

DAWN OF THE FAE

MODERN FAE BOOK 2

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Cover design by Elizabeth Mackey

Editing by The Artful Editor

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ISBN-10: 1-7326128-3-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-7326128-3-9

First Edition: June 2019

DRAFT 20190531

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DAMP ferns swiped me in the face every few steps. I swatted them back, pushing through and hoping there would be a clearing ahead. My loafers slipped in the mud. The bloody things would need to be tossed if I ever got out of here alive. Forests are no habitat for demons. Leave the forests to the Fae. They can have them.

I wiped a hand across the back of my neck, certain some crawling pest had dropped off a tree in an attempt to creep down my collar. My best button-down shirt, now filthy beyond redemption, might also be destined for the rubbish heap. I'd already sacrificed my jacket in an attempt to fashion an improvised carryall. My decision to help that idiot Fae, Liam, and his adorably clueless human, Evelyn, had already cost me my hard-won demon allies, not to mention put my demon mother on my tail. If I ever found Liam's little Fae love nest, I hoped Evelyn might take pity on me and beg her mate to magic me up a new outfit and a new flat.

A branch I'd pushed aside swung back and bashed me in

the side of the head. Brilliant. As much as I hated the forest, I hoped it would be the last place my demon kin would come searching for me. My plan was to lay low and ride out the coming war between the demons and the Fae. But first I planned to even the score and call in a favor.

The whole mess would have been sorted with much less effort if I could have just gone straight to Lydbury and spoken with Evelyn there. Unfortunately, showing up on her doorstep with demons on my tail would have made Liam less inclined than he already was to help me. Instead, I'd wandered deep into the forest in search of Fae sign, only to find myself drenched by spring rains and walking in circles.

As I contemplated which way to turn next, the forest around me fell silent. Not that I missed the incessant chatter of birds. They could all bugger off for all I cared, but something about this silence didn't feel right. Most demons didn't have magic aside from the ability to glamour, teleport, and ensorcell. But I'd picked up a few tricks from human witches and wizards over the years. They always agreed to teach me after I told them that my mum had been shagging one of their lot who then took off with some Fae female before I was born. At least, that's the story she'd told me back then, and I'd believed her. Never trust a succubus, even if she's your own mother.

I could fall back on the wizard tricks in a pinch, but I'd have preferred a more traditional weapon, something made from steel. I hadn't had time to grab one in my escape, and I hadn't run into any convenient armories while stumbling around in the woods. Teleporting out of here wasn't an option, since I didn't know my location. I'd been relying on stealth and hoping any potential opponent would be dumb enough to leave their mind unguarded. At least until I could get my hands on

something that stabbed.

The absence of sound began to creep me out. I rubbed my fingers together next to my ear just to make sure I hadn't actually lost my hearing. But I needn't have bothered. Each snap of a twig underfoot rang out like church bells announcing the hour. So much for stealth. I stopped walking.

The charred scent of burning wood wafted toward me on the wind. Either someone had set up camp nearby, or this damp and misty forest had managed to catch fire. Following the whiff of smoke lingering in the air, I crept toward the thick hedges just off the deer trail I'd been following. My shoes slipped and slid on the muddy ground, and I wobbled, struggling to keep my balance. Lifting my hands to the hedge, I parted the thick foliage enough to catch a glimpse of a clearing beyond. A flash of long red hair and pointed ears near a boulder off to one side of the mossy glade caught my attention.

I let the leaves shift back into place and took a hasty step backward. The crack of a branch underfoot echoed in the eerie silence. Damn. I froze, trying to decide the best way to approach her and ask for help. I'd been so focused on finding some sign of the Fae that I hadn't thought about what to do when I finally encountered one of them. I considered what might happen if I pushed through and announced myself. Perhaps she'd take pity on a soggy and mud-caked half demon. Unlikely, that.

If she didn't want to be friendly, I couldn't transport myself beyond my line of sight without risking the chance I'd reappear on the other end permanently enmeshed with a tree or boulder or worse. The demon part of me chafed at the idea that I'd fallen so low that I was seriously considering running or hiding from a Fae.

Before I could decide what to do, a fierce wind ripped through the hedge, parting it and carving a clear path between where I stood and the redhead in the clearing beyond. Clumps of my damp, knotted hair lifted and snapped against my scalp. I winced and squinted into the gale, throwing my hands up to block the force of it from pummeling my face.

