

## Chapter One

The day I learnt I was a demon was the worst day of my life. I won't lie. I spent most the day terrified of dying, or losing a limb.

The first thing I heard and thought about when I woke that morning was *demons*. A were-cat scream echoed for a beat, before an answering scream, higher in pitch called in the distance. It sounded like the packs were fighting; a territorial dispute most likely. There was a Pride not too far from the Temple. A muffled shriek drifted up through the floorboards. I rolled my eyes when it happened on the next scream. I buried my head under the pillow, pulling my blanket up. New Disciples thought the world was ending every time a demon passed nearby. It took them long to understand, if the Wall was breached the klaxon went off to warn us.

I rolled out of bed, tripped over the mountains of fabric and crushed cans that littered the floor of my room, and head butted the wardrobe door. It bounced back. Clothes flung over the top and spilling out the bottom had stopped it from clicking shut. I was not a dirty person, but a messy one. I was the kind of person who could make mess in an empty four by ten box. Stood in my fraying bra and panties, I groggily scratched at my knee, trying to pull myself together. It took a lot of rummaging around before I pulled on my ragged jeans and faded tee shirt, some pre Rupture band on the front. Not the best gear for running, but I was going to have to go straight to class afterward. I put my boots on and headed outside.

It was dark. Dawn was hours away and the grounds were eerily quiet. Fire drums set alongside the pathway flickered and weak flames cast a sick flush over the cold ground. Electricity was hard to generate, so the Sect cut corners where it could. Resources during the day and after dark focused on Wall hotspots, places difficult for the Clerics to defend easily, like steep ravines and cliff faces. These were the places demons too often breached. My eyes skipped over the Temple grounds and every graffiti wall, battered trashcan, was coloured fondly in my mind's eye. The Temple was an army base before the Rupture, but now it was the stomping ground of the Sect Clerics and their Disciples. It was home. Safety. My eyes settled on the Wall in the near distance, peeking out from the forest bordering the region. Past that electric fence was Outside. Past that fence roamed the demons.

I started at a jog. In no time I was at the main gate whistling to the security guard who barely looked up from his book. I wondered where he'd gotten that. Books made purely for entertainment were as rare as plain paper. The Sect had a library of course, right here at Temple, but you had to have serious pull with the Priests to be able to rent one. We lucky Disciples got to feel the smooth pages of a book on a regular basis, even if they were educational, and my envy was brief. The guard caught me eyeing up the pages and placed it on his lap. He waved me on as the gate cracked to let me out.

Leaving Temple, I was soon on a wide and flat lane gravitating toward the forest. I reached the Wall and stared at it. Each time I came here I asked myself the same question; was defying Sect Doctrine and stepping past this point worth it? The excited thump of my heart told me the answer. I glanced behind to scan the roadside and check I was not in sight. Confident I was alone, I slid through the sliver of space between the charged wires then held my breath for a beat. There was nothing but silence. I had no idea how I'd done it, but one morning I was tired of plodding the same ground and I'd looked out into the forest with its thick tree trunks, jutting roots, and seen a thrilling new route to push myself harder and faster. I had stood and stared at the webbing of steel, then wished for a hole to climb through. The wires had just unraveled without setting off the klaxon. I remembered thinking with a horrible kind of panic that I had somehow done witchcraft and was convinced I was the blackest kind of evil. Then I realized how ridiculous I was being and figured it was a coincidental gift from the universe, or something. Now every morning I had a new obstacle course to enjoy.

The trees were tall, and the air was fresh and clean and free. I ran, racing the beat of my own footfalls. Cold wind whipped past pushing hair into my face. Gods, how I loved to run and revel in the illusion of freedom it gave. I was the fastest Disciple at the Temple, and the best at cross-country; it took a lot to tire me out. I ran until the forest became too dense for me to sprint without tripping over roots. My chest rising and falling was a pleasant feeling I rarely got to experience, and only could experience when I ran Outside. Pushing at the long and dark tangle of my hair, I wished there was less of it. I snapped off a knobby twig from a shrub at my heel and pulled it back into a messy bun, using the twig to pin it there. I was distracted, and only because a raven boldly cutting past drew my attention from the task of managing my hair, did I see a movement at the corner of my eye.

A figure strode away from me up a leafy incline, into the light side of the daybreak.

“Hai?” I called my voice low.

The retreating shape paused, only to dart deeper into the gloom. Cresting the slope it winked out of sight. I ran after it. It seemed like the thing to do at the time. Skidding to a stop at the slope summit, I let out a surprised grunt. I could see down and far out into the forest. There was nobody down there, nothing but more trees. Fear whispered in my ear, no humans are supposed to be Outside, but I shook it off. Such a thing was surely nothing but my imagination. No demon would be this close to the Temple. It would be like a human who wanted to live a long life doing a jig with their eyes closed on the edge of a cliff.

Then I saw it again. The shadowed figure was there when I turned around, but was at the bottom of the slope. My feet skipped back then there was no more floor. I remembered the same time my head moved to where my feet had been, that I’d been standing on the apex of a steep and high slope. I went down. I tumbled backward and ended up rolling and rolling. The world churned around me, but levelled out abruptly as I crashed into the base of a tree at the slope’s underside.

My ass was up in the air and my shins mashed against my forehead. Oh gods it hurt. I rocked my body until I fell onto my side, and pulled my legs back to curl them under me. I breathed in and out slowly, mentally checking myself over. Nothing felt broken. I sat up and stretched it out. No, nothing was broken. The pendant I wore around my neck pressed into my collarbone awkwardly. I fiddled with it until it hung properly, and the leather cord was no longer choking me.

I stood and rubbed at my head, then tried to get my bearings.

The slope was too steep to climb back up and I wasn’t much into rock climbing. Like most people I was reasonably tolerant of heights, up to a certain point, and tolerant of deep water, up to a certain point. And even agreeable with confined spaces. Up to a certain point. Heights especially high were a stickler with me, despite my love of the things you could do when you were especially high. I had a way of pretending the floor was much closer than it truly was. Nevertheless, the slope was too high to pretend, so I was either going left or right. Determined to stay calm, I ignored the first curls of fear in my stomach. I hadn’t explored this far out into the forest yet and based on how long I had run for, I was at least ten miles from the Wall. I was not worried about the time; I could still get back for breakfast and with enough time to walk to class

with Alex. Looking to the east the sky was lightening to blue, but the sunrise was always painfully slow. Classes did not start until the sun was in the sky.

I picked the straightest line through the trees I could and started off, my boots slapping muddy puddles riddling the way. In the early morning the forest was empty of human presence apart from its familiar visitor (me), but it was creepy now, like someone was watching.

A short while later it was clear I'd done something wrong. The trees were getting denser, and more closely packed together, like I was going further into the forest. I stopped and spun around. My first instinct was to go back. I was walking in a straight line, and I could go back to the slope base and start again. I had been walking in a straight line, hadn't I? Those nasty curls of fear tickled my insides again. I started to walk back, but stopped after less than half a mile. I scanned the ground. Horrified at what I did not see, I knelt down to get a better look. To my dismay I could not see any footprints or other signs I had passed this way. All Clerics were master trackers, bested only by shifters who changed into predators like big cats. As a Disciple I had been trained in the basics of tracking, of course, and at that moment I felt the bitter sting of failure. What I should have done the moment I'd felt lost is literally retraced my steps and started again. But I hadn't done that. I'd let the fear get one up on me, and plunged into the forest without thinking. I needed to calm down and focus. I figured if I went high, I could see further around me.

I strode back a pace and took a running jump at a broad oak trunk. I reached the lowest branch starting five feet or so above my head, and dug my fingertips into the bark. Tree climbing was easy, and in no time I hauled my body over the highest bough that would hold my weight. I balanced on my toes, hands to knees. Exhaling, my breath was visible plumes of wispy vapor, and for a few seconds I chugged circular globules to amuse myself.

It was cold, it being the end of autumn, but the cooler days didn't bother me. It was a welcome change since my body had always run hot.

