the vampires I'd passed in the halls? Why were they gathering here?

Carefully and quietly, I inched the door open enough to peer through the crack. Sure enough, vampires. I was curious, but not enough to draw attention to myself. I was about to close the door and retrace my steps, but something caught my eye.

Black leather. Long, black hair. Tattoos.

Wings.

Glowing, purple eyes.

What the hell was Asmoday doing hanging with an entire gang of vampires? I double-checked; yes, he was the only non-vamp in the bunch.

I'd be worried for his safety if a) I cared at all about his well-being and b) I weren't aware that most vampires hated the taste of demon blood. Even Asmoday's elf blood, an aphrodisiac to a lot of vamps, wasn't enough to offset the rancidness of demon blood.

Which meant he had to be up to something. The guy was half demon and half elf. Being up to no good was a way of life for him.

I shouldn't care. He could do what he wanted. I hardly knew the guy. If he wanted to get up to no good with a bunch of bloodsuckers, who was I to question his motives or worry about his safety?

I wasn't supposed to worry.

Or care.

"Four at a time, otherwise it gets confusing and you could get spit out in Kathmandu or something."

"What, are you, like, ninety? Who even uses that as a reference anymore?"

"Me, obviously. Now come on."

They were all clustered around that giant mirror in the corner near the main entrance. Two groups had stepped into the mirror and disappeared before I realized what they were doing.

They were leaving school grounds and somehow using that mirror to do so.

I needed to know how to do this. It sure would come in handy. First, because I knew without a doubt that I was going to get bored in this place, and it would be nice to be able to slip away when I wanted to have fun, just like these guys were doing.

And second, I was all about having extra escape routes. Dear old Dad was not able to get into this place supposedly, but dear old Dad wasn't supposed to do a lot of things he still managed to do. Sort of went along with being one of the most powerful monsters in the world.

All the worlds.

The third group now stood before the mirror. Asmoday was part of this group. They didn't do anything special, just one by one stepped into the mirror like it was swirling water, not glass. And it seemed to suck them in; in a blink, each person disappeared from view.

The moment Asmoday put his foot through the glass, I slipped out from behind the partially open door and hurried across the foyer. He glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes widened before he disappeared.

Whatever. I didn't care if he noticed me now; there was nothing he could do. He'd taken off to wherever vampires went to party on a Saturday night, and I was going to explore somewhere else.

I had no idea where I wanted to go; the only landmark I knew on this island was the village. Why not? That seemed like a good place to start.

I stepped in front of the swirling mirror and canted my head.

True confession time. A couple years ago, I had, briefly, considered taking Dad up on his offer. Seriously considered, not the it's-just-nerves consideration I'd had when I first arrived at this castle. I'd reasoned that it would have been a

hell of a lot easier not having to dodge him or his goons at every turn.

Except for this right here. This indecision. How could I run Hell—or any aspect of Hell—if I hesitated like this every time I had to commit to something?

Damn it. I had gotten over that curiosity about the family business a long time ago, but my lack of decision-making skills still carried on, and I still hated that about myself.

I thrust my hand toward the mirror. Clearly, I had something to prove to myself.

The moment my fingertips grazed what should have been smooth, solid glass, it was as if something grabbed them from inside the mirror. I was pulled forward, stumbling, until I fell headfirst toward the glass. I squeezed my eyes shut, certain I was about to gain a major head wound.

Instead, I kept falling, like I had been on top of a cliff and now I was tumbling down the side like a boulder.

After long moments, when the falling sensation didn't ease up, I pried my eyes open. I was floating, not falling. Floating along a corridor lined with mirrors. As I slowly, weightlessly wandered past each mirror, I saw images in each.

One was the entry hall at Blackthorn Academy. Another looked like the inside of an antiques shop, maybe. The next was clearly someone's bedroom, and two someones were gettin' busy on that frilly white comforter. When I get back, remind me to turn every mirror away from any area where I may possibly walk around naked, because no thank you! I did not need anyone wandering this corridor to see my naked ass or boobs.

Presumably, I was to somehow get over to one of those mirrors and, if I had to guess, once I touched the surface, I'd be sucked through into that scene.

Except I had no idea how to maneuver my body. I stared at my hand, trying to convince my fingers to wiggle.

Nothing happened. I was helpless out here, bouncing along like an astronaut walking on the moon, except I wasn't

attached to the ship and I didn't have a jetpack that would counteract the lack of gravity.

This was why first years weren't supposed to travel via mirrors, huh?

I was on the verge of panic. No one knew I was out here. I couldn't wave my hands to pull anyone's attention through the mirrors. Did that mean I'd stay out here forever? Well, until I starved to death, I supposed.

What a horrible way to die. The next time someone chose to travel this way, would they accidentally bump into my carcass?

Oh yeah, I was in full-blown panic mode now.

Glancing to my left as I floated past yet another mirror in the endless line of them, I spotted someone standing there, looking as though they were searching for something instead of preening.

Asmoday! I'd never been so happy to see someone in my life. And when we made eye contact, I was over the moon.

And when he dove through that mirror, well, I had no words for how buoyant I was.

I watched, helpless, as he flew toward me, his arms open. He wrapped them around me, and I spared a moment to appreciate the hardness of his corded arms, his muscular chest. He felt as beautiful as he looked.

In the next heartbeat, we were jerked toward one of the mirrors. The image in the mirror was of a storage closet, maybe. Or a utility room.

We landed in a heap on a faded, braided rug that smelled like it hadn't been vacuumed in a couple hundred years.

I sneezed. Asmoday's arms tightened around me. He was on his back, me sprawled across his body. I could feel a certain part of his body growing, getting thicker and harder, and what happened to the me that didn't care about sex? Right now, all I wanted to do was get it on, right here, on this dirty floor, in

what I now could tell was, in fact, some sort of utility or storage room.

Asmoday rolled his hips and grinned up at me. Mentally, I rolled my eyes even as I lowered my face—

A door crashed open, and a bulky guy with dark skin and a bald head stood over us, hands on hips, a scowl twisting his lips. “What are yeh doin’ in my storage room?” he demanded, which, thank you very much, broke whatever trance I’d been under.

I rolled off Asmoday and stood, brushing dust and frustration off my leggings.

The guy stabbed a stubby finger at the mirror behind us, which reflected our images back at us. No swirling glass, no picture of that weird corridor.

“Yeh gotta pay to use my mirror.”

Asmoday smoothly pulled something out of his pocket and passed it over to the guy, who tucked it away in a pocket inside his coat.

“Do you mind if we slip out the back door?” Asmoday asked him.

He shrugged, then turned and stepped through the doorway, closing it behind him.

“Come on.” Asmoday snagged my hand and pulled me toward a different door. “Let’s get out of here before he wants more payment. My funds are exceedingly limited, and I have plans for what I’ve got left.”

I let him lead me out into an alley. I was still a little shaky from being stuck in stasis and then nearly kissing Asmoday, never mind the grossness of doing so on that dirty rug.

He flung me around and pressed me against the rough stone wall of the building we’d just exited. It probably wasn’t much better than the rug, since we were in an alley, after all.

Yet my mind immediately bounced right back to the kiss.

I grabbed the front of his vest and tried to pull him toward me. With a quick motion I did not see coming, he slashed his arm between us, breaking my hold on his shirt, grabbed both my wrists, and lifted my arms above my head.

Maybe this was why I'd convinced myself I wasn't really into sex. No one I'd been with had dominated me. They'd never held my hands above my head and looked at me like they had every intention of devouring me on the spot.

I squirmed. Licked my lips.

I could not wait.

CHAPTER 7



“YOU COULD HAVE DIED,” I RASPED OUT, STILL HOLDING Daruka’s wrists, still warring with my body, which wanted to pop the buttons on my pants, shove her leggings down, and fuck her against the side of the Boar’s Nest Inn. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time someone had done exactly that, right here.

She wanted it too. I could see it in the blue flames snapping in her pupils. In the way she licked her lips. Hell, I could smell her arousal; it was the sweetest scent I’d ever experienced.

I gave her wrists a shake to pull us both out of the trance.

“First years aren’t allowed to use mirror travel. At the very least, you need to learn the spell and the process before you do so. If I hadn’t realized you were about to follow me, you’d still be floating out there. You’d be there forever.”

The idea was giving me hives. Instead of fucking her, I wanted to pull her into my arms and hug her until this weird tightness in my chest eased.

“Yeah, I sort of came to that same conclusion. Um, if you aren’t going to ravish me, can you let me go now?”

I released her wrists. Reluctantly.

She swung her arms like she was stretching them out. The action thrust her boobs in my face. Boobs that were definitely more than a handful each, for the record.

I cast my gaze to the side.

“Wow, you’re really shaken up,” Daruka said. “Someone you know disappear in the mirror at some point?”

It would be nice if that were the reason for this irrational fear for her safety. It made a hell of a lot more sense than simply the idea of this girl I’d just met a few hours ago twisting me in knots like this.

“Just... don’t break any more rules without checking with me first, okay?”

She snorted. “You’re kidding, right?”

No, but if I tried to explain, she wouldn’t understand. Hell, I didn’t, not really. I understood my elf side better than my demon side, since I grew up in the elven forest, my father guiding me. No doubt he had been over the top in explaining my heritage, ensuring I understood what it meant to be elven royalty, since he’d fucked up and had an affair with a lust demon who, nine months later, deposited me on his doorstep and walked away.

He didn’t want me to make the same mistake.

Unfortunately for him, my mind and body hadn’t gotten the memo that when my potential mate came along, she ought to be an elf.

“What were you doing with all those vampires?” Daruka abruptly asked.

“Oh, Poe and his buddies? Just taking them over to Liverpool for the evening.”

“Why? Also, is mirror travel the only way to get to Liverpool from here? What about that boat?”

“Ready to leave already?” I played it off like I was amused, but inside I was clenching my fists and gnashing my teeth at the idea of her slipping through my fingers before I had the chance to convince her we were mates.

She rolled her eyes. “I just like to have an escape route, that’s all.”

Mrs. Caldwell and the headmistress’s overheard conversation popped into my head, but I didn’t ask. No doubt

Daruka wouldn't tell me anyway.

“Come on,” I said, motioning for her to follow me. “Let's go to Buckie's. I could use a drink.”

Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, hanging out in this alley was giving me ideas.

“What's Buckie's?” she asked, although she fell into step with me as I hung a right and headed down the cobbled sidewalk.

“It's a pub. They also have billiards. A dance floor, if that's your thing.”

“It isn't.”

That didn't surprise me.

“But a beer sounds pretty good right now. Or maybe shots.”

Although it was Saturday night, it was pushing two in the morning, so the place wasn't crowded. Everyone but the diehards—and the vampires—was making their way to their homes to either sleep it off or sleep with someone they'd managed to pick up through their impressive billiards skills or, more likely, too many shots.

A faint tinkling noise heralded our arrival when I opened the door and stepped to the side to allow Daruka to go in first.

A group of second-year students were clustered around the jukebox, snickering and pointing at the screen; no doubt whatever was going to come out of the speakers next would be cringeworthy. I noted two professors huddled over a two-top table in a corner, entirely engrossed in their own conversation.

A couple more students, fourth years, I was pretty sure, sat at the far end of the bar. They glanced up when we walked in, but other than a brief nod, they made no attempt to interact. The rest of the patrons were locals, supernaturals who lived in the village, content to stay in this place that was wholly untouched by humans.

The elven forest was like that, although even more exclusive. Very few beings other than elves wandered into our

forest, and certainly not humans. I could see the appeal to living someplace where we didn't have to hide who we were.

What I couldn't see was myself going back to the elven forest and taking over for my father someday. I wasn't cut out to be a ruler. And frankly, I didn't think I was cut out to live in a place where the only people I had contact with were my own kind. Well, half of my own kind anyway.

Daruka plopped onto a stool at the bar, and I followed suit. We each ordered a beer on tap. Then she paid for both of them. I probably should have done the chivalrous thing and insisted I pick up the tab, except after paying off the proprietor at the Boar's Inn, I was low on funds again.

After her first sip of beer, she arched her brows. "Wow. This is good. Way different from anything I've had before."

"Have you ever had beer from a pub in a magical village before?"

"Nope. Only human beer. Only ever served in America."

"Really? You never left the US until now?"

She lifted one shoulder, let it drop.

"Why not?"

Her hesitation, while brief enough that most wouldn't notice, told me she was about to lie. Or at least alter the truth.

"No reason to, I guess."

"Or maybe a whole lot of reason to stay," I suggested. "Were you hiding from someone?"

Her hand gave a jerk before she wrapped her fingers around her mug and lifted it to her lips, drinking deeply.

I'd hit the nail on the head. Not that it had taken a genius to come to that conclusion. What I wanted—and knew she wouldn't give me—was more detail. Who was she hiding from? Why?

How could I help?

“How come it took you four years to enroll at Blackthorn?”

“I never intended to enroll at all.”

“Color me intrigued.”

She did that one-shoulder shrug again. “School isn’t my thing. Studying isn’t my thing. Socializing isn’t my thing. None of it really does it for me.”

“So before you enrolled, you were a reclusive non-student hiding away on some mountaintop in America?”

She barked out a laugh. “Not even close. First, I’m half mermaid, so I need to be near water. I was hiding in plain sight in a city on the East Coast.” She gave me a side-eye. “Working as a body piercer.”

“A what now?”

“I pierce your body parts. Ears.” She gave mine a speculative look. They twitched. “Belly button. Eyebrow. Nipples. Other places.”

I swallowed thickly, that other place perking up. “Have you ever pierced anyone’s, er, other place?” The idea of her fondling some guy’s genitalia, even though I was pretty certain she wasn’t a virgin, made more than my ears twitchy.

“Nah. I hadn’t been doing it long enough yet to pierce people’s junk. You have to be a serious expert at the craft before you start messing with those body parts.”