Through my shielding hands, I glimpsed the Fae female standing tall in a sea of calm, arms spread in an inverted V with palms facing me.

She called to me across the expanse that stretched between us. "Reveal yourself, demon spawn."

Well, that settled that. I'd have to do this the unfriendly way with what little magic I had available to me. I concentrated on a section of mossy earth just past the boulder near the center of the clearing. Then I flickered out of her wind-storm and reappeared with the boulder between us. I ducked behind it for cover and cast a blazing wizard fire in each hand.

She spun toward me, reacting to my change in position faster than I'd expected. I lobbed a fireball at her, more as a warning than a true attack, and she dodged it easily.

"Stand down, or I'll wipe the forest floor with that grin of yours," she said.

I hadn't realized I'd been grinning, but it did please me that I finally had an opponent I could take my frustration out on. She may have more magic than me, but she was just a Fae, and if I could control her thoughts, I could force her to take me to Liam. I locked eyes with her and reached for her mind.

Before I could get a grip on it, she hit me with a wall of water. I sputtered, stumbling back a few steps. My feet slipped out from under me as I reached for the boulder. In a blink, I was flat on my face with a mouthful of mossy mud. I exhaled in a huff as the Fae female pounced on me, knocking the air

from my chest. She straddled me, pinning my arms to my sides, then held a knife to my neck.

“Submit,” she commanded.

A vine snaked across my wrists, binding them tight against my sides, eliminating my ability to use fire magic. To cast it, I’d need my hands, which were now uselessly pressed against my thighs. I grunted and strained against the organic restraints.

She slid off me and crouched by my side, knife still pointed at the pulsing artery in my neck.

I twisted away from her and the gleaming metal point of her knife until I could get one knee bent underneath me. Then I rolled onto my side, just far enough to allow me to look at her without straining. The sun glowed behind her like a halo, casting the features of her face into shadow. Her long braid fell over one shoulder, revealing the points of her ears as silhouettes on either side of her head.

Bested by a Fae. Utterly mortifying.

“Sit up.” She nudged me with the flat of her blade.

“Not that easy with my hands bound,” I muttered as I scooted myself into a sitting position.

She scratched a rune into the mud between us and whispered words in that incomprehensible Fae tongue. “What are you doing here? Are you following me?” she asked.

I opened my mouth to respond, preparing to charm her and make another attempt to grab hold of her mind, but the words froze in my throat.

The redhead grinned, wide enough to show teeth. “Speak the truth, demon spawn. Only fair, I think.” She shifted her weight, dropping one knee down and curling her booted toe beneath her. She left her knife unsheathed but rested the hand holding the blade on her thigh.

“You cast a truth spell.” I flexed my arms against the vine binding me, but it wouldn’t budge. Then I started to put it all together. The gale, the water, the vine, the blood magic preventing me from lying my way out of this. “You’re an Elemental.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” With a flick of her wrists, the vine wound tighter. “Like, why are you here? Forests are no place for demons.”

As much as I agreed, I wasn’t about to tell her that. “I’m looking for someone.”

Her lips pressed together in a thin line as she considered me. “One of the Fae?”

I nodded. “I need to deliver a warning.”

“What warning?”

“The demons are planning an attack on the Fae.”

She squinted at me. “A warning about demons from a demon spawn? If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d found a way around my spell.”

“I’m not lying.”

“No.” She leaned forward, raising her knife to point it at me. “Tell me. Were you there? Were you one of the demons helping the Hunt?”

She’d cornered me and made it so I couldn’t lie, but if I told her the truth, then she’d kill me before I got the chance to explain. “It’s not like that. I was there, but I wasn’t helping.” I wedged my fingers against my hip, hoping my hands were far enough behind me that she wouldn’t see what I was doing.

She raised a whirlwind around us. Still no fire, I noticed. “I should take you to the Court. Let them decide what to do with you.”

Flames licked from my palm and up my fingers, warm-

ing the vine that bound me enough that it loosened. She was either too distracted to notice or her control wasn't strong enough to overcome a direct assault on the magic that held my restraints tight. The instant my restraints fell away, I shifted and grabbed for the knife, tackling her so she fell back. Then I pinned her against the earth.