The clouds on the horizon were dark with rain, darker than the sky overhead. They rolled low and blocked out the coming light. There was a thick hum in the air, a sure sign a storm was blowing in. My heart did a jig in my chest and my mood picked up, for I simply loved a good storm. The clean scent of crushed needle leaf on the breeze was refreshing, and a nice change from the ashy smell that saturated everything at the Temple.

Getting back on track, I looked around in a wide circle. I bit my lip and looked the circle again, slower this time. I was in trouble. I couldn't see the Wall or the end of the forest. I must have run much further than I usually did before I'd fallen. Then I'd walked even further in the wrong direction.

I stood, clasped the branch overhead and skipped to the edge of my perch. Loosening my hold above, I pushed back with my foot and both my arms stretched back. I arced into a crescent and was momentarily suspended in the air. The crown of my head raced to catch my arms as my legs coiled and flew overhead. The world was crazy for a second; up was down, down was up. Pointed feet followed my legs around and then I was falling. Feet a foot apart, my knees bent to absorb impact as I landed, arms extended either side of me for balance.

That bit of fun helped chase away some of my distress. I was good at identifying my emotions and could control them with distractions if I caught them early enough. There were several notable times I'd allowed myself to fall into foul rages, where I'd thrown things about and punched walls, laughing as I did so. The most frequent were bouts of manic happiness where everything was funny. The worst and hardest to control were the dark humours. Sometimes the twisted things my imagination threw at me were only scary and off-colour to think about, once I'd snapped out of it. I'd always been odd, different to the girls around me, and those times where I'd lost control made some people suspicious and afraid of me.

Oh yes, I'd become good at controlling myself.

Back down below the forest canopy it was dark. The sun-rays had not broken through the leaves, and the understory had a monochromatic look. Silver bark, grey leaves and black spaces between. I pushed some hair out of my eyes that had gotten loose from my makeshift bun, and breathed in. Smells of the forest, nutty sycamore maples and sweet night flowers releasing the last of their fragrance, were strangely comforting. I was deep into wild and civilization was far behind, but I knew panicking would only make things worse.

A faint rustle ahead made me pause and swiftly reconsider panicking. Another, louder rustle made me tense. A tingle of fear ran down the back of my legs. The forest was full of animals of course; deer, badgers and more birds than I could name, though the most popular was the raven.

The thought I'd been consciously avoiding until now, making me want to lie where I was then die quietly, or run shrieking in the opposite direction, was that I was in demon territory.

A flicker of light illuminated the leaf edges in the darkness. I heard a low murmur of sound, hushed and urgent. Instinctively crouching down, I crawled forward and was scared. Voices. Demons spoke, of course. They were bloodthirsty and evil, but intelligent too. I could have gone the other way like a rational individual, but then I would not know what kind of demon was close by. If they were shifters with tracking skills, I was no better than a dead body anyway. Soon, I saw the pale glare of artificial light and inched closer, keeping myself low to the floor. My knees scrapped sharp twigs, hard stones. The prickly leaves of low grown shrubs stroked my cheeks and forehead as I pushed forward. My breathing sounded too loud in my ears, and I tried to breathe shallow. I kept my moves small and stealthy, like I was taught in Subterfuge when learning how to track demons for the element of surprise.

Ahead of me, there was a small clearing and three bodies in it.

Two were human, Clerics, identified by the peculiar hooded crimson blazers they wore with black tails that flowed to their knees. The wide, pointed hood could cover your face to the nose. The well-known white-eye sigil stitched on their breast pockets, commanded fear from demons and submission from Disciples. The one facing me was female with her hood down. She was skeletal with mud-coloured hair and pinched lips, but would be attractive if you like women with up-tilted eyes and a mean-looking disposition. The other had his back to me and was a well-built male. Small but compact with big arms and calves.

To my horror the feeling that surged through me was not relief. These Clerics would take me back to Temple, and I would get into heaps of trouble having to somehow explain the hole in the Wall. But that versus being caught by a demon and killed was preferable, right? No. I sat in my hiding place and quaked in my boots. My stomach twisted into a double knot and my teeth chattered, because something bad was happening.

The third body in the clearing was a demon. A kind I had never seen before in my life, meaning she could only be one thing. Green skin damp and scarlet hair wild, the fairy was sprawled across the forest floor in a tangle of her own gawky limbs. It was clear to me she was terrified. Her vibrant skin looked sallow and her eyes bloodshot. A tazer probe buzzed in her shoulder blade, another on her upper thigh. She was crying, a pitiful high keen that was so frail I could barely hear it.

The Lady Cleric twisted the probe deeper into the fairy's leg. "Why do you spy on the Academy?" she asked with chilling calm.

The fairy-girl cringed back. “I mean you no harm.”

“And here I thought a fairy could tell no lie.”

“I can’t.” The high chime of her voice shook on each word. “I speak the truth. Let me go; you don’t understand what will happen. My brothers—”

The Lord Cleric punched her. Her head flew back and a spray of blood wet the dry mud and splattered over the leaves concealing me. Face wet with tears and whimpering, she tried to crawl toward the trees and dragged up clumps of earth with her fingernails.

“You must let me go.” The words sounded muffled, like she had a mouthful of something foul.

The Lord Cleric executed a neat half turn and stamped on her thigh. There was a sharp snap, like I’d picked up a twig and yanked on the ends until the fibers split apart and cracked open. The fairy’s leg buckled into an unnatural shape and she screamed. The sound was guttural, a direct translation of pain to sound. I slapped a hand over my mouth to smother my own shriek. Not because of the broken bone, I’d seen and heard tons of those, but because I’d caught the Lord Cleric’s profile and recognized the handsome face. The Lord Cleric dragged the fairy back into the centre of the clearing and brought a knife to her face. Clamping a gloved hand over her mouth, he slashed the blade across her cheek. Blood seeped from the wound and strangely, the smell of sizzling flesh seeped into the air.

I gagged.

It was then my body reacted. It was something natural hidden deep within, you see. I know it now, but didn’t know it then, so my actions made no sense to me.

Lurching forward, I snapped twigs beneath me and reached out to her. The Lady Cleric spun and a big, blocky thing appeared in her hands. A gun. I crouched and froze. She peered into the trees for the source of the noise and I stepped back, snapping another twig underfoot.

The fairy’s red irises twitched to me. We locked gazes and recognition made her eyes blaze, her face crease with panic.

She whispered, “Run.”

The Lady Cleric’s gun swung, jerked, and a gunshot cracked the air. The fairy-girl convulsed then was still, so still.

I was frozen, horrified. I'd seen demons bagged and tagged before when they had dared to breach the Wall and threaten human society, but we were Outside. This was their territory. What could she, a fairy-girl child, have possibly done to deserve torture and execution?

"Show yourself," commanded the Lady Cleric. She stepped forward this time and her eyes roamed the space. She clutched the gun more securely between her hands. "Show yourself, I say. Come out so we can look at you."

When a Cleric asked you a question you answered, and if they bade you to do something, you did it. They upheld Sect Doctrine. The Sect was the single most powerful organization humankind invested their faith and security in. If a Cleric told you to do something, the Sect was telling you to do something. And you did it without question, without thinking. They commanded and you obeyed.

I knew if I did as she asked, I was as dead as the fairy-girl on the floor not ten feet from me. Her word echoed in my ear. Run. It was the only plan I had. I stood from my hiding place, wheeled on the spot and bolted into the darkness.

The sound of another bullet split the air. Something whipped past my arm and left a hot sting. Feet stumbling, the tears streamed down my face. Thorny branches tore at my clothes and hair. I crashed through the undergrowth, not caring how loud I was or that they would be able to track me. I needed to get away. Run, run and hide. I had witnessed something hidden and knew if they caught me, they would kill me.