I let out a shaky breath.

Her eyebrows shot up before her gaze lowered to my groin. “What? You like the idea? Or are you afraid of it?”

Hell, how did we get on this topic? “Neither. I don’t like the idea of you touching some other guy’s dick.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“But that doesn’t change how I feel.”

She watched me for a few moments. “Are you serious right now? Because I’m not into clingy guys. Yeah, I want to fuck

you—you're a lust demon, for the love of cinder and ash. But that's it. I don't do clingy. I don't do next mornings. Got it?"

Clingy wasn't the right word. Obsessive, maybe.

Not that I intended to correct her.

But I did intend to figure out a way to convince her that we could be more than a single night together.

"Look," she said, sliding off her stool. "I'm not going to be around long anyway. I'm only at this academy temporarily, until I figure out a more long-term solution."

"Solution to what?"

"My problem. So thanks for saving me out there in the mirror ether or wherever I inadvertently ended up. But that's all you're gonna get, okay?"

I didn't say anything. And I didn't follow her when she left the pub.

It was hard as hell not to, though.

CHAPTER 8



MONDAY MORNINGS SUCKED. ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY STARTED with me in an itchy wool school uniform, trying to grab breakfast without having to actually make conversation with any of my fellow students. Especially my roommate, who hated me, and Asmoday, who didn't hate me and who I kind of wished did.

It would be a hell of a lot easier to keep him at arm's length if he hated me.

I was more of a protein breakfast girl than a carb-loaded breakfast girl, and today's buffet was nothing but muffins and pastries and bread. When I asked the kobold refilling the pastry tower if there was a way to procure a plate of scrambled eggs, maybe with a side of salsa, he promptly dropped his tray and started screaming at the top of his lungs.

Every single student and staff member in the hall turned to stare at me. I snagged a strawberry muffin and tried to make a beeline for the door, my face probably the color of those berries cooked into the breakfast dessert.

And promptly bounced off the barrel chest of Professor Dunlop, the dean of students. Because losing my footing and falling on my ass in front of two-thirds of the student body was exactly the attention I needed right at that moment.

"Miss Montreau. What have you done to upset the kobold?"

"Er, asked for eggs?"

"It's Monday, Miss Montreau."

“And?”

“We don’t eat eggs on Mondays. Eggs are for Fridays.”

Was he serious? Based on the thinness of his mouth, the furrowed furry brow, I suspected he was.

“Right,” I said, climbing to my feet and brushing muffin crumbs from my hands. The muffin itself had skidded under a table somewhere. I wasn’t about to glance behind me to see where it landed. Too many students, all probably still staring at me.

For my entire life, I’d tried everything in my power to not be the center of attention. I’d only ever wanted to grow up and just, I don’t know, be happy. Was that really too much to ask?

“And asking for them is apparently a crime,” I muttered.

“More that the kobold takes offense that you might not like what he prepared for you.”

So we had to work with overly sensitive kobolds. Great. “Noted.”

“I understand there was a mirror incident over the weekend, Miss Montreau.”

“I...” Shit, how did he know? Did Asmoday rat me out? What sort of curse could I come up with as punishment? Clearly, it had to dull his sexuality. He deserved no less.

“I happened by the Boar’s Nest Inn yesterday morning, and the proprietor complained that a couple of my students had used his mirror without permission. I thought figuring out which students might take a tad longer than this.”

Son of a bitch, did I really just out myself?

“Hey, Daruka, you ready yet?”

Closing my eyes for a brief moment in an utterly vain attempt to collect myself, I turned to face Asmoday.

He stood next to me, looking as sexy as ever in his perfectly fitted school uniform, his eyes flashing, his ears twitching. He had a backpack swung over one shoulder and a small paper sack in his hand.

“What am I supposed to be ready for?” I asked icily.

“Class, duh,” he said with a wink for Professor Dunlop. “I told you I’d show you how to get to your first period. Come on, you don’t want to be late.”

He may very well have offered this and I simply forgot. But as we both bid Professor Dunlop goodbye, I suspected he was—yet again—saving my ass.

Damn it. Not sure which I hated more: being the center of attention or being beholden to someone.

As we climbed the main staircase to the second level, Asmoday offered me the paper bag. “What is it?” I asked suspiciously, even as the delicious scent of eggs and ham wafted up to my nose.

“Breakfast. Just don’t tell anyone where you got it from or this privilege will be revoked.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Nah. It just sounded good.”

I pulled a bagel breakfast sandwich out of the bag and nearly wept with happiness as I took the first bite.

“Fire and brimstone, don’t moan like that, Daruka. I can hardly handle not ravishing you when you’re being prickly.”

I inhaled. With a half-eaten bite of sandwich in my mouth. And immediately began to choke.

Asmoday abruptly wrapped his hand around my throat, and holy shit, was he about to finish the job I’d inadvertently started myself? Did he work for my dad after all?

But then I felt magic flowing from his hand into my neck, clearing my airwaves so I could breathe again.

Damn it!

Being beholden to an elf was not a good thing. At some point, he was going to demand repayment, and I knew exactly what he was going to—

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Daruka. I’m not going to demand you sleep with me as payment for saving your ass back there. Or right now. It’s not worth it if that’s the only way I can get you naked.”

Great. Now I felt a combination of regret and relief. Why had I come to this stupid academy again?

“What’s your first class, anyway?” he asked.

“Camouflage for Beginners.”

He arched his brows. “Really? You’re half demon and, I’m guessing, have been living in the human world for your entire life.”

I snorted. “Exactly. Easy A.”

“I suppose you signed up for Secrets of Demon Summoning too.”

A laugh burbled up, which was weird, because I didn’t laugh very often.

I kind of liked it, but that was something to analyze at another time. “I tried, but Professor Dunlop was on to me by that point.”

And I laughed again.

Asmoday blinked at me like he was seeing me for the first time. And he *really* liked what he was seeing. Uh-oh. Mental note: no more laughing.

“Uh, I better go,” I said, stabbing my thumb over my shoulder. “Off to class. Um, thanks for the sandwich.”

I hightailed it down the hall without glancing back, which was unnecessary. I could feel him watching me all the way to the doorway of the classroom.

Where I promptly slammed face first into a solid barrier instead of stepping through a door.

A round of snickering ensued as I rubbed my swelling nose. I quickly darted a glance over my shoulder. I didn’t see Asmoday. Thank Lilith. I didn’t appreciate anyone laughing at

me, but I *really* didn't want Asmoday observing me making a fool out of myself.

Again.

"Come in, come in," someone said from the other side of what appeared to be a doorway, but, now that I analyzed it, I realized was a wall with a magical coating that made it look like a door.

Not very advanced magic, and I'd walked right into the trap. Boy, I was making a hell of a first impression, wasn't I?

"You must be Daruka," that same voice said after I stepped nimbly to the left and walked through the actual door, which was disguised as a potted palm in front of a window.

The classroom was cavernous, comprised of a tall, arched ceiling with desks interspersed between pillars. Billowing, gauzy curtains floated and flapped in front of a wall of windows. More potted plants were positioned along the perimeter.

Much of it, I noted, was an illusion. Hm. Maybe this could be a useful class after all.

At the front was a gigantic blackboard—not an illusion—with a super old-looking desk pushed off to the side. A bald white guy of indeterminant age, dressed in a black cloak with a black shirt and black pants peeking out, stood next to a blooming hibiscus plant—also not an illusion—smiling benignly.

"Good morning, Daruka," he said. "You should know that every single student who enters my classroom on the first try has that exact same experience. No need to be embarrassed."

"Er, thanks?"

He chuckled. "Some do it the first few times, actually. There is one unnamed student in here who still runs into the wall, every single day."

Probably the kid nursing a black eye in the third row.

"Based on how quickly you figured out the correct entrance, I suspect it will take you only the one time to learn

your lesson.”

He was right on that account. I may hate school, but I was a quick learner. Had to be when the devil himself was constantly nipping at your heels.

“Please, join us.” Professor What’s His Name waved at the rows of desks. “There is one open seat.”

Right between the kid with the black eye and my all-time favorite person: my roommate.

“Seriously?” Selina blurted. “She can’t sit *anywhere* else?”

“Is there a problem, Miss Blackthorn?” the professor asked.

Miss what now? My roommate was a Blackthorn? Like, descendant of the family that started this school? Maybe I needed to be nicer to her. It didn’t seem like the wisest plan to make an enemy out of someone with the same surname as the headmistress. Someone who could probably get me expelled. I didn’t plan to stay here forever, but I definitely planned to leave on my own terms.

“I can’t stand the scent of incense,” Selina said with an imperious sniff.

I lifted my arm and took a whiff. Nope, no incense there. Unless I was around Asmoday, I was pretty good at covering up most of the obvious signs that I was a demon.

“You can’t—” The professor snapped his mouth shut and suddenly, every set of eyes in the entire classroom had settled on me, and seriously, why was I continually the center of attention in this place?

Professor Kennedy—I finally remembered his name—walked a full circle around me, peering at me like I was a severed finger floating in a jar of formalin.

“Fascinating,” he murmured. “I had no idea. Excellent camouflaging skills, Daruka. I am quite impressed. Now, go take your seat.”

Okay, whatever that was about. Head down, I hurried through the silent stares and dropped into the only empty seat

in the room, save the professor's desk, which was covered in a layer of dust so thick, I doubted he'd used it in the last decade.

Professor Kennedy strode over to the dusty desk, grasped at the air about two feet above it, and suddenly pulled a cloth away to reveal a pristine, shiny wooden surface upon which sat a glass enclosure with some kind of reptile inside. As he plucked the lizard out of the tank, its scaly skin changed colors.

While he droned on about chameleons and how we can learn a thing or two from them, I became hyperaware of the kid with the black eye sitting to my left. He had dusky skin and a mop of curly hair on his head, along with a practically full beard. His tie was loose, the top buttons on his shirt undone, with a tuft of dark hair sticking out.

He kept sniffing in my general direction. I was pretty sure he thought he was being stealthy about it, but his flaring nostrils and the constant *sniff, sniff* noises were a dead giveaway.

"Dude, stop," I whispered out of the side of my mouth.

"How'd you do it?" he whispered back.

"Do what?"

"Figure it out after your first try?"

"Figure *what* out?"

"The doorway." He nodded at the classroom entrance.

"Oh, that." I shrugged. "Just use your senses, man. That's what they're there for. If you trust them, they usually won't let you down."

"Use my senses..." He said it like he was having an epiphany, which was strange because the dude was a werewolf, the species at the top of the food chain being good with senses.

"You are such a loser, Krishna," Selina stage-whispered from my right.

I whipped my head around. I honestly didn't give two shits about the clueless werewolf, but damn, I seriously disliked bullies.

“Shut the fuck up, Selina,” I snapped.

Far, far too loudly.

And just like that, absolute, total silence descended. Every student was staring in my direction, most with their mouths hanging open. Professor Kennedy had his arm extended, the lizard perched on the end, half of it a bright red color—what the hell sort of camouflage that was, I had no idea—the other half a springy green color, frozen, as if someone had cast a spell over them both.

Well, the lizard just thrust out its little tongue, so I guess he wasn't frozen after all.

I slid deeper into my seat, like that would somehow camouflage me against all these stares.

I was definitely not starting my academy career on the right foot.

CHAPTER 9



WHEN I STEPPED INTO THE DINING HALL AT LUNCHTIME, MY gaze zoned in on Daruka like the obsessed monster I'd become. It was annoying, mostly because I wasn't used to being so focused on another individual but also because the woman wouldn't give me the time of day, and damn, that smarted.

Although this morning, Lilith save me, when Daruka laughed...

I wasn't one to throw around the L-word. My dad insisted I had a destined mate somewhere, and yeah, all elves did, but I was also part demon, and demons definitely weren't into taking mates. So I figured I had a fifty-fifty chance.

And since the woman I was currently obsessed with was also half demon, I figured that dropped my chance to nil.

That didn't mean I didn't want to have the time of my life with her, naked, for as long as it took to shag her out of my system.

Except, wait a minute, who the hell was she cozying up to over there? I stalked toward her and the hairy kid seated way, way too close to her on the bench. And they were laughing. Damn it, I wanted Daruka's laughs all to myself.

Yes, I needed to get a grip. Just as soon as I figured out what was going on between these two.

Ignoring the outrage of the winter faery I practically sat on before he slid to the side, I dropped onto the bench directly across from Daruka and her new pal.

She paused with a forkful of pasta hovering above her plate, a dollop of red sauce about to drop at any second.

“Hey, Asmoday,” the kid next to her said with a warm smile.

I didn’t really know him, but it wasn’t surprising that he knew me. I’d been around for six years, after all. Plus, I had a reputation as a stud, so a lot of the guys, especially the first and second years, tried to get on my good side, thinking I might impart words of wisdom that would help them get laid.

Some of them, like this guy, didn’t seem to believe me when I said it was just because I was a lust demon.

“You guys know each other?” Daruka asked.

“I know him,” the kid supplied, “but he probably has no clue who I am.”

Wow, low self-esteem much? “Krishna,” the dark recesses of my mind supplied.

Krishna lit up like a frigging Christmas tree. Daruka wasn’t nearly as animated, but she was at least mildly impressed.

I’d take it.

“I see you’re making friends,” I pretended to note casually as I scooped pasta onto my plate and reached for the green sauce.

“I wouldn’t eat that one,” Daruka blurted out with a sly glance at Krishna, who snickered.

I eased my hand away. “Why not?”

“The ghoul who helped make it has a cold,” Daruka supplied.

“He kept sneezing,” Krishna added, and the two of them giggled like schoolchildren.

Yes, Daruka, giggling. My libido would be doing backflips if I weren’t so high-strung over this sudden new friendship with some other guy.

“I think I’m missing the joke,” I finally admitted.