"Tell you what." I leaned over her, feeding heat to my hands where they held her wrists until she winced and dropped the knife. "You lead me to the Court, and I'll let you go. After I deliver my message." A hostage would certainly improve my chances of making it out alive. I reached for her mind again.

She spat at me, but I dodged it. "I'd rather die than lead you to them."

I sighed, unable to get past her mental shields. "Fine. Then let's make a deal." It was unusual for Fae to know how to shield their minds. Just my luck that I'd run into one who'd had some reason to learn and access to a decent teacher.

She squirmed under me, trying to get away. "Didn't your kind ever teach you? Never make a deal with a Fae."

I did know better, but I was willing to take my chances if it meant not having to wander around in these woods a moment longer than necessary. "Ah, but now that I've asked—"

"You've asked, and now I must treat with you." She grimaced. "Let me up first."

I released her arms but snatched up her knife, then disappeared before she could stop me. I reappeared seated on top of the boulder. I ignored the fact that my clothes were officially unsalvageable without magical intervention and positioned myself as though they were clean and freshly pressed.

I made him wait while I checked my wrists for burn marks.

Fire magic. How did this demon spawn come to have fire magic? The Ancients taunted me with the unfairness of it all, not even bothering to strike him down for perching on their altar. I tilted my head and considered the filthy demon sitting atop the remains of my offering. Perhaps the Ancients had sent me a solution to my problem, after all.

“What deal, demon?” I asked, keeping the eagerness from my voice.

“Simple.” He preened from his perch on the rock. “Take me to the Court so I may deliver my warning, then see me safely out of the forest, and I’ll not bother you again.”

“And what in exchange?”

He glared at me. “The warning should be enough.”

I shrugged. “No deal.”

He jumped down and began pacing around me, watching me with narrowed eyes. “What would be a worthy trade for the service I request?”

“Your life, for what you did to my kin.” Especially for the ones who, unlike me, hadn’t escaped the Hunt alive. But I’d take something else, if he offered it.

He lunged at me. “That wasn’t me.”

I stood tall, refusing to let him see the terror that still haunted me after my time in the dungeons under the Goddess of the Hunt’s temple. “You’re still one of them.”

He shook his head. “I won’t give you my life.” He glanced down at his hands, then back at me. “You’ve yet to use fire against me.”

He spoke as though he’d heard my thoughts. Of course, he was half demon. He could hear my thoughts if he tried. I worried he might have found a way into my mind, despite all the practice I’d had resisting the demons who’d been commanded by Lord Edric to search our minds for anything that

might lead him to Godda.

“What deal do you offer?” I asked, ready to be rid of him, one way or the other. I had two days until the first match of the Conclave, and if I couldn’t control my fire magic by then, I would have to admit that I’d been damaged by my stay in Edric’s dungeons more than I cared to admit. At best, failing to qualify would further isolate me from the other apprentices, who already treated me like a glass flower. At worst, I might find myself cast out like those Elementals who could only control three of the four elements. The cursed.

The demon considered his words before speaking. He behaved as though he knew I’d only give him one chance. “You escort me to the Court so I may deliver my warning, then see me safely out of the forest. No harm comes to me, and I teach you to use fire magic before I leave your forest and never bother you again.”

“What makes you think I need your assistance?”

He lifted his hand, palm up, between us. A perfect flame flickered in the air just above his skin. “If you don’t need my help, show me.” The flame disappeared.

His challenge burned more painful than his touch. At least he’d mentioned nothing of time. I could work with this deal. “With what name will we seal this bargain?”

“Nigel.” He offered no clan name, only his given name. Curious but acceptable.

“Gwawr of the Ancients accepts your deal, Nigel.” I grinned, proud of my title and thrilled that I’d found a way to maintain it. I would not let myself become a cast out.

He pressed my knife to his skin, wiping the grin from my face.

“Stop.” I held out my hand and motioned for him to return my knife. My heart pounded in terror.

He hesitated, glancing up at me, the knife still poised to cut.

“No blood magic. A Fae’s word is our bond.” Idiot. If he knew what spilling blood here would do, he’d not be so quick to stab himself.

He extended the knife to me, hilt first. “Gwarer?”