A dark shape jumped into my path and brought the butt of a gun hurtling toward my face. One forearm came up to protect my head and jerked violently. Then I cranked back my fist and snapped it forward. The answering grunt told me it was the Lady Cleric. As she staggered the gun swung again, barrel first, and forced me to drop and roll. Using the force of my body popping up, I spun, cocked my leg and kicked like mule. My heel connected with her upper back and sent her off-kilter-stance to hell. She flew toward a tree, spindly arms and legs flailing to hit an oak trunk hard. She collapsed to the floor in a messed up heap.

I'd struck a Cleric. Something crazy people with death wishes did. It was dark and I fretted she saw my face and would recognize me in a crowd. People had always said my hazel eyes were an outlandish shade hard to disregard and off-putting. Loud footfalls pounded behind me, getting closer. I ran again.

Short violent barks turned my blood to ice. Hounds- they had bloodhounds. I forced strength into moving my feet one in front of the other. Hands fisted, my arms alternated pumping back and forth. The air was solid resistance I needed to punch out of the way as much as the tree branches riddling my path. But I was tired. For the first time I felt my abnormal strength and stamina waning. There was a growl behind me, too close, and a snap of jaws at my heel.

My mind emptied and my heart skipped a thump as unexpected energy trilled through my body like an electric shock. The dark deepened into new dimensions. Shades of electric blue and purple tinted my vision, and I could see everything. Power exploded from my centre, filling my body to the brim. A sound like “guck” choked out of my throat in ecstasy, I felt so animated. I shot forward like a comet and the forest blurred into flowing lines I distinguished as if standing still. Now, air glided out my way as I hurtled forward, and my feet glanced effortlessly off the floor, not leaving the slightest imprint in the earth beneath me.

Taken by shock, I planted my feet and slammed to still.

The landscape shifted dramatically, and my sense of direction was completely disoriented. I trembled at the thrumming of air crashing into the collapsing void I’d created behind. Then my eyes started to hurt, opened too wide. The lash of pain on my arm flared painfully then dulled into nothing. I wiped at it. Again and again, crying out and scrubbing at my arm in panic looking for the graze. There was nothing but clammy skin and a dried smear of blood where a cut should be.

It was then the fear took hold of me and I lost control. My chest heaved and I choked a sob. The crazy sound smashing my ears had me seeing double, and my own breath razed across my eardrums. Racked with shivers, I curled into a ball at the base of a tree. My body spasmed once then the convulsions were frequent and uncontrollable. I kept my teeth clenched to avoid biting my tongue and tucked my arms into my sides. The position, though safe, was not comforting. I buried my face in the leaves and scrunched my legs into my chest. I cried out at each lash of pain. My muscles kept up this hedonistic clench and release until they cramped into bunches. Waves of heat shot down my spine, and splinters of ice burrowed into the space between my pores. Each assault was more painful than the last. I shivered as the wind fluttered my sweat soaked my clothes. What hurt most was my head; the pumping of blood in my ears, ringing between my eyes, and the overwhelming scent of my own fear clogging my nose.

Gradually the pain subsided and breathing became easier. My heart took it down a notch and I was grateful, for I was not sure it could take much more. Quivering, my muscles relaxed and stayed relaxed. With a great measure of wonder, I realized there was no longer pain, but an overwhelming sense of all things. Despite my emotional exhaustion my body felt better, and I felt different. Strong.

“Have you calmed down now?” asked an amused voice above me. “I have been told an awakening is easier if you are calm.”

I sprung up to defend myself. My hands were fisted and my face fierce.

At first sight all I made out was a male shape, an impression of someone tall and built. In the lightening dark all I could see were his eyes, wide and cold eyes touched with mad, framed by a tangle of thick lashes. His grey irises were so light they could be silver. They burned, scorched me as his gaze flicked over my face and body. He wore dark, faded jeans and that was that. Feet and chest bare, he was the least civilized boy I'd seen. His skin, pale and covered with intricate tattoos, scintillated even in the absence of light. During my steady appraisal my hands had dropped and relaxed, but they clenched again. Boys slid their eyes up and down you before whistling to catch your attention. They did not stare at you until your insides felt like outsides. The directness of his gaze had me mystified, and I was already under the influence of so many emotions the only way I could react to something I could not understand, was with violence.

However, he remained close and did not look alarmed at my aggressive posture. Belittling the tense atmosphere, his face lit up with a smile.

“Rae,” he murmured and stepped closer.

He lifted his arms as if to embrace me. One more step would close the distance between us completely.

I was scared, so scared. I couldn't speak. There were no words or coherent thoughts in my head. It was a jumble of panic and cautious interest. Who was he? Was he another Cleric? Would he kill me now? Oh gods. I would become one of the faceless and nameless that went missing every year. To be forgotten as my body rotted or was left to become a demon dinner. I couldn't handle it, nor could my body functions manage the full-scale meltdown. My legs buckled and the world went a funny gray colour. I fainted, but told myself I didn't have time to faint and came to in the next second. Not that my actions meant anything, or my revival was what stopped my ass hitting the ground. The boy darted forward so fast his body blurred, and something hard and

invisible shunted into me. So hard it knocked the breath from my lungs. Pushed off centre, my legs flew up and the sky swung into view.

He'd caught me.

"Stop talking," he said. Then smiled.

I stared up at him dumbly. Was he making a joke? I hadn't said a word. In fact I think I'd forgotten to breathe since I saw him, and that's what caused my half fainting spell.

I shifted. My top rode up some and his fingers touched my back. Something hot and powerful invaded me. It charged through my body until every muscle was tense and straining, not pleasant after the baptism of ice and fire I'd been an intimate and unwilling subject of before. And then it was gone, dissipating into nothing. I relaxed so completely it felt like my bones had unhinged, and my muscles liquefied.

The boy's face was blank with shock. Had he felt the painful heat too? I hoped so, because I was sure it was his fault.

There was a fracas nearby, getting closer and louder. My heart did a good job of clambering into my throat and blocking my airway. The party hunting me crashed past and kept on going. The boy, who had crouched down with me on his knee whilst I had worked on breathing right, ducked his head down and tensed. I felt better because he too was barely breathing. My heart thundered and my thoughts raced. The bloodhounds were trained to follow the weakest of trails. Why didn't they smell me when my scent would have led them right to us? This brought me round to the daunting thought of how I'd got so far ahead, rolled around on the floor, and encountered a strange boy before they had caught up. Again, who was this boy, over whose arm and knee I was draped? Not that it was uncomfortable, but he'd put his hands on me so easily, and held me close and it felt ... good. The shock had me relaxing and looking down at his hands. They were big, hard and somehow elegant as they curled around me.

The hunting party passed out of sight and hearing range. My stomach unclenched and my heart slid back down to rest uneasily in my chest. The boy remained as he was and peered into my face. My heart raced at how tall and how strong he was. Hair cut close to his head the general impression was hardness. A heavy top brow, and sharp cheekbones rested high on a sculpted face. His nose was the opposite of the distinctive aquiline bridge most boy Disciples had, and I liked it. His bold eyebrows and masculine lips added depth to a face that needed no flattering.

The scent of soil and sunlight reached me as I watched his silver eyes flick from my face, to the leather cord at my neck.

“We’ve been looking for you,” he said.

The first words I’d spoken all day were, “Nobody looks for me, and how do you know my name?” Taken aback by the feeble quality of my own voice, I lifted my chin and added some gusto. “I mean, put me down. Now.”

He did no such thing and he did not answer my question. But he did smile again, and what a spectacular show it was. His body was heavy and hot. Through the fabric of my clothes I felt the hard lines of him, and the slow thump of his heart over mine. Without thinking, I reached to touch his jaw and it felt like strength. My fingertips glided over a raised slash of skin, and a quick tug tilted his head so I could see more of his profile. I traced a scar following the line of his jaw, curving up to his cheekbone. The skin was puckered, rough. His eyes met mine and I shrugged, the scar made him real to me. I snaked my hands up his bare, solid shoulders and jumped off him so I stood on my own two feet.

I knew without a shadow of doubt this boy would rather die than hurt me.