Krishna nodded at something over my right shoulder. I glanced, then edged a little to the left so I could look around the winter faery who had shifted over just enough that our thighs weren’t quite touching.

Selina, sitting at the table behind us, wrapped her lips around a forkful of pasta soaked in green sauce.

Swallowing back the bile trying to push up my throat, I pointed at the bowl of red sauce. “I take it this one is safe?”

“I made it, so yeah,” Daruka said.

So she was taking a cooking class. Good to know. As it happened, I was too. Mine was the early morning class, hence how I was able to procure her an egg sandwich on Continental Breakfast Monday. She was obviously taking the late-morning class, which was the one responsible for making lunch for the school each day.

Hmm...

I ladled an extra-large portion of sauce over my pasta.

She rolled her eyes.

“You probably shouldn’t make an enemy of her, you know,” I commented.

“Did you know she’s a freaking Blackthorn?” Daruka asked.

“I do.” I didn’t when I hooked up with her, but yeah, I did now. Just in case I needed another reason to keep her at arm’s length. The last thing I needed was to piss her off and get myself kicked out, thus speeding up the inevitable: taking over as ruler of the elfin forest.

“Is that why she’s such a bully?” Daruka asked. “Because she’s a descendant?”

I actually didn’t pay all that much attention to Selina these days other than to do my best to give her a wide berth. I’d heard about her bullying behavior, of course, because this was

a school, and if students were experts at a single thing, it was gossiping.

“Who knows?” I said. “Maybe.”

“She’s had it out for me since literally the first day of our first semester together,” Krishna complained.

Probably because he was an easy target. The kid was so timid, it was hard to believe he was a full-blooded werewolf.

“Uh-oh, incoming,” Krishna mumbled, his gaze suddenly glued to his plate.

A moment later, something rubbed against my wing, which was currently flattened against the back of my blazer, and then my hair was brushed off my shoulder.

“Hello, Asmoday,” Selina purred.

She slithered sideways into the nonexistent space between me and the winter faery, forcing him to scowl and inch over enough for her to sit. She shivered—probably from touching the cool fae—and shifted so close to me, she might as well be in my lap.

Daruka glared at us from across the table.

Selina wrapped an arm around my neck, causing the front of her blouse, which was missing a few buttons, to gape, exposing a good portion of her breasts.

I tried to focus on eating and pretending she wasn’t here. The winter faery finally got tired of us invading his space and left. Selina didn’t inch away now that she had ample room to do so.

Great.

“Oh,” Selina said, placing her other hand in my lap. “I didn’t see you over there.” She gave Daruka a toothy smile.

I plucked her hand off my junk and dropped it into her own lap.

“Maybe you should get your eyes checked,” Krishna quipped in a ridiculously misplaced attempt to be brave.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. When I blinked them open, Daruka was glaring at Selina, challenging the other woman to respond to Krishna's silly comment.

I nudged her under the table. It was not a good idea to bait the descendant of the academy founders. She delivered a sharp kick to my shin.

"Ow," I complained, leaning forward to rub at the injury.

Selina dropped her hand into my lap again. Lilith be damned.

I grabbed it and slapped it onto the tabletop.

Daruka nodded at the appendage. "The message he's trying to send is pretty clear."

"What message is that?" Selina asked, sugar sweet.

"Keep your hands to yourself. It's obvious he's not interested."

Selina gave me the side-eye. "Oh, trust me, he's interested." She tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, which twitched in response. Not that I was still remotely attracted to Selina, but my ears were a serious erogenous zone. And that wasn't even the lust demon in me. That was all elf.

Unfortunately, Daruka noticed.

Her eyes narrowed.

"This is the game we play," Selina said in that same overly gooey tone. "Isn't it, Asmoday?"

She leaned toward me and licked my ear.

Damn it.

Daruka's eyes widened.

Krishna, in a moment of sharp observation that was entirely out of character, said, "Whoa. Did you hook up with Selina?"

Son of a...

Daruka abruptly stood and charged out of the dining hall. I'd have taken a moment to appreciate that she even had a

reaction to that question, except I had no freaking clue how to recover from this.

Shoving Selina away, I bounced up and followed Daruka.

“Hey, don’t leave me here alone,” Krishna called out. His trainers slapped against the stone floor as he hurried after me.

Well, hell. I couldn’t very well have the conversation I needed to have with Daruka with wolf boy dogging my steps. Not to mention, she was already gone by the time I made it into the great hall, and my next class started in less than ten minutes. Not that I really cared whether I missed Charms and Potions, which I’d taken for three years and pretty much had memorized.

“Damn it.” I bypassed the stairs, heading toward the main entrance. I needed air. I needed to breathe in the fresh grass, the potent flora planted on the school grounds. My elf nature was desperate to get to the outdoors so I could de-stress and recalibrate.

“Where are we going?” Krishna asked as he slipped out behind me.

“I hadn’t actually intended for there to be a ‘we’ in the equation,” I muttered.

“Oh. I—”

I had no idea what he said next. My entire focus was taken up by the sight of Daruka on the bank of the moat. She was mostly hidden underneath the wooden walkway that connected the castle to the grounds beyond the water, and I probably wouldn’t have noticed her if I weren’t so damn hyperaware of the woman.

But notice her I did. I noticed as she shed her blazer, then her shirt and bra, revealing a pair of spectacularly bouncy breasts. They were large, really large, with blue tips the same color as her hair. Miles of perfectly smooth, creamy flesh I wanted to bury my face in. Or my dick. Underworld help me, what I wouldn’t give to fuck those breasts.

“Holy—” I clapped my hands over Krishna’s eyes while I let my own feast and then feast some more.

I swallowed thickly as she unlatched her skirt and let it drop to the ground, and why in the hell was the woman undressing out here on the school grounds? I couldn't tear my gaze away to check to see if anyone else was watching. Son of Sam, there had better not be anyone else watching.

She shoved black panties down her legs, and if I didn't already belong there, I was most certainly going to hell for watching her like this. Except she's the one who decided to shed all her clothes in the middle of the day not fifty feet from the front door to the academy.

Seriously, why was she doing this?

She stepped to the edge of the mossy groundcover that curled over the edge of the moat and then did a graceful swan dive right into the murky water.

A moment later, a blue-green fin burst from the depths, the scales catching in the sun and sending sparkling stabs of light at my eyes before the fish's tail slapped the surface and disappeared.

I dropped my hands from Krishna's face.

"Did I just see—"

"No," I practically growled. "And if you tell a soul, I'll eat yours."

He audibly gulped. "Right. I didn't see a thing. But where's Daruka?"

I pointed at the rippling water.

He stared over the edge of the bridge. "She's in the moat? Did she fall? Shouldn't we, ah, help her?"

I sighed. This kid was so clueless. "She's a mermaid, Krishna."

His eyes bulged as he searched the surface for signs of a half-woman, half-fish. "Seriously? Holy cow, I wondered what she was. The way Selina talked about smelling incense, I thought maybe she was a demon, like you."

I closed my eyes and slowly shook my head. “She is, Krishna. She’s half demon, half mermaid.”

“Whoa,” he said rapturously. “That is so cool.”

I had to admit, the kid was right. Daruka broke through the surface, headfirst, her blue hair flattened against her chest, hiding those beautiful boobs from my pleasure-seeking eyes. She leaped into the air, as agile as a dolphin, exposing the lower half of her body. Her milky skin faded into blue-green scales just above her ample hips, which narrowed into a shimmering fish tail that seemed to wave at us before it disappeared beneath the surface again.

And I couldn’t miss the abject joy on her face before she dove underwater again.

So this was how Daruka unwound.

We were more alike than she’d probably ever be willing to admit. I preferred to be in a meadow or the woods, but it was still outdoors, and there was always a lake or a river nearby.

It was peaceful. And soothing. And kept our volatile demon natures in check.

And honestly, I needed to let her have this peace. Maybe, afterward, she’d be amenable to talking about that ridiculous show in the dining hall. But right now, I was being a voyeur, and honestly, that was only fun when the other person was aware and playing along.

“Come on, Krishna.” I grabbed the kid by the sleeve of his blazer. “Let’s get to class.”

“Hang on,” he said, tugging out of my grip. “Something’s wrong.”

“I told you, she’s a mermaid. She can literally breathe underwater. She—”

Krishna’s body began to vibrate. His nose elongated. Long whiskers sprouted to go along with the heavy dark scruff already there. His ears grew into fur-covered points. His back rounded, forcing him to drop to all fours, then his blazer split at the seams, revealing more thick, dark fur. A tail sprouted

from his ass, and he shook, sending fur and the remnants of his tattered clothes flying.

With a warning bark, he dove into the drink.

Oh, come on.

Was I about to have to save a mermaid and a damn werewolf?

CHAPTER 10



ASMODAY SLEPT WITH SELINA. SO WHAT? WHAT DID I EVEN care?

I didn't.

So why was I so damn bothered by that knowledge?

I didn't actually want to know the answer to that question.

What I wanted was to get the hell out of this place. Not forever—not ready to deal with dear old Dad yet—but temporarily.

The moat wasn't a hot tub, but it was water, and that was exactly what I needed to calm my annoyingly overwrought nerves.

Already feeling better, I leaped into the air, twisting twice, straightening my arms as I prepared to break the surface. I opened my eyes and spotted Asmoday and Krishna standing on the bridge, watching me. Well, Asmoday was watching; his hands were covering Krishna's eyes.

Shit, shit, shit. In my mermaid form, my boobs were exposed for all the world to see, specifically Asmoday, whose lust I could feel even way down here in the moat.

I had no idea how deep this moat was, but I was about to find out. Surely, going all the way to the bottom would separate me from the embarrassment I now felt over being so exposed to him like that.

Damn, it was deeper than I expected. It felt like I'd been swimming for far too long given this was simply a moat

around a castle. It should have been twenty feet at most.

Yeah, it was way deeper than that.

I finally stopped swimming, pausing to tread water and catch my breath. Well, not really my breath, since I was currently breathing underwater. As murky as it was near the surface, I couldn't even see the end of my fin here.

Maybe I didn't need to be quite this deep. It was entirely possible there were creatures down here I didn't want to come face-to-face with. Hell, it was likely. Mrs. Caldwell had insisted I was safe at this castle, and what she meant by that was safe from outsiders. Which meant school officials had taken precautions to ensure outsiders stayed out.

Such as stocking the moat with—

Something wrapped around my fin. I reached down and grabbed it, tugging it away and lifting it closer so I could see it in the dimness.

A tentacle. With a claw on the end.

I threw it away from me and began swimming as fast as I could toward the surface. No wonder this moat was so deep. It had to be to house a kraken.

A kraken! That would definitely help to protect the school.

Also, that seemed like something school officials should warn a girl about. Especially one who was half mermaid. You'd think they'd expect me to want to take a swim on occasion.

But not with a kraken!

I felt the tentacles behind me, waving through the water, reaching for me, but I was managing to keep just out of reach. Finally, light began filtering into the water, and kraken hated sunlight. Just a little bit farther and I'd be safe. I'd have to flop onto shore and wait for my scales to dry before I could shift back into human form, which sucked. I was about to give Asmoday an eyeful of big girl knockers, but that was the lesser of two evils at the moment.

I broke the surface, barely noted that Asmoday and Krishna appeared to be walking back toward the entrance, then I turned toward the bank. I'd hardly managed two strokes before something wrapped around my fin again and jerked me under.

This time, the thing's hold was a lot more secure, and it clung to me as it sank toward the bottom, towing me along with it. Doubling over, my poor, underutilized abs screaming at me, I grabbed the tentacle and tried to loosen it while mentally sifting through all the magic I knew, trying to determine what would be most effective against a gigantic octopus with twenty tentacles that had razor sharp claws on the end and four rows of needle-like teeth in its bulbous head.

Something shot past me. A dog?

No, a wolf. It opened its jaws and clamped down on the tentacle wrapped around my fin. The tentacle immediately loosened and I shimmied free while it flung the wolf through the water.

Ah, hell. Ten bucks said that was Krishna. This struck me as exactly something that kid would do. He'd pegged me for a bleeding heart after I'd snapped at Selina on his behalf, and he'd latched onto me like we were going to be friends forever. That wasn't true, of course, since I didn't plan to keep in touch with anyone after I left this place, but I had to admit, it was nice to actually have a friend.

And said friend couldn't breathe underwater. I needed to go after him and get him to the surface while fending off a killer octopus.

No sweat.

Fluttering my tail, I charged through the water, catching up to Krishna, who was trying really damn hard not to pull in a lungful of water. Grabbing him around the stomach, I swam my heart out toward the surface.

Only to be snagged by that damn kraken again.

I gave the wolf a shove that would hopefully get his head above water, and my brain finally kicked into gear. I pulled on

my magic, sending a lightning bolt at the offending tentacle.

It immediately jerked away, and I hightailed it toward the surface again, only to be waylaid yet again before I could get there.

This time, though, it was an arm, wrapping around my midsection, dragging me toward the mossy water's edge. My head pushed through the waves, and I glanced over at Asmoday, who was swimming one-handed toward shore. A soaking wet, bedraggled wolf was already sitting in the grass, waiting for us.

Asmoday's finger brushed the underside of my boob, and I shoved his arm away. "I got it from here," I said icily.

"I was just trying to help," he said, totally fake-innocent.

"Uh-huh."

He climbed out and leaned back on his elbows, breathing heavily, all damp and sexy with his shirt clinging to his torso and water streaming down his face and neck.

"Come on out," he said.

"No way," I replied. No way was I giving him an eyeful of my wet boobs with nipples that were currently standing at attention, admiring how good he looked soaking wet.

A fluffy, dark purple towel landed in his lap. I glanced over to the bridge. Mrs. Caldwell stood there, arms crossed, brow furrowed, mouth pinched.