“Rae,” he said softly. I shivered from his silky soft calling of my name, but then he finished with, “My name is Breandan, and you are mine.”

My whole body jolted. Then my startled laugh broke the short silence. Needing space to think and breathe, I pushed away from him.

“In your dreams,” I said and spun around.

I tried to pin down a direction to run toward. I realized at that moment my solution was downright silly and ineffective. See bad, scary or confusing thing, turn and run from bad, scary or confusing thing until you bump into another bad, scary or confusing thing. I was getting nowhere fast.

“You wouldn’t say such a thing if you knew the truth. And since I saw you first you have to be mine. The white witch was right, and now I’ll never hear the end of it. I didn’t think you would come out here so soon and so freely. I tried to ignore you, even when you got lost, but when I heard you running away from them I had to help. They would have caught you.”

I’d stopped moving in the middle of this rationalization. His voice was awfully attractive. I could never describe how it sounded because it would only ever sound perfect to me, and no one

else. Once I'd gotten past hearing the words I thought over the meaning. In delayed reaction my chest puffed out and I bristled.

"The hell I do. People don't belong to one another, and I certainly do not belong to you, even if you did see me first ... whatever that means. What stupid--"

He moved closer, then I could see nothing but his eyes again. Mouth suddenly dry, I was unable to finish my scathing rebuttal, and it took a moment to un-stick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. A warm, rolling sensation formed in the pit of my stomach and lodged there. It was an odd sensation, it even hurt a little, but it was a nice pain. I breathed in deeply through my nose and expelled the breath through my mouth. The whole deep breathing thing was helping.

"Okay then, Breandan," I said serenely, but my heart thumped too hard, and he cocked his head as if he could hear it. I went on nonetheless, "What do you want? Why are you in the forest, alone?" The best defence is a good offence, and I could give as good as I got. "This is demon territory y'know. I can admit I was freaked and a bit off course." He snorted a laugh and my temper bloated into righteous indignation. "It's dark out here. I was running away from the Clerics because ... they had dogs." My eyes darted to and from his now, uncomfortable with the lie. "And I ... don't like dogs. They bark. Loudly. And how do you know my name?"

There was a beat of silence as his eyes held mine. "You will have to get out of the habit of lying. You won't be able to do that for much longer. And anyway, you don't have to explain anything to me. I understand. I know you, and that is why we have come for you."

"Are you from the slums?"

For a bad moment there I had assumed he was from the Sect. I would be in a world of trouble if anyone saw me out here. I was beyond the Wall, which was forbidden, and I had seen ... I didn't want to think about the horror I'd seen, and how I'd been foolish enough to get caught seeing the thing I saw. I had disobeyed a direct order from a Cleric, something I, a Disciple training to be a Cleric, should never do. No, I was not so sure anymore. If Breandan was from the Sect he'd have called to the Clerics, not hidden me from them. If he was a civilian, I didn't see how he could come to be lost Outside. After all, you would have to get past the Wall to make it out here. There was not a human alive who didn't understand the dangers of going over the Wall and into demon territory.

I felt stupid then. If there was not a human alive who didn't know how dangerous it was Outside, what the hell was I doing Outside? I was going to have serious words with myself.

“Coming for you is not something I chose, and believe me, if I could change it I would.” He paused and shook his head. “We are stuck. You belong to me,” he repeated. “And I to you. Now we have touched it is sealed. Alright?”

Sealed my ass. I decided then and there, I did not like this boy.

“You cannot appear next to me in the middle of demon territory and say such silly things,” I said, strained. “You’re beginning to scare me.” That was another lie. I was beyond scared now. My body couldn’t keep up a constant pitch of terror, so it had simply gone beyond terror and pressed a big reset button. I was too afraid outside to be anything but calm inside. Voice unattractively shrill, I lowered my clenched fist and took a deep breath. I moderated my voice. “Let’s start with where you’re from?”

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his head. “A place not too far from here. You are very lost.”

I shifted on the spot. “Are you transferring to this region to be a Disciple?” It happened. Rarely, for it was too hazardous to travel large distances through demon territory, and it was only attempted once a settlement had reached a population density that put all the humans there in danger. But it did happen. He shook his head.

“Are you visiting Cleric at the Temple?”

I was reaching, but that could explain how he could be so comfortable in the forest. Clerics were not like regular people and often came from hardy families. The Clerics were the fastest, strongest most intelligent and intuitive of humankind. That is why they managed to keep us so safe.

His face darkened. “No.” The word was fired at me like a bullet.

Without preparing myself for the answer I asked with catty aplomb, “Are you a demon then?”

“Oh yes,” he said softly.

## Chapter Two

I waited for the fear and for the panic. I waited for the scream of terror to rip from my throat, but it never came. I waited for him to grab me, and murder me, and cut me into pieces and hide me under the small patch of wild flowers over there. But he said and did nothing. The clever thing would have been to get the hell out of there and start running again. But I didn't want to, and I was curious as to who and what he was. I wanted to know why he was stood in front of me, and what he was after.

His gaze raked over me again and again, looking for something.

"If you didn't think you were safe you would ask me to leave," he said. "And, if you wanted me to leave, I would have done so already."

I hated that his words made sense to me. "Stop trying to be clever, demon-boy."

"I'm trying to help you, demon-girl."

His words hit me like a blow to the head. I twitched liked he'd pinched me all over and staggered back.

I knew then something menacing was coming around the corner. I had to accept what he had told me next, right? Not to acknowledge the undeniable truth would be foolish. A tear slid down my face and landed with a soft plunk on my front. I had always been different, strange, but within the realms of human strange. Undoubtedly, I knew I'd gone beyond the boundaries.

He stepped closer, closer still, and our clothes rustled as they touched. Lowering his forehead to touch mine, warm fingers found my hands and coaxed them to entwine with his. I did not like the way my body was reacting to him. It overruled logic and it was beginning to upset me. Something was happening to me and I didn't understand what. Worse, I couldn't explain to myself why I was still there talking to him.

His finger tapped my chin up. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that, but I was never good with words." His voice was serious and complicated. His hand clasping my chin released the knot that had formed in my stomach and, with a sob, I dragged in a breath to control my tears. "Don't do it," he warned and used his hold on my chin to tug my face closer. "To cry over learning the truth is useless. It should empower you." He stroked my cheek, wiping the tear there. "You're sad," he said brusquely and watched me fight to control myself. "That tells me I

have not done this right. Maybe now is not the time to have this talk. I have responsibilities I cannot ignore simply because it will hurt not to be around you. I'll explain better when I return."

With no other option I nodded slowly. And then I knocked his hands off me. Whatever was so important he needed to leave me well, that was fine.

"You don't have to justify anything to me," I said. "I don't know you and I don't expect to ever see you again." He didn't owe me a thing and I was happy he was leaving. I could get back to being lost, and worried about being lost.

"So stubborn. I can admit not to see you will be hard. Can you not look outside yourself for a moment to do the same?"

The intention was to tear into him about his stupid, confusing statements that made no sense, but as my head turned his lips brushed along my chin. Gravity shifted and flowed into his eyes to ground me. The world darkened to nothing as they drew me deeper into their shaded depths. My lips parted in a sigh, and my hands swept around his waist as he pulled me closer. His hand tangled into my hair as my own moved over his lower back. I breathed in the heady smell of sunlight from his chest, and the scent became a taste on my tongue. Exploring the dip in his spine, I glided the pads of my fingers into the shallow groove flowing uninterrupted to his shoulder blades. My hands left his back then I hesitated in my exploration. The sensation that slicked over my palms was, odd. Hovering a few inches away from his skin the air felt warmer, thicker.

He jerked back and spun away to look into the forest. He peered around us, and the waves of hostility pulsing from his body cranked the tension in the air up. He stood, all wound up and tense, so I got all wound up and tense, and we fed off each other until I was panting. It was uncomfortably wearing for someone like me who was already beyond terrified.

Breandan said, "Rae, go back to the Temple now. That direction." He pointed into the trees.

When I didn't move he twisted me around by the shoulder, and pushed me in the direction he'd pointed. I kind of stumbled a few steps forward before I stopped, and realized I didn't have to do what he said.

"But, you can't tell me I'm a demon then stop explaining."

I wanted to stay, badly, but sense was telling me I had to leave like he said.

"You don't have to argue with every word I say. We'll come for you later. Go now."

Returning his steady gaze with one of my own, I picked up on something I'd been unconsciously registering. There was a barrier between Breandan and I. Pulling my brows together, I tilted my head to watch him, watch me. Not a physical or tangible barrier; invisible. He shimmered and rippled into something different. A soft nimbus coated his entire being. Pearlescent it repelled my gaze.

"Stop hiding from me and I'll go," I said. "You want me to trust you and I can manage some trust since you haven't killed me. But you have to trust me back. You say you're a demon, well then what kind? Show me your true form."

"I don't have the time for this."

"Come on, it can't take that long. Show me, then you can run off and do whatever you were doing before you just had to help me."

He made a noise of frustration and pointed again. "Will you at least move in the right direction as we talk?"

I nodded curtly. I was persistent not stupid. If he was this antsy something bad must be coming this way.

"If we run I can get you back and maybe catch it up. Follow me," he said.

And then he was gone. One moment he's walking, and the next he's a silver blur zipping through the trees ahead of me.

It was odd, because I knew it was demon fast, but I could track his movement with my gaze. Was it crazy that I wanted to follow him? Grudgingly, I admitted to myself I'd never wanted to follow someone so badly, and I was never one to shy away from a physical challenge. I'd run blindingly fast from the hounds, and the only difference between now and then was that then I was scared. Huh, piece of cake. I had loads of scared stored up around the solar plexus area. Tapping into the well of energy inside me was too easy, and I burst forward.

Everything was so bright and lively, and it was nothing for me to flow across the land at a velocity strange, yet comforting. Breandan took a sharp turn and I was pleased to see I was gaining, gliding across the ground at his side. A chuckle caught my ear. I had made him laugh, and a silly tide of happiness blazed through me. I grinned and laughed, and sped up to leave him trailing behind. The floor yielded to every pound of my foot. Not a single branch snagged my hair or cut my skin because I didn't let it. I zipped and dodged, jumped and spun a trail in the undergrowth. I didn't know where I was running to, but it felt good to be in motion.

The air was heavy with a piquant scent that fizzed on my tongue. The silhouette of trees taller than any I'd seen rose high in the sky, and a few stars winked out of sight. I'm not a botanist, so all I can say is that there were plants. A big orgy of red, blues and purples scattered everywhere. The breeze was crisp and made everything sway in orderly chaos. The buzzing of insect and restless whining of beast punctured the dawn in harmonic beat.

I knew the moment Breandan's hand reached for mine. My skin tingled and, like a magnet seeking its opposite, my hand moved to meet his. A light tug slowed me to a stop. I plucked a leaf from my hair and brushed a lick of dirt off my cheek. I could have continued this grooming session for a while since I felt twigs and thorns caught in my clothes and hair, but I was distracted.

Breandan stood still and let me roam my eyes over him. His profile was sharper somehow, and I pushed the hair out of my eyes to drink the strong column of throat that flowed into solid chest. His ears held my attention for a long while, couldn't say why, before my gaze slid over the straightness of his nose and the strong planes of his cheek and forehead.

"Let's keep moving," he said. I stood still and he had to either tug me again or let go of my hand. He let go and sighed dramatically. "Stop being difficult. If you're not back at Temple soon, they'll be suspicious of you and it won't be safe there anymore."

He walked off and took no more than five steps before I felt an insistent tug, a niggling urge pushing me toward him. I suspected it had something to do with that painful heat I'd felt when he'd touched me skin to skin for the first time. He had a lot of explaining to do. Gritting my teeth, I started after him and reached out the same moment as he did to clasp hands. We trod a path of crunching leaves and snapping twigs. The breeze was sweetly fragrant and smelled of green things. It was quiet now apart from the sound of small furry things going about their business in the understorey.

"Speak then," I said. "Don't go all shy on me."

"I'm a fairy."

I blinked and froze. The wind stirred fallen leaves and wrapped his words around me. A few words truly can take your breath away, or make you doubt your own mind. I walked on, not seeing, hearing or feeling.

I managed a sharp noise. "You must think I'm stupid or something. You want me to believe that you are one of the rarest species on the planet?"

He bit back a smile. “You believed I was a demon easily enough.”

“Well, we are in demon territory. You hid from Clerics and only demons do that.”

“You ran from Clerics.”

He had me there. “Uh, we’re not talking about me,” I said hotly. “I’m not the smartest girl, but I’m not stupid either. I’ll be just as impressed if you tell me you’re a shifter or witch.”

“What about me don’t you believe?” he asked after a small pause.

I was on a sarcasm-high now. “Yeah, sure. I believe you. Lucky Rae sees two fairies, the one kind of demon that is nearly extinct. And she sees them within minutes of each other. Even though the odds of that are—”

“What did the other look like?”

“Uh, green skin and all this long fiery hair.”

He made a clucking noise meant to sound cross, but he smiled radiantly, silver eyes faraway. “I told her to hide her true form.”

The direction of my thoughts became hideously plain, and icy horror froze the blood in my veins.

“I’m guessing you know her?” I tried to keep the question casual but my voice sounded shrill.

“The fairy you saw is called Maeve. She’s my little sister.”

I stared at him, my lips becoming numb. “Sister,” I whispered. “How can you know that? Aren’t all of your females green with red hair?”

“Do all human females have light hair, eyes and skin? No, all fairies are unique, though, there are typical things like our pointed ears and sharp teeth.” He must have figured I was having a simple moment. I didn’t back chat like I usually would. “Don’t worry,” his voice was gentle. “Maeve is a force of good. She’s been looking for you too, and she wouldn’t hurt you. She’s young and stealth is not her gift. She has skills with a blade not even Conall can match.” There was a deep affection in his voice as he spoke of her.

I felt dirty for not saying something sooner and opened my mouth to speak. Those curls of fear sprung up in my belly, and lashed at my insides to silence me. I locked my jaw. No words seemed adequate enough to explain what had happened. Before, I had been sad about what had happened to the fairy, even guilty. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t spooked

the Clerics. They might have let her go. If I told him what happened, how I'd disturbed them and gotten his sister killed, what would he do to me?

Oh gods, I felt queasy. The stress was eating away at me and I was wound up tight right down to my baby toes.

Then the outline of something big prowled past, ghosting through the trees. I forgot about Breandan, I forgot I'd seen his sister take a bullet to the chest, and forgot I was lost in demon territory as my entire body locked down. Blood rushed in my ears as the shadow trod a path parallel to where we stood. Breandan was calm and unmoved so I toughed it out, and stayed put.

It emerged from behind a tree a few paces away to cross our path. Black and freckled with flaxen rosettes, the big cat's emerald eyes with slitted black pupils swept over us. The powerful build and handsome face were too brawny to be anything but male. Slinking to a stop, his ears pricked up and he looked me right in the eye. A wave of consciousness flashed across my skin, and for a beat I couldn't breathe.

He padded over, thick claws glinting and pressed into my legs. A soft growl rumbled in his throat and his whole body vibrated. I tensed then flexed my hand and let it drift down. As he pushed his wet nose into my palm the growl became a satisfied purr. The cat was warm and smelt musky. My fingers rubbed up the coarse hair behind his ears then smoothed it down. He nipped at my finger and I yelped. He twitched at the sound, and the long whiskers on his upper lip whistled as they cut through the air. Nudging the back of my knee he made a contented noise, tinged with almost an apology for startling me. His eyes lingered on mine, blinked at me then he sniffed the air and gathered his front and back paws together. Ears flat against his head, he paced forward and slinked lower.