"I am really quite curious as to the reason why you three chose to take a dip in the moat," she said, and then snapped, "Asmoday, Krishna, get up here. Daruka, get dried off and *get dressed*."

Krishna, his tail between his legs, hurried to her side. Asmoday climbed to his feet at a much slower pace. "Are you okay?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine."

"Did it help?"

"Getting attacked by a kraken?"

He chuckled. “Taking a swim. Until you were attacked. Did you feel better, at least for a minute?”

I shifted my gaze to the side. How did he know?

“I get it,” he said. “I’m the same way.” He nodded at the tree line. “I was heading out here for the same reason. To de-stress.”

“Asmoday,” Mrs. Caldwell called out, her tone like a whip that propelled him into action.

“See you inside,” he said, and then he finally strutted—of course he did—up to the bridge to receive his dressing down from the school administrator.

I grabbed the towel, wrapping it around myself as I rolled onto shore. Lying there, letting the sun do its thing, I repeated that brief conversation in my head.

And I hated myself for liking the fact that we had something in common.

CHAPTER 11



DARUKA MANAGED TO AVOID ME UNTIL THURSDAY. WELL, Wednesday night, shortly after midnight, to be precise.

Tomorrow was Wild Boar Thursday, a meal that took quite a long time to prepare when done right. Eighteen hours, actually.

Due to the long prep time, all the students in all the cooking classes took turns making this meal. There was a sign-up sheet posted right inside the kitchen door, a fact I figured Daruka hadn't realized yet, since her name wasn't on it. Until Wednesday, after lunch. And then I added it, right next to mine.

I pointed out her name on the list to Professor Holtsclaw at 12:15, when Daruka hadn't yet shown up for the shift she didn't even know she was supposed to work.

Ten minutes later, a disheveled Daruka—I desperately hoped she'd been sleeping and not doing other activities—stomped into the kitchen, took one look at me, turned on her heel, and slammed into Professor Holtsclaw, sending the professor's beads and shells clattering.

"Uh-uh," Daruka said. "I'm not working with *him*."

"Would you rather fail this course, Miss Montreau?" Professor Holtsclaw cast a swift glance at her watch.

I also happened to know that Professor Holtsclaw had a standing date every other Wednesday evening. Which was why she tended to prefer the more advanced kids work those shifts so she didn't have to be here, making sure we didn't

burn the place down. No idea who her date was with, only that every other Thursday, when she showed up for her morning class, she looked both dreamy and exhausted and her braids were always a little off kilter.

“Yep,” Daruka said. “I’m totally fine with that.”

Professor Holtsclaw frowned. “What about all those other students, Miss Montreau? Aren’t you sick of them looking at you like you’re a pariah? Whispering about you behind your back? If you do this meal well—which I am sure you will, considering Mr. Asmoday has taken this class for six years now—I do expect you will win a small modicum of respect. If you do it poorly...”

“Ugh, fine. What do I need to do?” Clearly, Daruka cared more about what others thought than she was normally willing to let on.

Professor Holtsclaw glanced at her watch again and pointed at me. “Just do whatever he says. I’ll be back to check on you shortly before the Thursday breakfast class starts.”

And then she was gone.

Daruka narrowed her eyes. “This was all planned, wasn’t it?”

“Yep,” I said, rocking on my heels. “Totally and completely. Right down to the fact that there aren’t any kobolds on duty for the next few hours.”

“You’re such a creep.”

“I’d say I’m more desperate than creepy.”

“A desperate lust demon? That’s an oxymoron if I ever heard one.”

I handed her an apron. “Come with me.”

She followed me into the smoke room. It was more or less a lean-to shed that had been built next to the kitchen for exactly this task. A combination of magic and smokestacks kept the smoke from permeating the room and drifting into the kitchen.

There were four smokers and four brick ovens with spits. Whoever was cooking got to choose whether to smoke or spit-roast the pigs. I'd decided on smoking for tomorrow's dinner. Less work. My plans for the evening did not include basting a bunch of pigs every few hours.

I'd already filled the smokers with wood chips and warmed them up. The pig carcasses were resting on a stainless steel table in the middle of the room, ready to be prepped and slid into the smokers.

After that, we'd have all night to work through our issues and get ourselves back on even footing.

"Come stand across from me," I said, even though I'd rather her be right by my side. But I knew having the table between us would give her a sense of control. And she needed to feel like she was in control.

Although when I'd held her wrists above her head in that alley, she'd been practically butter in my hands, so maybe that control didn't extend into the bedroom.

Definitely something I hoped to find out one of these days. Probably not tonight, though. Tonight, I just wanted to figure out how to become friends.

Because not talking to Daruka at all was damn near killing me.

"Do you want to spread the olive oil or the spices?" I asked, nodding at a bottle of oil and a bowl of spices I'd already mixed together.

Professor Holtsclaw wasn't wrong; I'd become a hell of a chef over the last six years.

Daruka eyed the display. "Which do you prefer?"

"Whichever you don't."

"That's not helpful."

"It's the truth."

She glared at me. I blew out a breath. "Look, it really doesn't matter. Either way, we're both going to get oily and

covered with herbs.”

And no, that shouldn't sound sexy at all, but I was a desperate man, and anything with Daruka was sexy at this point.

“Fine,” she said, pushing the bottle of oil toward me.

“Okay, follow along behind me,” I instructed. “Make sure the entire pig is covered, inside and out—”

“Inside?” She eyed the butterflied carcass.

“Inside,” I repeated, lifting a leg to show her the ribs.

We worked silently for a time. She caught on quickly, probably because she wanted to stop brushing against my hands every time she tried to spread the herbs.

“How bad was your punishment?” she finally asked.

After the incident in the moat, Mrs. Caldwell had taken all three of us to the headmistress. Poor Krishna had to shift back into human form without any clothes at his disposal. Daruka had tossed him her towel; she had been able to get dressed before heading inside.

The headmistress had pulled us into her office one at a time. Once again, I felt sorry for Krishna; I was willing to bet this was his first trip to the headmistress's office. He probably wished he could have stayed in his wolf form for the lecture that ensued.

I, on the other hand, was quite familiar with the inner sanctum of our feared leader. Six years plus being a mischievous elf and oh, let's not forget a lust demon—Headmistress Blackthorn and I were well acquainted.

I shrugged. “A lecture that felt like it lasted for days and bathroom cleanup duty this weekend.” Weekend bathroom duty sucked because that's when drunken students tended to miss the toilet when expelling the contents of their stomachs.

“Sorry,” Daruka muttered.

I stopped massaging oil onto the pig. “What?”

“I said I'm sorry.”

“Why?”

She waved her salt and herb encrusted hand in my direction. “If I hadn’t decided to go for a swim in the moat, you never would have dived in after me—although I’d like to point out that I didn’t need your help.”

“Are you serious right now? You’re apologizing and then immediately pointing out how dumb I was for trying to help you?”

“Not for trying. I appreciate the consideration. It just wasn’t needed is all I’m saying.”

“What about Krishna? Was his help needed?”

There it was. The tell. She lowered her gaze and refocused her efforts on spreading the herbs over a section of the pig that was already plenty coated.

“So what the hell is going on between you two?”

“He’s my friend.” She lifted her gaze to glare at me. “And for your information, yes, he did help me. But that’s beside the point. He’s just a kind person. And frankly, it’s nice to hang around someone who has no ulterior motives.”

Well, hell.

I quickly oiled up the last pig and left her to add the dry rub while I slid each porker into its respective smoker. Without a word of acknowledgment, I returned to the kitchen to wash my hands and shed my apron.

Daruka joined me at the sink. “So what’s next?”

“That’s it,” I said, drying my hands. “You’re free to go.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the smoking shed while tossing her apron onto the counter. “Don’t we have to, I don’t know, pour barbeque sauce on them or something?”

I snorted. “We’re smoking them. You just let the smoke and heat do their job. I’ll check the temperature in a few hours, make sure they still have plenty of wood chips, but that’s it. So go on, go back to bed. Or whatever you were doing before Professor Holtsclaw dragged you down here.”

“I was sleeping. Why are you so defensive all of a sudden?”

“Because I got your hint about ulterior motives, Daruka. And it pisses me off because you’re right. I do have ulterior motives. I want you. I want you underneath me. I want you on top of me. I want you in the shower, and I’m pretty sure that can’t even happen.”

“It can’t.” Her voice was breathy. “When we’re in mermaid form, we don’t have sex organs. Well, besides our breasts.”

I threw my head back and closed my eyes. “Fuck. You have the most magnificent breasts I’ve ever seen. I can’t get them out of my head.”

“It’s been two and a half days since you’ve seen them.”

“Yeah, and it’s only gotten worse. This stupid obsession I have for you.” I opened my eyes, caught her gaze, held it. “I have never felt like this, ever. And it sucks. I just want it to go away.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She continued to stare into my eyes. “Never? Seriously? I’m not even—”

“Do not say you aren’t attractive,” I warned. “Because one, that’s bullshit. And two, that isn’t even it, although you are hot as fuck. It’s all of you. Not just”—I waved at her breasts—“them.”

She glanced down at her boobs. “They are pretty hot though.”

I snorted.

She cupped them, lifting them and pushing them out. She wasn’t in uniform; she’d not changed out of her pajamas before coming down here to tend to the evening meal with me. Her nipples pressed against the thin material of her pajama top like they were trying to cut their way to freedom.

I swallowed, my gaze now fixed on her breasts instead of her eyes.

“What would you do with them if I let you touch them?”

Underworld help me. “Everything I possibly could.”

Her thumbs dragged across those taut nipples. Holy hell, I’d never been seduced before. I’ve only ever been the seducer.

It was hot as fuck.

“Tell me,” she said, rubbing her nipples again. “I want details.”

Oh Lilith save me, my cock was going to burst through my pants at this rate. Swallowing thickly, I said, “First, I’d hold them, just like you are now. Massage them a little. Really get a feel for them. Figure out which parts make you moan when I touch them.”

She gasped. Close, but not a moan. Not yet.

“And then I’d cup one of them just so”—I reached out, covered her hand on her right breast with my own—“and I’d lean in”—she sucked in a breath, watching me—“and I’d wrap my lips around that beautiful blue nipple...” I pressed my lips to her breast, over her shirt, and then I sucked. Hard.

She moaned.

Yes!

But then she pushed me away. Damn it, did I carry this too far? I thought I was reading her signals right. I mean, it’s pretty hard to misinterpret “tell me more” while she’s holding her breasts in her hands.

She flipped her shirt over her head.

I was clearly not misreading her signals.

“Keep going,” she demanded, and oh yes, my pleasure.

Truly.

CHAPTER 12



I JUST TOOK OFF MY SHIRT. IN FRONT OF ASMODAY.

Granted, he'd already seen my boobs before, but hello, totally different scenario. That was an accident. This was very, *very* deliberate.

Asmoday was a smart demon-slash-elf; he didn't give me a chance to second-guess my decisions.

He pounced like the lust demon he was, sliding his arm around my back, pulling me to him, and wedging his leg between mine so that when he dipped his head and sucked my nipple into his mouth, I was practically riding his thigh while I threw my head back and moaned.

He was so skilled, it felt like his tongue was in two places at once, twirling and swirling and teasing and—holy wow, I could hardly catch my breath.

Grabbing his head, I pushed him away, lifting his face to mine. He blinked dazedly.

“Show me your tongue,” I demanded.

He grinned wickedly before opening his mouth.

His tongue was split, like a snake, except larger. No wonder it had felt like it was in two places at once. “Has it always been like that?”

He darted it out and licked his lips. “Does that when I'm turned on.”

Oh my. With his head still in my hands, I pulled him to my lips. I wanted that tongue shoved down my throat, damn it. And other places, but we'd get there. Eventually.

He complied, stabbing his fingers into my hair and holding my head, canting it slightly so he could own my lips, my tongue, just like I had no doubt he would own my entire body before this night was through. We should go someplace else—my roommate wasn't around—but then he did a particular little swirl, and I rubbed against his leg like a damned dog in heat.

Yeah, we weren't going to make it up six flights of stairs before we lost our clothes and got busy.

He broke the kiss so he could tease that tongue along my cheek, down to my neck. I took the opportunity and licked his ear. It twitched. His moan shot straight to my core.

So his ears were an erogenous zone, were they?

I could work with that.

He lowered his head, flicking his tongue into the valley between my breasts. I stroked his ear, featherlight.

He grasped my ass, dragging me up and down his leg until I panted in between moans. "More," I begged.

He came up for air, cupping my chin and holding it so he could look me in the eye. "This will not be the only time between us. Do you understand?"

I nodded. Fire and brimstone, we were hardly to second base and this was the best sex I'd ever had. No way did I want to do this only once.

"Good. Because one of these days, I'm going to fuck these breasts. But not today. We need a nice, soft bed for that, and I don't have the patience to get upstairs to one of our rooms."

"D-did you say you're going to fuck my breasts?" Pretty sure I was on the verge of orgasm. At just the thought.

"Yep. And just you wait. You're going to be begging for it. But first—"

He flipped his shirt off, and his wings spread and flapped like they needed to stretch, then curled against his back. Then he hooked his thumbs into the elastic waist of my pajama bottoms and shoved them down to the floor, revealing my completely bare—and pierced—pussy.

“Holy fuck,” he whispered as he lowered himself to his knees. “Absolutely beautiful.” He touched the small barbell in my labia. “Lie to me and tell me you did this yourself.”

I laughed. “I did, actually.”

He kissed it, gently, soft, tentatively touching it with his forked tongue. “So damn beautiful.”

And then he dove in with gusto, swiping that two-pronged tongue over my seam before thrusting it inside me and using it to fuck me like I’ve never been fucked before.

I spread my legs as wide as I possibly could and clutched at the counter behind me, needing it to help keep me on my feet. My knees were shaking so badly, I was afraid they were going to buckle.