I gasped, spotting a sable coloured deer grazing within my line of sight, half hidden by a few dogwood trees. The cat's muscles bunched tightly before he sprung forward and bounded away. I didn't watch what happened to the deer after that.

Breandan watched me, head cocked thoughtfully.

I marvelled at the short ebony hairs stuck on my fingertips. Evidence my encounter had been real.

I trembled.

"Did that mean something to you?" I asked quietly.

“Oh yes,” he replied, took hold of my hand, and started to walk again. “Nothing out here will harm you unless you pick a fight first.” He paused. “Usually shifters are not that sociable. Rarely do they interact with those outside their pack, even when they leave Pride territory. Do not make a habit of petting them. Despite your difficult personality, I will protect you until death, but would prefer not to have to deal with such dire circumstances unless necessary.” Jerking to a stop he yanked gently on the ends of my hair to pull my head back. “Alright?” His teeth nipped my neck then his lips pressed a kiss to my pulse point. There he stood amongst the trees, smiling down on me and waiting for my answer.

All the while, for all that I’d just experienced and all he’d told me, all I could think was, he kissed my neck.

“Believe it or not I don’t skip around looking for trouble. I only come out here for some space to think and run. And I can take care of myself.”

After a beat of silence he chuckled and walked on, continuing to tow me along side.

A shifter. I had stroked a were-cat, one of the most feral demons in existence. Only Brendan’s firm grip and steady steps forward kept me moving.

“I never realized the different demon kinds lived so close together,” I said.

“Our territories are vast. Right now we are in his back garden. The Pride encompasses the entire human prison. That is why we showed respect and stayed still. If he had taken issue with us here, he would have let me know. But then he has probably scented the vampire too, and is happy to have the extra help in hunting it down.”

“Prison,” I echoed, startled. “Vampire?”

Saying the name made my toes scrunch together in my boots and my stomach pitch dangerously. The dead ones were not the kind of demons people dressed up to make scarier than they actually were. Vampires were the creatures you made nicer in stories so that you didn’t pass out when reports came your way one had breached the Wall and eaten a few homeless people..

“Is that not what it is? A prison the humans have locked themselves inside?”

There was too much behind that simple statement I could not begin to get into.

“So, you can go wherever you like? To hunt vampires, I mean. It doesn’t matter you’re not his kind?” I was fascinated. I had learned more about demonkind in one hour than years of training.

“Why would I not be able to go where I liked? There has not been a war between demonkind and we respect each other enough not impose foolish rules of ownership. Though most of us do avoid venturing into vampire cities. Shifters are bestial under a full moon, but sensible for the most part. The alpha-male keeps them in good order. As for the vampire, he’ll be dealt with soon enough. He’s only on our radar because he’s been round for so long, nearly a month now. It’s unusual for one to stay so long away from the safety of a nest. Unusual and worrying considering the timing.”

The Wall stretched out for miles and miles. If the shifters’ Pride surrounded the entire human region....

“How big is fairy territory?”

“Not as big as you may think. We are solitary by nature and usually travel in mated pairs. Small families.”

“There’s nowhere you all get together?”

“I know what you mean. We have two wylds, the Orchard and the Grove.” He paused, slanted a look my way. “You’re asking a lot of questions. You believe me now? That I am fairy, that you are fairy.”

“No,” I blurted. “I’m not ... I’m not.”

“You never thought it odd you are able to push your body beyond the normal boundaries of a girl your age?”

I ignored the fact he’d called me a girl and batted his words away with my hand.

“I’m stronger, yes. And I’m fast, but I always have been.” I was stretching the truth. I hadn’t always been fast, but crazy fast.

“And that’s all?”

My pace slowed to a dazed meander, an aimless weave through the mossy trunks. Swallowing hard, I bit my lip and tasted blood. My hand strayed to where the wound from a bullet graze should mark me and felt nothing. I had always been a quick healer. Not that quick, but quicker than most. I was not like other people because I didn’t think or feel the same. I didn’t eat right, or feel right when people touched me. I got urges, strange urges to... I blinked away the sting in my eyes. My mind took a frightening and obvious leap of intuition. I stopped. Everything in my world vibrated and slid to a canted angle then jerked straight, becoming new and balancing to the truth. I gave myself time for the largest wave of emotion to subside.

“I am a demon,” I said slowly, testing the words. “I am fairy.”

The world didn’t end. No one gasped or cried out, and there was nothing to suggest anything was wrong anywhere else in the world in that moment. My entire perception and understanding of everything was shifting into a new alignment, but that did not affect anything or anyone but me. My eyes were drawn to Breandan’s face. We stared at each other. Over the worst of my freak out, I had decided to make everything his fault, and I wondered what part of him to hit first.

His expression turned from wary to amused. “See, you’re not surprised. You knew you were different.”

I ducked my head to let my hair fall forward and cover my face. “I wish I’d reacted with hysteria now, like stabbed you with a stick and ran screaming.”

Lips curving he shook his head once. “You’re taking this well,” he explained. “Better than we’d hoped for.”

I opened my mouth to ask who this “we” was he kept referring to, but he kept on talking.

“The world has changed with demons out in the open and the fact you are training to be—” His expression hardened briefly. “Your reaction is not what I expected, good, but unexpected.”

“What did you think I would do?”

He shrugged. “Violence.”

The word described how I would have expected to react, but I didn’t feel aggressive. I was exhausted, confused and a little giddy. Maybe I was having a vivid dream, or an out-of-body experience. “Give me longer. I’m working up to it.”

“Do you want to talk about it? That helps females.”

His eyes fell from mine as the violence he was waiting for seeped through my calm and poisoned my voice. “No.” I threw the word at him with the force of an accusation.

“I’m sorry.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You need to work on speaking plainly.”

“The awakening was painful for you.” His mouth twisted around the word. “Your nature should not have been released so crudely without your knowing what you truly are. It may seem like I’m being cruel with my words, but we don’t have a lot of time and now you have broken the spell you will find it harder to conceal what you are.”

It was like he was speaking the dead languages to me. One minute, I understood and followed his train of thought, the next I was being dunked head first into the sea when I'd thought I was standing in a field.

"You're not making any sense. You talk like I already know what you're referring to. And I don't."

"Your true form was concealed, a powerful casting. It suppressed and hid your fairy nature to keep you safe."

I bit my lip. "I really am a fairy too?"

"What else would you be?"

I stopped, and my fingers curled under into fists. "You called me a demon girl. I could be a shifter, or have goblin blood or be a witch." I sniffled. Unattractive, but needed since my nose was running. I was still trying not to cry, and the stinging pressure had to be released somehow.

My voice was muffled and my nose felt thick. "They all look human too."

"Oh, Rae. You look like a human because of your glamour."

My frustration was replaced with confusion and curiosity. "My glamour?" I waited for him to elaborate. He said nothing. I did the only thing I could do and applied logic to try and understand. I felt sick.

"Vampires can do what you describe. Glamour a human when they need to trick and feed."

Was that it? I was I some freaky vampire-fairy hybrid that was going to go mad and massacre a load of people?

"No." His hand cut the air in a strong motion. "What you refer to is purely mind control. The dead ones dress up compulsion to make it seem harmless. Fairy glamour is a small enchantment allowing us to look completely human." He placed a hand to his heart, to his lips and reached as if to touch me. "Magic to our being is air to breathe and water to drink."

The barrier over him rippled again.

"The glamour is that shield over you." My hand swiped feebly but the curiosity in my tone was evident. "The barrier I can't see through or feel." His mouth tugged into a secret smile. Then he looked back over his shoulder, tapped his foot impatiently. I frowned. "You still need to go after the vampire you sensed back there?"

His face smoothed into relief. "Yes, yes I do."

“Then show me. Prove what you are.” I stopped and crossed my arms over my chest. “The quicker you do the quicker you can go.”

Breandan took a long look at me then glowed with an inner light. His face was fiercely beautiful, the perfect features sharpened. His ears had elongated, pointed at the tips and curved into a slender elliptical shape. He looked different. Other.