Please, knees, don't buckle. Not until after he gives me the mother of all orgasms, please.

He lifted one of my legs, draping it over his shoulder, and I leaned even more heavily against that counter. The whole time, he never let up. His tongue was everywhere at once: on my seam, my clit, inside me, toying with my piercing. It was so much sensation, all at once, I could scarcely breathe as I braced and then let go, the orgasm tumbling over me with the intensity of a tidal wave.

He didn’t stop. Instead, he added a couple of fingers, working me through the aftershocks until I was so sensitive I finally nudged at his shoulder to get a minute to catch my breath.

He slowly stood, chasing kisses up my thigh, over my belly, back to my breasts. I was panting all over again by the time he pressed his lips to mine. When he finally broke the kiss, he lifted his hand, showing me the tiny vial of liquid in his palm.

“What’s this?” I asked, my voice all high and breathy.

“Birth control. Drink it. It lasts for about ten hours.”

All of my previous encounters had been with human men, so the only form of birth control I’d ever used was condoms. I kind of liked the idea of drinking a potion and being worry-free for the next ten hours.

“You’re so smart,” I crooned as I popped the lid and tipped the liquid to my lips.

“You really know how to make a guy happy, don’t you?”

“I haven’t even done anything except let you make *me* happy.” I grinned cheekily.

He swatted one of my ass cheeks and then patted the counter behind me. “Get up here. I have something to show you.”

“Oh-h-h, fun.” I struggled to hop onto the counter—yeah, not exactly the most agile woman here. Finally, he grasped my waist and lifted me like I weighed nothing—to be clear, I definitely weighed a lot more than nothing—and plopped my bare ass on that cold countertop.

“Yikes,” I complained.

“Don’t worry, I’ll warm you up quick enough.” With a flourish, he popped the button on his pants and pushed them down his legs. His dick bounced out, ready to play.

I stared at it. The thick, veiny length. The bulbous head. That smaller extra dick at the root, sticking up and kind of curved forward. What the...?

He stroked himself, watching me. Up and down the length a couple times, then he used this thumb to toy with that extra micro dick.

“It’s for your pleasure,” he explained.

Even as a shiver zipped through my body, I tipped my head, still studying him. “You have sex with humans with that thing?”

“Not that I want either of us to think about sex with anyone else right now, but I can control its appearance. Usually.” He frowned down at himself. “Apparently not today, though, because I can’t make him go away. I guess thinking about pleasuring you gets him *really* excited.”

“I definitely like the way you think,” I assured him. “Now, tell me how this guy works.” I wiggled my finger at the bonus dick; I swear it vibrated in response.

“He’s intuitive. You know all those jokes about guys who can’t find the clitoris?” He waved at his fancy lust demon cock. “When we’re fucking like this, it’s going to hit you right here.” He moved between my legs, rubbed himself against my drenched pussy, and tapped my swollen clit.

I hissed and arched against him.

“When I fuck you from behind, it stretches so it can still stroke you, right where you need it.”

“Fire and brimstone, less telling and more showing.”

He smirked, grasped himself with one hand and my ass with the other, and then he thrust.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him while his two-pronged cock stroked all the right spots both inside and out. As he pushed me higher and higher, I gave his ear a lick.

At that, he thrust so hard, I would have moved halfway across the countertop if my legs weren’t twined around his waist.

I nibbled on his ear. He buried his face against my shoulder, his thrusts becoming erratic, while the bonus dick continued its job of teasing my clit, and Lilith save me, this impending orgasm was going to blow my mind.

“Daruka,” he whispered hoarsely, and that was it. With one arm still curled around his neck, I grasped his chin and turned his face toward me, slamming our lips together while my hips tried to lift off the now-heated stainless steel surface, my body craving him like it wanted to swallow him whole.

While our tongues tangled, he dug his nails into my ass, pulling me toward him with enough force that our bodies slapped together, again and again, until I broke the kiss to make a keening noise that was entirely unlike me, but I didn't even care. The pleasure poured over me, drenched me, claimed me.

Owned me.

He stiffened, our bodies flush, as warmth filled me.

It was oddly intimate. Actually, that probably wasn't an odd sensation at all for most people.

For me, intimacy was definitely odd.

Asmoday lowered his face to my chest. I figured he hadn't gotten enough of my boobs—no complaint there—but instead, he simply hugged me, with his cheek pressed against my shoulder. I could feel his rapid heartbeat, matched with my own.

After a few moments, I relaxed enough to stroke his ear, which twitched in appreciation. I could feel his lips curve into a smile. I wasn't ready for this. I didn't know how to handle intimacy. The only person I'd ever loved was my mother.

Not that I was in love with Asmoday. I mean, I know I said I was in love with his dick, but that was during the throes of passion, and can one really be in love with a single body part?

Although it was a damned impressive dick. If not love, I could certainly see myself becoming addicted to it. And maybe the rest of him too.

Ugh. I needed to stop with all the sappy bullshit. This was just sex, for the love of Lilith. And even though he'd promised, there was no guarantee we'd do it again. Asmoday was a lust demon, and that was not how they rolled. Not to mention, hello, I had zero interest in tying myself down to anyone, magic dick or no.

Frankly, being associated with me was dangerous for one's health. Any demons coming after me on my dad's behalf would have no qualms about destroying whoever might get in their way.

The counter shivered, like the ground underneath was moving.

“What was that?” I demanded.

“Ley lines,” Asmoday mumbled against my chest. “Underneath the castle. They do that sometimes. Shift and move and then settle again.”

“My kitchen!” someone shrieked.

I jerked upright, shoving Asmoday away. Shit, where were our clothes?

“My kitchen,” went that shriek again. It sounded like more than one someones this time.

Uh-oh.

Asmoday snatched up my pajama shirt and pants and tossed them at me. I struggled into the shirt before bouncing off the counter to shove my legs into my pants. Asmoday scrambled around, snagging his own clothes and rushing them onto his body.

“My kitchen! My kitchen! My kitchen!” There were multiple voices now, chanting. Moving shadows on the walls warned us a moment before more kobolds than I’d seen since I’d started at this school swarmed into the kitchen, surrounding us.

The crowd parted as a thoroughly fucked-looking and also quite mad Professor Holtsclaw came storming toward us. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, shoving an errant braid out of her flushed face. “Why are the kobolds so upset?”

My first instinct was to feign innocence. *I don't know. They just started chanting while Asmoday and I were checking on the smoking pigs. No idea what's going on.*

But the group parted again, this time slightly to my left, where a giant smudge the size and shape of my ass was on display, on top of the counter.

Right next to the empty vial of birth control serum Asmoday had given me.

CHAPTER 13



IF DARUKA THOUGHT GETTING CAUGHT SWIMMING IN THE MOAT was bad, she would be utterly humiliated by the fact that our sexcapades in the kitchen were the current talk of the town. We weren't the first students to have taken advantage of the late-night cooking class like that, but we were the first in recent memory to have gotten caught.

Lucky us.

I wanted to talk to her about it, to assure her that this, too, shall pass. It always did. Students loved their gossip but were always looking for the next juicy tidbit. We'd be old news in days.

Problem was, we were now forbidden from being within ten feet of each other. Every professor—and definitely every kobold—was watching us, all ready to leap in, pull us apart, and send us to the headmistress's office.

Where we'd most certainly be informed that we were being expelled. The headmistress promised as much when she gave us our joint dressing down after the kitchen incident. No more chances. One slipup and we were both out.

Despite being a demon and thus, theoretically, having a gray moral compass, Daruka appeared to be towing the line. But I didn't know this for a fact—I hadn't seen her since that night.

And it was driving me mad.

Forgoing my usual path to Defense Against the Dark Arts class, I headed down the hall toward where I knew Daruka

would be. Yes, my obsession for her had taken a slight turn into stalking territory, which meant I'd snuck into Mrs. Caldwell's office and looked up her entire schedule.

Sue me. I had needs. And one of them was to lay eyes on her. I didn't even need to talk to her; I just wanted to see her. I didn't want to cause any more trouble—the last thing I wanted was to get kicked out myself—but fire and brimstone, I needed a visual fix.

As I hovered outside the Practical Application of Curses class, another shiver rattled the castle. It wasn't like a hardcore earthquake, but it was enough for students to notice and begin whispering about what it meant as they kicked up their pace, like getting to their next class sooner might stop the magic.

Yeah, there weren't usually two movements like this in such quick succession—it had been five days since the most amazing kitchen sex of my life; okay, okay, the most amazing sex of my life, regardless of location—but that didn't mean the world was about to end. It just meant the rocks this place was built on were settling.

Krishna wandered by, head down—alone. I grabbed the back of his collar. He tensed but then relaxed when he realized it was me.

“Where is she?” I demanded.

“In her room,” he replied, and I appreciated that he didn't pretend like he didn't know what I wanted. “Napping.”

“Napping?” It was mid-morning. She had class.

“Yeah, she won't sleep at night because she's afraid Selina will try something. So she's been sleeping when she knows Selina has other places to be.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why is she afraid of Selina? What does she think she'll do?”

“Curse her, at best. Murder her in her sleep, more likely.”

“What?” I yelped, then dragged him into an alcove so we could have a modicum of privacy. “What are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “Selina thinks you’re her property, mate. And Daruka stole you from her. And Selina is not a fan of not getting her way.”

“Shit.” I let my head drop back on my shoulders for a moment. I hadn’t thought about the consequences if Selina found out about Daruka and me. That’s exactly how much that woman meant to me.

Except now I’d put Daruka in a bad spot. It wasn’t fair that she was afraid to sleep at night. She’d been at school for all of two weeks, and thanks to her association with me, it had been nothing but one issue after another.

I should probably feel regret—which I did.

I should probably feel like I should stay away from her—which would never happen.

Between my demon and elf natures, I was a very selfish bastard. I wanted Daruka in my life. Needed her.

And frankly, the only way that was going to happen was if I figured out how to fix her life for her.

I shouldn’t do it behind her back, though. That had potential to make things even worse.

Which meant I had to see her.

“Thanks, mate,” I said, patting Krishna on the back before striding toward the staircase.

“Where are you going?” Krishna asked, practically running to keep up with my long strides.

“To see Daruka.”

“No.”

I gave him an arched eyebrow look and didn’t break stride.

“I’m serious, Asmoday, don’t do it.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t go up there and seduce her. She—she’s fragile right now.”

I snorted. “Daruka has never been fragile a day in her life. Besides, I’m not going to seduce her.” Although the idea *did* have merit. “I just want to talk to her.” And if talking led to seducing, don’t expect me to complain.

“Oh, well, if that’s all, okay.”

He didn’t veer off to go to class. He followed me. All the way up to Daruka’s door on the sixth floor.

Guess there really would be no seduction any time soon.

Bummer.

I rapped on the door.

No answer.

That’s right; she was sleeping. I lifted my finger to my lip to warn Krishna to be quiet, and then I slipped an old skeleton key out of my pocket that was so steeped in magic, it was warm to the touch all the time.

The moment I stepped through the entry, my body was hit with what felt like a thousand jolts of electricity. My teeth clattered together, my eyes rolled into the back of my head, and my face and the floor became very close and painful acquaintances.

“Oh shit,” I heard someone say from a distance. I was on the ground, face down. The electrical shocks had stopped, but my body was still shaking, which was the only thing it was capable of doing at the moment. I was pretty sure my nose was bleeding, probably from the impact with the wooden floorboards.

I couldn’t even push out a groan.

“Help me roll him over.”

There was more than one pair of hands on me, then I was flipped onto my back and something soft was tucked under my head while something not-quite-as-soft was swiped under my nose. I spared a moment to hope I hadn’t pissed my pants. I’d lost full control of my facilities for a moment there. What the hell happened?

I needed to learn that trick, whatever it was. It might come in useful down the line.

Something was waved under my nose—smelling salts, maybe? I honestly had no clue, but all of a sudden, my eyes shot open and my surroundings came into focus. My fingers and toes were tingling, although I couldn't yet move them.

Daruka's face swam into view, and I actually sighed with relief.

"Did you do this to me?" I asked.

"I did," she confirmed. "How did you get in here anyway?"

"Elves are crafty individuals."

"There are lots of crafty individuals in this school. And our dorm room doors are magical reinforced by the headmistress herself to keep every single one of them out."

"I have a key," I admitted. "It's probably on the floor over there."

"You have a key to *my* room?"

"I have *the* key. To every room. I borrowed it when I popped into Mrs. Caldwell's office to look up your schedule."

"You—you—"

"Don't bother pointing out that I'm a stalker. I prefer the word *obsessed*."

"With me?"

We definitely needed to work on our communication skills if she was this shocked by that revelation.

The feeling was returning to my appendages. "I'd suggest you take advantage of me while I'm unable to fight you off, but I'm pretty sure Krishna is still here."

I caught Daruka's wobbly smile before Krishna's mop of hair and scruffy face moved into my line of vision.

"Right here, mate. How are you feeling?"

“Like I was pumped with too many jolts of electricity.” I groaned as I pushed myself up onto my elbows. “Tell me you’ll teach me how you did that. And also, tell me who your intended victim was.”

I knew, of course, but I wanted to hear her say it. Maybe I needed a dose of reassurance that she hadn’t intended to hit me with three thousand jolts of electricity.

Daruka and Krishna each looped an arm under my pits and more or less dragged me over to Daruka’s bed. I lay there on the soft comforter, wishing I were lying here under entirely different circumstances. Ones that involved Daruka and me naked. Preferably with her tits in my mouth or my cock stuffed between them.

Seriously, that was my biggest fantasy.

“Dude,” Krishna said, his gaze darting to my groin.

I glanced down at the bulge in my pants. “Oops.”

“At least we know the important bits still work,” Daruka quipped, which only made my other head swell more.