The desire to hold him had increased in pressure and was a force attacking all angles.

“Why do I feel like this?” I asked quietly. “I don’t think I even like you. How can I feel like this? Like I’ve known you my whole life. When you touch me I feel complete. When you speak, I accept everything because you said it.”

“The feeling of dislike is mutual, but I’m beginning to think I was born for you.” He sighed. “This will not be easy. Of course I would be the one to see you first.”

He pointed to somewhere behind me and turned his head slowly from left to right, like he was considering something. I looked over my shoulder. We had reached the Wall and the sudden crackling energy in the air allowed me to sense he was doing something big. The red wires stopped humming and cooled to pewter metal instead blazing red with electricity. The wires pinged and unraveled leaving a hole big enough for me to pass through at a stoop.

He jerked his head toward it. “Go now. Be safe and we will come for you.”

Then he was gone. Apparently fairies didn’t do long goodbyes. He was there then he wasn’t.

I was alone again in the forest but at least I wasn’t lost anymore. The sun was nearly done creeping up too. I slipped through the hole in the Wall, and the moment I did it knitted back together, but not before a dark streak dived through.

Every hair on my body stood on end. This was no fairy or Cleric. The movement was too liquid and quick to belong to anything but a dead one. All I could think was, *run*. I turned, tripped over a tree root and fell flat on my face. A mouth full of dirt, I crawled forward then decided I wanted to see it coming rather than be jumped from behind, and flipped round to scuttle back.

The vampire loomed over me, silent and deadly. He was dressed all in black and the space around him pulsed with darkness. Gesturing to me, his fingers were palm up and they curled around the air.

“Quiet, now,” he said. “It is not what you think. I would have revealed myself in a less dramatic manner, but the tear the fairy made was closing and I did not have another way.” His somber expression lightened and his eyes twinkled. “I have already eaten; a skinny girl, bitter.”

I shrieked and scrambled back some more. My hands were scraped and gouged by stones and bracken, but the flares of heat a second after told me I was healing. The vampire followed me, human slow so my eyes could track his movement. I’d heard they liked to torment their meals. Make them beg and scream for death before putting them out of their misery.

“You are being rude,” he said shortly. “Will you not talk to me?”

I blinked, astonished, and stopped moving. “Huh,” I grunted, incredulous. “I’m about to die and you think I’m being rude by not talking to you?”

If I was in my right mind I would never backchat the living dead, but I was shaking with fear, and pretty sure I was about to pee myself.

Backchat didn’t seem bad anymore.

His face remained passive. “I am death to those who cross my path.” My heartbeat picked up as if to emphasize the point. His mouth pulled into a grim line. “I do not deny what I am. I embrace it, but I have not come here to hurt you. I told you. I have already eaten.”

I started backing up again. It was stupid me crawling back and he walking after me, but now I was over the initial shock, I couldn’t get my body to stop. “Forgive me for not wanting to trust you, but your kind and my kind haven’t exactly seen eye to eye.” As I spoke I wasn’t sure if I meant humankind or fairykind, but I was sure the relationship with the vampires was about on par.

His lips quirked then fell straight. “No. I suppose not. Would it help if I gave you my word?”

He stopped and held out a hand to help me up.

I thought about it and managed to stop crawling. My arms were tired, my ass was damp from being dragged across the forest floor, and I was pretty sure I had a spider crawling up my back. I sighed and tossed my head to get the hair out of my eyes.

“No, it would not help, but I’m tired of being on the ground, and if you’re going to eat me I’d rather be upright with my head held high.”

I clasped his hand and curled my fingers around his. They were rock solid, cold. He pulled me up and my legs wobbled, so his other hand snagged my waist to steady me. For a moment I

stood, but was weightless. The sensation was unusual. I scowled and stared into the face of my vampire.

He was older than me, not by much, and he was ugly. Swept back from his forehead and longer than fashionable, his hair was coal black, and cut close at the neck. His eyes were red ringed, like he was sickly, and had a peculiar stillness about them. He hadn't blinked, not once since he'd first revealed himself to me. His eyebrows were thick and dark, as was the smattering of hair on his chin, which had a deep cleft. His brow jutted out from his face and his cheeks were gaunt, giving him a look of the starved. It was a strong face but one that did not appeal to me.

Straightening, I pulled myself from his grip and knocked his hands away. A faint, dry scent hit the back of my throat and my hackles rose. Swallowing hard, my eyes left his as I controlled the sudden urge to launch myself at him. To rip, bite and tear. A manic giggle bubbled in my chest. The thought of launching yourself at a vampire was ridiculous and suicidal, but my body was seriously contemplating it. He brushed the hair out of my eyes and I recoiled. He hadn't made a move for a vein yet, but he was a blood drinker, and I was full of blood. He flashed me a smile, and his chalky lips framed pearly fangs flanked by two smaller canines. They had run right out as he'd touched me. For a moment I was overcome. I stared at them, the spiky tips resting on his lower lip, a startling shade of ruby red. Everyone knew vampire fangs ran out when they were mad or bloodlusty. Which was he? Probably the latter, if he was mad my limbs would be scattered across the forest floor by now.

"You're going to kill me now," I said steadily.

I'd been through too much to deny that I was living on borrowed time. To be honest I was waiting for the hammer to fall. I would die there, food for the vampire-boy that the fairy-boy was hunting. Breandan would return eventually, like he promised and find my rotted corpse. Would he be sad? Would he and the 'we' he'd referred to, lament over my body. Would they give me a proper burial? After all he had said I was like him, fairykind too. In my last moments of life pondering on how I felt about being named a demon, I did not feel disgust or fear, but sort of a resigned relief. I was no longer a freaky human girl, but a demon. My strangeness made perfect sense now.

"I am not going to kill you."

The vampire had spoken. It took me a while to realize he had, because my last words had been a statement not a question. And even if he'd interpreted it as a question, it was clearly

rhetorical. I was living my last moments and the flashbacks of my life were about to commence, so the interruption was not appreciated. But since he'd spoken again I felt obliged to say something back, and I was getting used to conversations with strangers.

"Why?" I asked, genuinely puzzled. "You didn't dive through that hole for fun. If the wires had caught you, you'd have set off the klaxon and had Clerics with stakes and silver on your ass until you were ash. Vampires don't seem the self-sacrificing kind to me. Plus, the sun is rising." I pointed east. "You don't have much time, and to be out this early, or late, you must be super hungry to risk the true death. Or suicidal. Which brings me back to the fact you guys are big on the self preservation."

He made a low rumbling noise and his shoulders shook. It was laughter, and it was gruesome and wretched. "I have been looking for you."

I thought about this. For a vampire to be looking for you and not hunting you, was unheard of. It was intriguing and I knew then that curiosity was about to get me into more trouble.

"You're not the first to try that line today. You demons know how to flatter a girl."

He growled a little. "Fairies." He said the word like a curse.

I sighed again, exaggerating the rise and fall of my shoulders. Fine, my tribulations for the morning were not over. I could deal with that, but I needed the safety of Temple walls. The forest was no longer comforting, but alien and hostile.

"If you're not going to eat me would you mind if we walked and talked? I'm tired but have to keep going, or I'll be late for class."

He remained still and peered past me into the trees. I found it hard to read his face. His expression was not worried, but I thought it brooding, or rather, preoccupied with being anxious about something.

"I need to find a dark place. A safe place."

The dead and the sunlight didn't mix well. They burned, badly, and burst into extravagant blue and red flames. Then their blackened corpses flaked into ash. I could see why he might be anxious to find a 'dark place' as he put it.

"My wardrobe is dark." The words popped out of my mouth before they registered. "Wait," I said, and held up my palm. The standard cracks in my judgment were now gaping canyons, and there were all kinds of crazy ideas flying around. "You're friendly, right? If I help you, you aren't going to turn on me. Or turn me."