I shifted up so that I was leaning against the headboard—a headboard I’d love to tie Daruka’s wrists to, using silk ribbons.

Seriously, even for a lust demon, this was out of control. Normally, I could keep the raging libido under wraps until I was ready to let it out. I’d blame the zap I just received, but I knew better.

“Okay, so can we assume your roommate was your intended victim?” I asked while massaging my temple.

Daruka darted a narrow-eyed glance at my sidekick. He threw up his hands. “He seemed concerned,” Krishna sputtered.

“I *am* concerned. You shouldn’t have to worry about sleeping at night. Even in a place like this. Why aren’t you going to the administration?”

Daruka crossed her arms. The action pushed her breasts up and out. I slid my gaze to the side. Now was not the time for my lust-filled fantasies.

“Did you miss her surname?” Daruka asked.

I rolled my eyes. “She’s so distant a cousin that the headmistress didn’t even know she existed until she was enrolled.”

Daruka’s arms fell to her sides. “Really?”

“Yes, really. She, of course, doesn’t tell anyone that, but it is a fact. She does not have the power she lets people believe she has.”

“How do you know this?”

I sighed. “During the previous dressing down, the one before the kitchen incident, I mentioned her bullying, and the headmistress told me.”

“Huh.”

Experimentally, I bent my knees. I wasn’t quite ready to walk yet, but I was pretty sure I’d be able to, eventually. Didn’t know how long it would take, though. Maybe I could stay here while Daruka resumed her nap. And if she wanted to take advantage of me when she woke, hey, more power to her.

“There’s still no way I’d ask the administration for help,” Daruka said.

“Why not?”

“Are you kidding me?” Daruka flapped a hand at the middle of the room. “She’s mad because you and I had sex. And everyone knows about it. And frankly, I’m a little disappointed in you for having sex with her first.”

“Well, I met her first, so...”

She narrowed her eyes.

I huffed out a sigh. “Last semester, I came to the island a few weeks early. Got tired of my family pressing me to stay and take on the responsibilities they all think I should take on, even though I don’t want to. Nor do I think I’m even qualified.”

“What responsibilities?”

“Not important to the story.” I didn’t want to get into my elfin expectations right now. Or ever. I had a bad feeling she wouldn’t feel she could fit into that life, and I had no intention of living any life that Daruka wasn’t part of.

“I think they are very important,” she replied.

Ah hell. “When I graduate, I’m supposed to take over as head of the elfin woods.”

“What does that even mean?”

I tugged on one of my ears. “It means I’m elfin royalty, Daruka. Or as close as the elves come to having royalty. Really, it’s more of a management role. An overworked manager at that. But it also comes with certain responsibilities. Like moving back to the elfin forest and maintaining a permanent residence there.”

Hell, I hadn’t even gotten to the juiciest part, and she was already shutting down on me. I could see it in her eyes. The idea of living in the elfin forest repulsed her. Might as well put it all out there at this point.

“And take a mate and get busy creating the next generation, who will take over when I’m ready to retire.”

Her eyes flared for a brief moment, and hope bloomed. But then her eyes narrowed and she said, “Creating the next generation?”

I nodded. “Yes, it means making babies, Daruka.”

“I know what it means,” she snapped, sounding far more irritable than the subject merited. But then again, she was part demon. Demons weren’t keen on the whole parent thing. Compassion, feeling responsible for another being all the time—that wasn’t in a demon’s nature. Just ask me.

Or my mother. Or, I’d wager, whichever of Daruka’s parents she got her demon side from.

“So this thing you keep insisting is between you and me...” she started.

“Daruka, that’s—”

“How does this all tie back to Selina?” Krishna interrupted.

Damn, I’d forgotten the werewolf was still here.

“Yeah,” Daruka said, her words now dripping with ice, “finish your story.”

I was tempted to point out that she was the one who asked me to elaborate on the whole elven responsibilities bit, but I held my tongue and explained what happened between me and Selina instead. In truth, figuring out how Daruka can feel safe while she’s here at the academy was the more urgent issue.

“I was staying at the Boar’s Nest Inn. Selina was working at the antiques shop down the road.” I’d believed she was just another supernatural who preferred to live here than to go back to the mainland and deal with humans on the regular. “I didn’t realize she was a student. I didn’t even know her name.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

I gave Daruka a good glare, even though it was true. Until her, I didn’t care who they were or what their names were so long as they were a willing participant in the sexual activities I had planned.

“I made it clear that it was only one night,” I said. “But she has obviously chosen to ignore the memo.”

“You didn’t make that clear to me,” Daruka said.

“What I made clear to you was, ‘This will not be the only time between us.’”

Her cheeks flared an adorable bright red. Krishna stared at me like I was a deity.

Far from it, mate.

Daruka waved at my groin. “So basically, your dick is so fantastic that my roommate wants to kill me because she got to ride it first.”

“I’m pretty sure she wants to kill you because I want you to ride it again and again, and I don’t want her anywhere near it.”

That doubt crawling across Daruka's face was really starting to get to me. What was it going to take to convince the woman that I—

The bed wobbled. Not the kind of shaking it did when two people were hardcore fucking—or even one person was spanking his monkey with enthusiasm. This level of movement was more akin to—

“Holy crap, is this an earthquake?” Daruka asked, all that high color from her previous embarrassment leeching from her face.

I shook my head while swinging my legs over the side of the bed. “No way. Earthquakes don't happen here. The school is built on ley lines, not tectonic plates.” Still, that hadn't been the barely noticeable shiver the ley lines sometimes caused. Not to mention, the ley lines weren't normally so active. This was, what? Three times in less than two weeks?

And twice today?

“Maybe we should get down to the ground floor anyway,” I suggested.

Just in case.

CHAPTER 14



SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT.

No, not Asmoday's wobbly legs that slowed our progress out of my room and into the hall, where a swarm of other students must have had the same idea we did.

When a building shook like that, you got down to the main floor. Common sense.

That *something's not right* sensation was courtesy of my crazy-ass roommate. She'd not liked me from the first moment she laid eyes on me. The whole "You stole him from me, you bitch" bit she'd screamed at me five days ago was only icing on a very not-tasty cake.

My "Guess you should have been better in bed" retort clearly hadn't helped our deteriorated relationship if she was so angry she was rattling the walls of this very formidable and old building.

What was probably most interesting—I didn't think her not being good in bed had anything to do with what was going on between Asmoday and me.

I was pretty sure *that* had nothing to do with anyone except the two of us.

And it wasn't all about sex.

Don't get me wrong, it had a whole lot to do with sex, and he could officially call me an addict at this point, but that wasn't all there was between us.

And yeah, that made me super uncomfortable.

Enough so that I'd been using the threat of expulsion as an excuse to avoid him. Normally, I'd give less than two shits about that threat. Or any threat, really.

Except my dad's threats to force me into the family business or kill me trying. Those I took very seriously. Which was why I was even at this academy in the first place.

Eventually, though, I'd leave, and newsflash, I wasn't about to head to the elfin forest. With Asmoday as a very obvious exception, I didn't think demons were allowed there. Not that rules necessarily kept demons from doing whatever the hell they wanted—or whatever the hell my dad instructed them to do—but still, my bet was, Asmoday's people had wards and spells and shit to keep me out.

Which hardly mattered, because let's get one thing straight: motherhood was not in the books for me. And staying with Asmoday meant there'd be expectations, and while thinking about the process of seeing to those expectations was even now making my thighs warm, the end result was...just not going to happen.

Me? Raising children?

Ha!

Not to mention, Asmoday was half elf. I was zero elf. Any children we produced together would hardly qualify as elves.

But they'd have a whole lot of demon in them.

And I was 100 percent confident that *a whole lot of demon* was not who the elves wanted running their forest.

Also, how could I even forget for a single moment that my father, the king of the underworld, expected me to take over *his* family business.

What was it with our families and their insistence that we be just like them? Why couldn't we be our own selves?

Not that I had any clue what that looked like at this point, but damn, it would be nice to be allowed the opportunity to figure it out.

On the third-floor landing, I abruptly stopped and pushed Asmoday up against the thick, wooden railing. He was getting less wobbly with each step, but he still wasn't fully functional. Guess it was good to know that curse worked, since I'd never used it before today.

"Is that really your expectation?" I demanded, twisting my hand in the front of his shirt.

"I'm going to need just a tiny bit more information in order to answer that question," he replied, holding his thumb and pointer finger about a quarter centimeter apart.

"Me. You. Your *responsibilities*," I said, watching his face for clues.

His gaze darted to the side. "This isn't the time or place, and honestly, that's a subject I have zero interest in talking about, ever, so..."

"If you want a repeat performance of our kitchen antics, you'd better start confessing." It was totally a bluff; if he asked, I'd ride his extra special cock right this minute, despite the hustling bustling students all around us and despite the weird earthquake-like shaking I was pretty certain was the workings of a certain super-jealous roommate.

"Aw, come on, that isn't fair," he practically whined. "How about if I promise to admit everything later?"

"How about if you tell me right now?"

Pursing his lips, he straightened to his full six and a half foot height, thrust out his spectacularly muscular chest, and brushed the wrinkles I'd caused out of his shirt. His ears twitched; his leathery black wings partially expanded and then like an accordion pulled tight against his body.

Krishna hovered at my elbow as if he were as invested in Asmoday's answer as I was.

Let's not even get into why I was so invested.

Asmoday spread his arms wide. "Yes, Daruka, at some point, my family expects me to take a mate and get her with child. And no, I don't want to do it. I don't want to take over,

and I don't want to have kids. I'm a demon, for the love of fire and brimstone.”

He narrowed his eyes, glaring at me. I darted my gaze back and forth, like that would somehow help me understand why he was looking at me like that.

“Part of the issue is the person I think is my mate is—”

I lifted my hand, cutting him off. “Don't go down that path. Not right now.”

“You're forcing me to talk about my deepest, darkest secret, and now we can't talk about yours?”

Whatever I may or may not feel for Asmoday, while confusing and frustrating, was definitely not my deepest, darkest secret.

Luckily, the building gave another shake, this one hard enough to knock dust from the ceiling and send a picture of some long dead famous person crashing to the floor. Students screamed and shouted for their friends while professors seemed to materialize out of nowhere, directing everyone to calmly and quickly make their way to the main level of the building.

“What are you expecting?” Asmoday asked as the three of us made our way downstairs at a significantly slower pace. He seemed to be pretty much recovered from the jolt I'd accidentally given him, but I wasn't exactly in a hurry to get down there to what I suspected was waiting for me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, hopefully sounding casual.

“You're expecting trouble. I can tell. What do you think is going to happen?”

I sighed. “I'm guessing my roommate wants to duel or whatever supernatural people do when they fight over a lover.”

“Really?” Krishna said, sounding shocked.

Asmoday barked out a laugh. “I don't think that has been a thing for hundreds of years, Daruka. Although I do appreciate your willingness to dual on my behalf. It's very romantic.”

“It really is,” Krishna agreed.

“Damn it, it isn’t on your behalf,” I argued, even as my stupid cheeks heated. “I don’t think she’s going to give me a choice.”

He sobered and gave the walls a critical glance. “I’m not so sure. Whatever is messing with this building is seriously powerful, and Selina is definitely not. She barely has any magic. I’m sure that and the expectations as a result of having the surname Blackthorn are why she’s such a bully.”

“I have some pretty steep expectations and you don’t see me treating other people like shit,” I pointed out.

“What expectations are those?”

Oops, I shouldn’t have said that. “Later. Seriously. Whatever is going on with this building is clearly more urgent than my family issues.”

He didn’t press, simply allowed me to set the pace as we followed the crowd to the main level.

“What would you do if you didn’t go back to manage the elfin woods?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

He snorted. “The only way I can get out of it is if I take on some other responsibility that is equally as important. Which, one, doesn’t sound like fun, and two, there aren’t many options.”

At least he had options. Mine were to do as Dad dictated or keep running and hiding.

Period.

When we were done dealing with this Selina mess, I probably needed to tell him about my situation. It wasn’t fair to keep stringing him along, as inadvertent as it may be, without him knowing the full story.

Because I was reasonably certain once he knew that I was being hunted by my own father, Asmoday wasn’t going to want a thing to do with me.

Even though there was no way I could possibly move to the elfin forest with him, the idea that he'd push me away was making me unaccountably sad. I wasn't used to feeling emotional over another person. It had always been my mother and me against the world—or, more accurately, against my father—and other than grieving her death, I'd not ever had to worry about catching feelings for someone.

Let's not even get into the fact that I may or may not be catching feelings for a freaking lust demon.

Who was also part elf.

Who was supposed to, at some point, create a baby or two to carry on his legacy.

Who I was pretty sure had hopes that I might be the other half in that whole baby creation process.

And I thought my life was complicated when all I was doing was trying to outrun my father.

We were on the second-floor landing, overlooking the crowd of students and faculty all huddled in the main entry, when the building started to shudder and shake again. This time, it lasted for what felt like a century but was really maybe thirty seconds. But thirty seconds was a crazy long time when you were worried that the stone and magically reinforced building you were in was about to collapse around your ears.

Plaster rained down from the high ceiling. Clouds of dust exploded all around us. The armor from a medieval knight on display in the main hall—because this was apparently a requirement in every castle everywhere—fell forward, the metal arms caging a couple of students who hadn't moved out of the way fast enough. The pendulum on the grandfather clock swung wildly, until it broke free and zoomed across the room. Students ducked and dove out of the way, and the round disk crashed into the mirror in the corner, shattering it.

More screaming ensued as students moved like a wave, trying to determine the safest place to huddle together. "Outside," someone shouted, and a cluster of them rushed toward the main entrance.

I gave Krishna a little shove. “Go. Wolf out and follow those other students. We’ll be fine.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m staying with you.”

“Demons are way less destructible than werewolves,” I pointed out. “Seriously, we’re right behind you.”

He stubbornly shook his head. I was about to use my mom voice—which was weird because nope, not mom material. But damn it, I did not want Krishna to be injured or worse over some stupid vendetta Selina had against me.

The door swung open.

I got distracted.

By the tall, debonair man dressed in a tailored black suit, with a head of thick, slicked back dark hair that revealed a sharp widow’s peak. His eyes were black under bushy, dark brows. A shadow of stubble circled his mouth, which curled into a smirk as his gaze scanned the crowd.

Behind him, the bridge over the moat was jammed with demons, some in human form, most in their natural, highly disturbing forms.

The students and professors in the main hall all squeezed together, like that might help protect them from this intruder.

His gaze finally reached me.

He spread his arms wide. His grin widened too.

“Ah, there’s my spawn!”

CHAPTER 15



“SPAWN?” I REPEATED, CANTING MY HEAD WHILE I CONTINUED to study the man standing in the doorway, preening like he’d just won the presidential election. “Is that...?”

“The devil?” Daruka said on an aggravated sigh. “Yes.”

My head whipped around, my stare shifting to her. “You’re the spawn of Satan? Literally?”

Daruka grimaced and made a half-ass wave toward the guy standing in the doorway. “Meet my dad.”

He wiggled his fingers. Satan apparently had excellent hearing.

“Hello, sir,” I said, bowing my head. What the hell else was I supposed to do? It was the freaking devil—I was part demon, so I technically was one of his minions.

And also, I’d just banged his daughter a few days ago, and I not only wanted to do it again, I wanted to do it on the regular for the rest of our lives.

Yikes. Would we be obligated to visit Hell for family gatherings? Would he expect to give her away at our mating ceremony? Pretty sure the elves would not appreciate me inviting Satan to the elven woods.

“How did you figure out I was here?” Daruka demanded, glaring at the freaking devil. “Mom told me this was the one place you’d never find me.”

“And she would have been right. Except...” He plucked a phone with a bright red, heavy-duty case out of an interior

pocket and waved it. “Social media.” He tapped the screen, his gaze scanning it for a moment before adding, “Someone named WolfBoy posted about this cool new chick at school with blue hair who was a total badass and a mermaid to boot. Couldn’t imagine that could be anyone other than my dear daughter.”

“WolfBoy?” Daruka repeated, her gaze swinging Krishna’s way.

He lifted his hands, palms facing out. “I had no idea the *actual* devil was following me,” he protested. “There are dozens of profiles with that name.”

“Mine says ‘the real deal’ though,” Satan pointed out.

Daruka smacked her forehead.

“It’s time to go, Daruka,” the devil called out, his tone suddenly serious.

Every head in the building swiveled our way. Daruka was clutching the banister so fiercely her nails were carving half-moons into the wood.

“I thought you’d changed your mind,” she said, her voice wavering only a little. “The last minions you sent after me tried to kill me.”

“What?” Satan yelped, swinging around to face the cluster of demons at his back. “Anwir, Dagon, where are you?”

Two demons slowly raised their hands.

Satan pointed at them, and a moment later, two curls of smoke drifted on the wind and there were two scorch marks on the wooden bridge. And two fewer demons in the world.

“That wasn’t my intent,” he said, calmly, turning back to us while brushing imaginary lint from his shirt. “I can assure you.”

“I’m not going,” Daruka said, far more clearly and concisely than I was pretty sure literally anyone else would. But I guess if you were the daughter of the devil, you probably had a lot more confidence than the rest of us when dealing with the most powerful demon in the world.

“It’s time to take on your responsibilities,” the devil said, eyeing the interior of the ancient castle. He hadn’t yet stepped over the threshold. Was that because he couldn’t or simply hadn’t gotten around to it yet?

“Responsibilities?” I echoed. “What responsibilities?”

“Running the family business, of course,” the devil responded. He chuckled and pressed his fingers to his chest. “Well, not *running it*, running it. That’s my job. She’ll be assigned a small faction at first, to get her feet wet. Or hot, as the case may be.”

“A small faction...” I continued to stare at Daruka. “Definitely some steep expectations,” I echoed her earlier comment.

I shook my head, struggling with this news. “You’re going to Hell?” That was her plan? Well, hell. Here I thought we could figure out a way to live happily ever after. But nobody lived happily ever after in Hell.

“Not if I can help it,” Daruka muttered, and then abruptly rushed away, down the hall toward the classrooms.

Satan’s face contorted, but his gaze tracked her until she disappeared from view. He lifted his arms, hands curled like claws, and started chanting. The building shook with even more vigor than before.

Guess we knew what was causing it now.

That realization wasn’t comforting. How the hell were we supposed to defeat the devil?

“I will bring this castle down around their ears if you do not come out here and talk to me.” His voice amplified like he was using a microphone.

Oh shit! I bolted after Daruka.

I caught up to her in the Magical Transportation classroom.

“I know, I know,” she said before I could even open my mouth. “I need to get out there before he hurts anyone, but I’d rather do it on my own terms.” She waved at the nearest mirror. “Can you help me get this turned on?”

Despite the gravity of the situation, my lips twitched. “That’s not how they work. Where do you plan to go?”

“Just outside. Somewhere on the castle grounds.”

“You need a mirror to step through at your destination, and as far as I know, there aren’t any mirrors lying around on the castle grounds. The closest we’d end up is in the village.”

Her fists clenched. “I don’t want to lure him there. All those people will be in danger.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“I’m making it up as I go along. First, I need to get outside, preferably circling around behind him. That way, I can pull his focus away from the school but also have a clear escape route. Once I’m confident he isn’t going to do any more harm to anyone else, I’ll run. And apparently find someplace else to hide.” She shook her head. “My mother said this was the safest place for me. That he’d never find me here. I can’t believe a stupid post on social media gave me away.”

She was losing her cool, and fast. I needed to distract her, help her find her balance again. I grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face me. “Daruka, I need you to understand that what I feel for you, it’s not just sex. It’s—”

“Seriously, Asmoday? Right now? You want to have a heart-to-heart while the freaking devil is trying to destroy a castle that has been around since the thirteen hundreds?”

“No. Yes. I mean, I just want to tell you that I’m in it for the long haul. Whatever happens. If you need to take over Hell, I’m going with you.”

“I’m not taking over Hell. That’s not in the cards for me.” She pulled out of my grip and strode over to the nearest window. “You don’t think you belong in the elven forest? Well, I sure as heck don’t belong in Hell. Why do our fathers insist upon forcing their own ideals onto us? Why can’t we just live our own lives?”

I stepped up behind her and clapped a hand on her shoulder. “I lo—”

She spun around and slapped her hand over my mouth. “Do not say it.”

I licked her palm. She jerked it away, scowling. “Gross.”

“Fine, I won’t say it. Not right now, anyway. But you’re not getting rid of me, Daruka. I hate to break it to you, but if you run away without me, I will come after you even if that puts me right into Satan’s path.”

“He’ll kill you.” Her eyes widened. “He wouldn’t even hesitate.”

“Then I suggest you not leave me behind.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “You play dirty pool.”

“I promise to spend as much time as you can handle making it up to you.” I slipped out my two-pronged tongue and licked my lips.

Her mouth fell open while a flush crept up her chest. After a couple of heartbeats, she shook her head. “Fine. What’s the best way to get out of this building without using the front door?”

Smiling smugly, I twined our fingers together. “Come with me.” I led her to the end of the hall, where we hurried down the back staircase, which would take us to the kitchen. The narrow space was riddled with chunks of plaster and pieces of wood from torches that had been attached to the walls but had broken loose with all the rattling going on.

“He can’t get inside, can he?” I asked after we stepped into the kitchen.

“I don’t think so. Otherwise, he surely would have strode right in and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck.”

A group of kobolds were clinging to one another, their gazes darting every which way while they shivered like wet dogs in a cool breeze. They didn’t say a word as we skirted around them and headed toward the exterior kitchen entrance.

I flung the door open to reveal the sheer side of the castle wall, leading straight down into the moat. Beyond the body of

water was a well-tended garden plot, stretching from the banks to the edge of the enchanted forest.

One end consisted of rows and rows of fruit and nut trees, then a few rows of grapevines, some fruit bushes, then tidy little sections of vegetables and herbs.

There was no visible bridge in between.

Daruka hadn't yet attended enough cooking classes to be assigned to tending the garden. She tugged my arm, pulling me away from the entrance.

"It's okay," I assured her. Grabbing a handful of walnuts from a nearby bowl, I tossed them out the door. If this image were as it appeared, they would fall into the moat; instead they skittered across an invisible surface, one of them rolling all the way to the grassy bank a good twenty feet away.

"Whoa," she said, clearly impressed.

I shrugged. "This entrance is used so frequently, it can't have too many protective spells and charms. So some former headmistress came up with this idea of an invisible bridge." I waved at the vast area of murky water just over the threshold. "It's the width of the doorway, so stay right in the middle and walk a straight line and you'll be fine."

"This is crazy." She tentatively pressed one foot to the invisible surface.

"You're being hunted by Satan and you think this is crazy?" Impatiently, I stepped out in front of her and began walking toward the garden. "Just tell yourself you're walking on a glass surface. Although, by the way, aren't you a mermaid? Couldn't you just dive in and swim to the other side?"

She followed me across. "Sure, but I'm not a fan of swimming with a kraken. In case you missed it the other day, they aren't particularly friendly."

"Fair," I acknowledged.

"Plus, I'd have to get undressed, and I'm pretty sure we'd both get distracted if that were to happen."

“I am glad to hear that you’re as attracted to me as I am to you.”

“Uh, you’re a lust demon. Everyone is attracted to you.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Really? Is that all it is?”

She dropped her gaze to the moat. Her cheeks reddened. “No.”

I stepped onto the grass and lifted my arms. “And we’re safely on solid ground.”

That solid ground gave a major shudder, causing us both to wobble. “Oh hell,” I said as realization dawned. “He’s pulling magic from the ley lines. He really could destroy the school.”

This place had been my sanctuary for six years now. We couldn’t let the devil bring it to its knees. There were far too many young adults out there like Daruka and me who just needed a place to go where they could feel safe. And maybe learn a thing or two at the same time.

“Tree line,” I said, nodding at the garden. “We can use the enchanted forest for cover while we skirt around behind him.”

Students were forbidden from entering the enchanted forest, but I figured this was justification for an exception. Plus, did anyone really follow that rule? Based on the number of students who ended up in the nurse’s office with bites or dragon fire burns or other sundry afflictions that could not be explained by simply attending class, I’d say not many.

We made our way around the castle, toward the main entrance, without running into any changelings or satyrs or orcs. I suppose even they weren’t keen to hang around when a bunch of demons came to visit.

I could see the cluster of our unwanted visitors in the distance, filling the drawbridge and spilling out onto the banks of the moat. The massive, arched door was still open, the devil still standing on the threshold, arms raised. Chunks of brick and stone broke free from the castle wall and tumbled into the dark, unsettled water.

“Stay here,” I heard from behind me. Swinging around, I caught Selina as she tossed a fluffy wolf to the ground.

“Hey,” Daruka said, stalking toward her. “What are you doing with Krishna?”

“Saving him, obviously,” Selina said.

I glanced down at Krishna. He wagged his tail and let his tongue loll out of his mouth. The young werewolf looked like a lapdog. If he were smaller, he’d be the sort that wealthy human women liked to tuck into their purses while they went shopping.

“Saving him?” Daruka repeated, shaking her head. “I don’t buy it.”

Selina rolled her eyes and cocked a hip. “Fine. I planned to use him as bait, if necessary.”

Krishna gave a startled yelp and scurried over to cower between Daruka’s legs.

“For what?” Daruka demanded.

Selina flapped her hand at the cluster of demons. “I just want to meet him. The head of all the demons.”

Daruka’s mouth fell open. “You want to *meet the devil*?”

Selina crossed her arms and thrust her nose in the air.

We didn’t have time for this. Satan was going to destroy the place if we didn’t get over there, pronto. “Go back to the castle,” I said sternly, almost channeling Mrs. Caldwell there for a moment. “It’s too dangerous out here.”

I clasped Daruka’s hand, twined our fingers. Gave her a squeeze.

“Come on. Let’s go kick some Satan ass.”

CHAPTER 16



WITH ASMODAY AND KRISHNA—STILL IN WOLF FORM, SINCE if he shifted back he'd be naked—at my six, I stalked out of the tree line, stopping a few dozen feet from the cluster of demons surrounding the bridge. And then I waited for them to notice us.

It didn't take long.

A demon with a red face and black facial hair and horns that curled over its head saw us, nudged the demon next to him, who used his pointy tail to tap another demon on the shoulder. And on and on until awareness rippled across the bridge. My father glanced over his shoulder and slowly lowered his arms.

All the shuddering and shivering and shaking ceased.

I blew out a breath. Okay, now I just had to convince him that I wasn't going to return to the academy so that he wouldn't decide to go back to attacking it and then prove my words right by hightailing it the hell out of here.

Apparently, with Asmoday on my heels.

Was it wrong that I liked the idea? It would be nice to have a partner, someone to bounce ideas off. Someone to help me stay a couple of steps ahead of the devil at all times.

Someone to keep me warm at night.

Someone to do other things with me at night. Or the middle of the day. Or anytime, really.

“Hi, Dad.” I waved. “Over here.”

He shoved the nearest demon out of the way. The guy bellyflopped into the moat.

The rest of them scurried to part like the Red Sea.

He strode through the gap, his unwavering gaze latched onto me like he was trying to hold me in place. If I were anyone else, it would have worked. Luckily—in this context, anyway—I was his daughter so therefore immune to his powers of persuasion. A fact that really, really irritated him on the regular.

“Daruka, how lovely to see you again,” he said pleasantly enough, like he hadn’t been unsuccessfully chasing me down for four freaking years now. “How’s your mother?”