“As you pointed out, the sun is rising and I weaken by the moment. I need to talk to you. Hear what I have to say then I’ll go.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. There did not seem to be too big a downside to this arrangement. “I can do that, hear you out. But tell me, the fairy-boy I met is hunting you.” I watched his face carefully. “Why? Did you do something bad to him or his kind?”

He looked me over so intently I squirmed in my skin. He made a quick movement with his hand that said ‘so what?’.

“If they find my resting place they will kill me, and they won’t listen to what I have to say, which is why you must.”

I mouthed my next words silently before I spoke them aloud. “I’m a fairy too.” It was easy to say and I smiled. “It’s important I know if talking to you will get me in trouble.” I paused then grunted. “In more trouble than I already am, I mean.”

His eyebrows rose and he focused on me more intently. I backed up a pace and couldn’t help cupping my neck with my hand. He tilted his head and narrowed those bottomless eyes of his.

“I smell magic, but you seem human to me in every way.”

“You seem to know a lot about me and what I’ve been doing. But then if you knew a lot about me you would know I have only just found out I’m a fairy.” That sentence was convoluted, and I had confused myself. It made some kind of crazy sense, so I stood my ground and waited for his answer.

The vampire did not seem confused. “I can explain. But at night.” His eyes darted to the east and his mouth pulled down.

The sky was much lighter now, but the clouds gave extra cover. Time was running out. I was beyond terrified, the curls of fear in my stomach were tornadoes, and I felt a responsibility to protect this vampire from bursting into a firework display.

“My wardrobe it is.” He placed a hand on my lower back and I jerked away. “Watch the hands,” I said and eyed him.

“I’m going to carry you,” he explained. “It will be faster and we will not be seen.”

No doubt he could carry me, but still, the thought of being so close to death itself was worrisome. His presence still rubbed me up the wrong way. I was strong willed, not infallible, and my losing control would be fatal.

“No funny business. I’ll scream and, dead or not, it will hurt your ears.”

He shook his head, face serious. “No funny business,” he promised.

“Could you put the fangs away?”

“I like the way you smell.”

“That is creepy,” I said and plucked at my bottom lip. “You’re creepy.”

His body kind of vibrated, and a strange grizzly sound came out of his mouth. I guess since vampires didn’t use air to talk or breathe they sounded, moved and even laughed differently to normal beings. I jumped, but thankfully he was too preoccupied with laughing to notice, or to comment on noticing.

“No biting. I swear.”

I was having a hard time. Vampires were more often than not attractive in a scary, dead, don’t look them straight in the eye, ripping throats out and wallowing in ‘top yourself’ amounts of despair, way. This vampire-boy was positively spritely. It was such a stark contrast to my preconceptions cultivated by years of Sect reports, I kept having mini flashes of the different ways he would grab me, and sink his fangs into my flesh.

“Can’t get much crazier than I already am,” I said finally, and shuddered. Another flash of watching him drink me to death had me wishing I’d stayed my ass in bed.

The vampire picked me up and broke out into a ground-eating run. I noticed then that he was not breathing and wondered if that was by choice? It was strange to be so close to another person and not sense the normal rise and fall of the chest. There was no heartbeat either. No body heat. Just this animated body walking and talking and carrying me. People said vampires were soulless, and I did not agree. They had souls, dark ones. Here I must say I also believed there were different kinds of dark. There was a dark that was evil and cruel, and there was a dark that was solitary and simply absent of light. Maybe this boy was the clear dark.

I kept thinking nice fluffy thoughts of flames that didn’t blister the skin because they looked pretty, and bolts of lightning that wouldn’t kill you dead because they were a gift from the sky. Making bad things good helped me to not freak out and start bawling in this demon’s embrace. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stop the thought that really mattered. This vampire needed something from me. That was the reason I was still alive. And, I concluded, he must be cunning. Breandan seemed a good tracker and he’d been fooled. I was sure he would not have left me if he’d thought there was a chance I’d be in danger.

Thinking of the fairy-boy had me thinking on a new problem I had created for myself. What did I do and say the next time I saw him? Did I tell him about the vampire-boy in the wardrobe? Breandan had said he'd come back but not when, so I figured he'd probably give me a few days to adjust. He'd seemed conscious I accepted what he'd told me, and he'd made an effort to ask how I was feeling and if I'd wanted to talk about it. The vampire could die for the day in my wardrobe, ask me his questions after sunset then go on his merry way. Problem solved, because then I would wake up.

I had decided right around the time I saw the green fairy-girl that I was dreaming.

We ended back on the Temple grounds in a few blinks of the eye. At first it looked like he was going to run through the brick wall that surrounded the Temple, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I felt a jolt. Air whistled past my head and other sounds drowned in a loud whoosh. The vampire-boy did a fast movement, another bigger jolt, then the wind was blowing the hair back from my face again. It was hard to figure out the speed he ran at in the dark, but the wind on my face gave me a little thrill. If ever I needed to run away from him I'd be faster.

Something struck me as a little odd. He seemed to know exactly where he was going.

I said, "You've been here before."

This was more evidence I was still sleeping safely in my bed.

"No. Your scent is distinctive."

"Huh. The key is in my left butt pocket," I said candidly.

"I see," he said. We reached my room and he threw me over his shoulder. It was neat, and swift, and not a little bit uncomfortable. "May I?"

"Uh, may you what? May you take the key, or may you drain me for dinner?"

"You have to invite me in." He sounded strained. "The hallways are public but your room is private. Invite me in."

"Sorry, I forgot. I'm a little nervous with this whole thing. I'm still waiting for you to try and take a chunk out of me. Sure, go ahead. I invite— Wait. It will only let you in right? The invitation won't throw my room wide open to all vampires, I mean."

"Only me. And I cannot extend the invitation to others. Are you satisfied? The night is over."

"I invite you to enter my room," I said and giggled. It sounded so formal.

There was a light brush against my butt then we were in my room, and he was placing me down on the bed.

“Ta,” I said and fell back, rubbed my face on my blanket. It smelled like trees, rain and sunlight. I blinked. It smelled like me, but it also reminded me of Breandan.

“This is your wardrobe?” My vampire-boy did not sound happy.

“It’s small, but it will do the job.” He shot me a look that on a human face would have been long suffering. He was too strange looking to look anything other than intimidating. “Give me a break, it’s not like this was ever a scenario I’d ever have to prepare for.” I started pulling clothes out onto the floor until the space was empty. “There,” I said with satisfaction. The space was big enough for two people. He was being prissy. I deliberated for a moment whether you could catch anything from sharing bed linen with a vampire, but then gave myself a mental slap. I chucked my pillow and blanket in there and nodded. “Best I can do.”

The vampire picked up my hand and bent over. My heart stuttered and I flinched. He paused and his shoulders shook with laughter again.

“No biting,” he repeated.

Keeping eye contact, he flipped my hand over and kissed my palm. The press of his skin to mine was almost beyond words. His lips were firm and the tip of his tongue wet. It was odd, cold and overly smooth, but not unpleasant. My mouth opened and I made a gasping, choking sound. I blushed from the soles of my feet right up to the tip of my ears. I tugged my hand away, hid it behind my back.

“Once you’re in I’ll close the doors, and no one will be the wiser.” I glanced out the window. “You’d better tuck yourself in now. There’s a storm, but I can see breaks in the cloud cover.”

He lacked the smooth and predatory movement of vampire as he staggered forward and collapsed into the space. We’d pushed our luck too far. He was visibly exhausted, which was fascinating to see on one of the most powerful demons in existence. Face shadowed, he sighed, shifted a bit and sat with his legs bent in front. He wasn’t tall. It must have just been his scary vampire presence and the pulsing darkness following him around that made him seem huge to me. In a very human move he propped the pillow to the side, and leaned his head.

“At sunset we will talk.”

I nodded. Pushing the hair out of my eyes I smiled at him. “Sure thing.” I went to close the door, but then stopped and yanked it open again. “Oh wait; my name’s Rae.”

His eyes were already half closed, and as he died for the day he said, “Tomas.”

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