“Dead.” I managed not to wince as I said it. Points to me.

His face fell. “Oh, how terrible. She was such a delightful woman. In mermaid and human form. Especially in her human form. Those legs. So long. The way they wrapped around my waist...” He closed his eyes and lifted his face, like he was reliving a particularly fond memory.

Not a memory I wanted him to expound on. “Can we focus on the here and now?” I suggested.

His eyes popped open, and the moment was gone. He nodded at Asmoday. “You’re keeping company with a fellow demon. How absolutely fascinating.”

“It isn’t what you think,” I said.

“You aren’t having sex with him? He’s a lust demon. What else would you do with him?”

I wrinkled my nose while my face heated. “Okay, it is what you think. But it’s more than that. He’s...” What was he to me?

Was this something I was ready to admit to myself, let alone the devil?

“Um, I think we might be, maybe, sort of dating.”

“No maybe or sort of about it, sir,” Asmoday clarified. “I hope that meets with your approval. Sir.”

Asmoday was acting like we were teenagers and he was nervous to ask my dad if he could take me out on a date. Yeesh.

“Um, news flash. I don’t really care if he approves.”

“That’s my girl.” Satan sounded delighted.

I sighed dramatically. “Look, Dad, do you think we can come to some sort of agreement? A compromise?”

He sniffed. “The devil does not compromise.”

Of course he doesn’t.

“But an agreement, well... What do you have in mind?”

Oh shit, I hadn’t actually had anything in mind. I’d simply blurted that out in what I assumed was a pointless attempt to reason with the guy.

He gave the partially crumbled building a sly look. “Does it have anything to do with the school?”

Quickly, I shook my head. “No, not at all, I swear!”

Think, Daruka, think. Think, think, think! I needed to distract him so he didn’t cause any more harm to this place and its inhabitants.

He tossed a spell over his shoulder. The nearest demons twisted their heads back and forth, some scratching their heads, like they were confused.

“What did you do?” I asked, momentarily distracted.

“Silencing spell,” Dad said. “I don’t want them to hear this conversation. In fact, I’d prefer if it were only you and I, but somehow I doubt those two behind you will leave us alone.”

“Nope,” Asmoday said. “Sir.”

Krishna shook his furry head.

“So anyway,” Dad drawled, “I am fully aware that you’d make a lousy ruler in Hell.”

“Hey,” I protested. “Wait. You are?”

“Oh please. You’re just like your mother. Such a bleeding heart. Always looking out for the underdog.” He gave the fluffy werewolf a pointed glance.

I cleared my throat and dropped my gaze. While I much preferred to be more like my mother, protecting people like Krishna wasn’t something I consciously did. It just sort of happened.

“The problem is, you’re my daughter. Currently, my only offspring.”

“Currently?”

He shrugged. “I spread my seed far and wide. One of these days, another will take hold. Ever since your mother, I’ve made a concerted effort to only screw women with no morals. I’m sure the next one will be the perfect spawn to groom as my shadow.”

I swallowed thickly. “That sounds...lovely.”

“In the meantime, we need to figure out how to save face here. I can’t let all these followers think you’ve won.” He waved at the sea of demons behind him.

“Yoo-hoo!” Selina stepped out of the tree line, wiggling her fingers and shaking her hips as she made her way toward us on a pair of stiletto heels that kept sinking into the soft earth. Her plaid skirt was so short I suspected we’d be able to see ass cheek if we were behind her. And her shirt was unbuttoned almost to her naval. Her eyes were smoky, her lips a deep burgundy, and her hair was teased about a mile high.

She hadn’t looked like this when we ran into her just a short time ago.

“Hi there,” she said, coming to stand next to me. “I’d like to volunteer as tribute.”

“Tribute?” Dad asked, a red flame sparking to life in his eyes.

“Uh-huh. The idea of birthing the spawn of Satan...” Without taking her eyes off him, she shivered. Dramatically.

My mother had been so stressed early in my life, worried that I'd be more like Dad than her. And then later, she worried that he'd come after me and want me to join him in Hell.

This might be exactly what Selina deserved. Even if it was kind of skeezy to think about a fellow student getting it on with my father.

Dad arched his brows. "My soul is so black, my sperm doesn't work very well. It will take lots of practice before we get so lucky."

Ew, had he and Mom done it more than once? I'd always been under the impression it had been a poor choice one-night stand.

Selina dropped her gaze to his shiny shoes and then dragged it up to his slick hair, pausing for an unnecessarily long time on the groin area. She licked her lips. "I think I'm up for it."

"You need to be sure," Dad said, wagging his finger at her. "Consent is important. Even to the devil." He glanced over his shoulder. "Also, you're going to have to quit this place."

"That's okay. I hate my roommate anyway."

Dad arched his brow.

"I'm sure," Selina said, boldly stalking toward him and wrapping her arms around his neck, one leg around his thigh. Yep, there was the ass cheek. "Absolutely sure."

This was officially weirding me out.

Dad pressed a hand to the small of Selina's back and tossed a spell over his shoulder. All the demon chatter going on while we were having our private conversation abruptly stopped.

He turned himself and Selina to face the crowd.

"New plan, minions," he announced. "I'm going to create a new spawn. A better spawn." Glancing over Selina's head, he winked at me before turning back to his followers.

"Let's go home!"

A rousing cheer cut off abruptly when Dad zapped a nearby demon, turning him to dust.

“What was that for?” Selina asked, sounding almost giddy.

“He looked at you funny.”

She kissed his cheek.

Huh. As weird as it was, maybe this would work out after all.

Dad threw his arms into the air, and I raised my own, in front of Asmoday and Krishna, taking several steps backward and shunting them along with me.

The ground began to shake and shiver, like it had been doing on and off for the last few weeks. The shaking increased in intensity until suddenly, the grassy area between us and Dad and his minions split wide open like, well, a portal to Hell.

Dad grinned. “It took me a week to be able to do that. The wards around this place are quite impressive.”

I made a mental note to see about improving them even more. I wasn’t in a hurry for a follow-up visit from my father.

Selina better damn well provide him with a new heir.

The demons began shuffling toward the hole, walking right off the edge like a bunch of lemmings. When Dad and Selina were the only ones left, he lifted his hand in a farewell wave.

“Enjoy your life, my spawn.”

“You too, Dad.”

It was the closest we’d ever come to saying “I love you.”

Asmoday squeezed my shoulder. “Come on, let’s get back inside. I’m sure the headmistress is going to call an assembly or something. We don’t want to be late.”

I laughed.

And just like that, life went back to normal.

I hoped it stayed that way.

EPILOGUE



“WHY, HELLO THERE, PROFESSOR ASMODAY.” I STRUTTED into the Magical Transportation classroom, my gaze latching onto the superhot demon-slash-elf sitting behind the desk, scribbling in a notebook. He wore a pair of slacks and a button-down shirt, his cloak draped over the back of his chair.

He glanced up, smiled widely, and slammed the notebook shut. I arched my brows. “Are those the answers to the first test?”

He continued to watch me as I moved deeper into the room. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Are you willing to bribe your professor?”

“Do professors take bribes?”

“This one does.” He paused. “From you, anyway.”

I chuckled and slipped into his lap, curling up there like a kitten before pecking his cheek. “I missed you last night.”

It was the first day of classes. My second year at Blackthorn Academy for Supernaturals. A mass of students would be pouring into this classroom in about an hour, ready to learn how mirror travel worked.

Asmoday brushed a lock of hair away from my face. “I missed you too. I got used to waking up with you in my bed. I may be addicted to it, actually.”

He had finally decided to graduate last spring. Well, more accurately, the headmistress had insisted. And then she'd offered him a job as the new professor of Magical Travel. Something about him being an expert at figuring out how to get in and out of the castle undetected.

After graduation, we'd gone to visit the elfin forest. Lovely place, although I could see why Asmoday didn't want to commit to managing it. It wasn't nearly as interesting as this school.

His dad had been surprisingly thrilled by Asmoday's announcement that he was taking a position at the academy, instead of returning to the forest. His father thought that'd be a perfect career for Asmoday. And then he promptly named Asmoday's younger sister as the new manager of the elfin forest.

I admit, I was glad it had never occurred to Asmoday to simply ask his father if he could get out of becoming the forest manager. If he had, he might have left the academy after four years and gone on to pursue some other profession, and then we might never have met.

Now, not only was Asmoday about to start a career I had every confidence he would excel at, but last summer, after our visit with his family, we'd returned to Wellspring, rented a room at the Boar's Nest Inn, and spent every night banging like, well, only a lust demon could manage.

But the fall semester meant he had his room and I had mine and—big shocker—students and faculty weren't allowed to cohabit.

"It's going to be a long three years," Asmoday murmured, his hands slipping under my skirt and up to cup my ass cheeks. "Why, Miss Montreau, you aren't wearing undergarments."

"Huh," I said, tapping a finger against my lips. "I must have forgotten them."

He lifted his chin, and I obligingly kissed him, that forked tongue slithering out and stroking into my mouth until I curled

one arm around his neck and burrowed the other hand in his thick hair.

He broke the kiss to nip at my neck. “I think I may need to bend you over my desk.”

“I think you definitely should,” I replied, already panting. “When I forgot my panties this morning, I also took a dose of birth control.”

“Excellent.” He lifted me off his lap and turned me to face the desk. I pressed my palms to the smooth surface, and he lifted my skirt, flipping it up onto my back. Then I felt his fingers probing me. I was already soaking wet. I’d stroked myself earlier to thoughts of doing exactly this.

I shivered.

“Somebody likes the idea of getting fucked by their professor.” Two fingers slid into me, pumping. I heard the shift of material; he’d managed to get his pants unlatched one-handed.

I bit my lip, but a moan escaped anyway. “Only by one professor,” I managed to gasp out. Only ever one professor.

Only ever one man.

Abruptly, his fingers pulled away, and a scant moment later, he slammed into me, gripping my hips so I didn’t go careening across the desk.

“More,” I demanded, arching my back.

“There’s definitely more,” he promised, his hand sliding into my shirt so he could cup my breast.

He pumped steadily, that nubby extra dick tapping my clit as my nails curled against the smooth surface. “Fire and brimstone, getting fucked by my professor is so damn hot,” I crooned.

“Three years,” he said without breaking stride. “We get to do this for three years. Sneak around. In my classroom. In the broom closet. In this hidden alcove I found my second year here.”

“We should keep a running list. See how many different places we can defile in this place,” I suggested between pants and gasps.

He pumped a bit harder. My orgasm began to build. His extra dick gave my clit a stroke. Oh Hades!

“You. Are. So. Damn. Hot.” He accentuated his words with such strong thrusts that the desk inched forward underneath my palms.

I threw my head back, crying out as the orgasm spun through my body. Asmoday thrust one more almost violent time and then froze, warmth filling me as he found his own release. After a few moments, he gently pulled out and dropped into his office chair, pulling me down into his lap.

Stroking my hair, he murmured, “Such a dumb rule that professors and students aren’t allowed to live together.”

I chuckled. “If I weren’t still a student, I doubt you’d find it such a dumb rule.”

“Maybe not,” he conceded. “But after spending the summer living with you, I seriously cannot wait to do it on a permanent basis.”

“That’s only because of the boob sex.” Although, admittedly, the boob sex *was* hot.

“That’s definitely part of it.” He winked. “Three more years. And then you graduate. Are you going to take that teaching job they’ve already promised you?”

“I think so. Tutoring Krishna last year was surprisingly fun. I think I’m going to like being a professor someday.”

“You were a phenomenal help. He’s really thriving now.”

I nodded. “He has so much more confidence. Do you know that he’s planning to start a fetch club?”

Asmoday laughed and hugged me tightly for a moment before kissing the top of my head. “How about if I sweeten the deal?”

I arched my brows, waiting.

“If you take on the professorship, we can finally share a room. And I have a guy. He can put in a hot tub.”

My eyes widened, probably to comical proportions. “Oh, Asmoday, you do say the sweetest things,” I crooned.

He cupped my face, staring into my eyes, all playfulness gone. “Seriously. I just want to spend the rest of my life with you. As mates.”

I offered up a wobbly smile. I had to blink rapidly too; for some reason my eyes were watering. My lust demon was such a romantic.

“I love you, Asmoday.”

“Daruka, I love you too. So much.”

I climbed off his lap and straightened my uniform. “Okay, so, seriously, you going to give me the answers to your tests?”

He buttoned his fly and slipped his arms into his cloak, adjusting it so that his wings could fit through the specially designed holes cut into the back. “You’re going to have to earn them.”

“I thought I just did.”

“Hey, I’m a professor now. I have morals.”

I blew a raspberry. “You’ll fuck your student but not give her answers to the test? That’s how you define having morals?”

He laughed and curled his arm around my waist, hauling me flush to his body. “You and me, Daruka. We’re a great team. And you know what?”

“What?” I was already breathless, already ready to shag him again. This man of mine. He claimed he was obsessed, but so was I.

“We’re going to live happily ever after.”

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ABOUT TJ BELL

TJ Bell is the naughtier alter-ego of romance author Tami Lund (although you should totally read Tami Lund's books too, because they are really, really good). She writes paranormal, all the time. Her heroines are tough, even if they are broken, and her heroes tend to have a heart of gold under all that alpha. Hell, sometimes they aren't even alpha at all; after all, who doesn't love a solid beta hero?

When she isn't writing snarky, steamy books, TJ Bell likes to take long walks on the beach with a tall glass of wine... oh wait, wrong bio. But still true.

TJ Bell lives in the (sometimes) beautiful state of Michigan, USA, where the weather is glorious approximately 30% of the time, with her even-more-snarky husband, snarky-in-training (and progressing impressively) teenage daughter, and her dog, Kaya, who wants to know if it's dinnertime yet.