I groaned at his mangled pronunciation as I sheathed my knife. “You may call me Dawn.”

“Dawn?” His brow wrinkled in thought as he tried to make the connection.

“Dawn. ‘Gwawr’ translates to ‘dawn’ in your British human tongue. I’d rather you use that name than continue to butcher the one my dam gave me.” *May her force join the Ancients and strengthen the Hands*, I added in my head, avoiding further explanation of Fae Ancients and life forces to a demon who wouldn’t care about or respect our beliefs.

He shrugged. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. The Fae never tell their true names.”

I chose to ignore his ignorance. “Now that we’ve settled our arrangement, it’s time for our first lesson.” I held my hands out and waited.

He glanced at my hands, then up to my face. “Lesson? Now? You said you’d take me to the Court.”

“I did.” I smiled, wondering if this was what the Rogues felt like when they ensnared humans.

“Then let’s go.” He gestured to hedges surrounding the clearing. He had no idea that he was pointing in the wrong direction.

“Lesson first.” I hoped he knew more about magic than he did about surviving in the wilderness.

“But if I don’t get this message to the Court, more Fae could die. Doesn’t that matter to you?” His voice adopted an

almost pleading tone, which was extremely out of character for a demon. Unfortunately for him, I was not about to be swayed by his words or his attempts at charm. Too much was at stake for me.

“Of course it matters. So stop wasting time and start teaching.” I didn’t plan to tell him that I could get a message to the Court now, if I wished, and I didn’t need to drag him before Fiona and the others just to warn them the demons were hunting us. We already knew. I still planned to bring him to the Court, because that had been our deal, but only as my prisoner, and only after he’d fixed whatever had gone wrong with my magic. When I handed him over, the queen might even give me a reward.

“Forget the deal. I’ll find them myself.” He turned and began walking to the edge of the clearing.

I watched him go, waiting for the moment he’d realize what he’d done. There. He stopped suddenly, as though he’d run into a wall. He ran his hands over his waist, staring down like he’d be able to see the invisible link he’d created between us with his words.

“That’s not how deals work,” I said.

He spun around to face me. “What did you do? Let me go.”

I crossed my arms. “I did nothing. I’d be happy to see you go. Only, you made a deal, and now we’re tethered until the terms are met.”

He searched again for a rope tied around himself, or one that bridged the space between us, but there wasn’t one, of course. If I were truly one of the Rouges, rather than an Elemental, I wouldn’t need a tether to hold him to his bargain. But, if I were a Rogue, he wouldn’t have gotten away with such a harmless deal.

“You won’t be able to see it,” I said.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Someone should have taught you about making deals with Fae.” Not that any demons I’ve heard about would know anything about making deals with my kin. I considered his parentage. Based on his appearance, too human-like to be fully demon, one of his parents must have been human. Perhaps he’d been raised by the demon. “Dam or sire?” I asked.

“Dam or sire, what?”

“You know.” I gestured to the stubby horns protruding from his skull just above his temples. Inky-black horns poked out of his clump of damp and dirty hair. He’d inherited them from one of his parents, just as he’d inherited his fire magic from the other.

His hand lifted to touch the point of one. “Dam.”

“Succubus, then?” There were at least as many female as male demons, but I only knew one type of female demon notorious for preying on human men.

He nodded, confirming my guess.

“So, your sire was a fire wizard? Was he the one who taught you?” Only a handful of humans, those with at least a touch of Fae in their blood, had the ability to use magic. Even then, they had to learn how to wield it, usually from other witches and wizards. If his sire was a human wizard with fire magic, he had an Elemental relation somewhere in his ancestry.

He crossed his arms. “I’m not talking about this now. And I’m not teaching you. I’m not moving until you agree to take me to the Court.”

“I already agreed to take you to the Court.” I grinned at him. “Only, you didn’t say when. You’ll want to be more specific next time you make a deal with a Fae.”

“I’d have thought you’d want to be rid of me.” He fussed with the cuff on his folded-up sleeve, wiping at some speck

of mud or blood as though that were the only thing marring his otherwise posh appearance.

“I do want that. But I want the lessons you promised me first.”

“Why?” He slipped his hands into his pockets.

“None of your business, demon.” It didn’t seem fair to keep calling him a spawn now that I knew there was a possibility his dam had seduced his sire to beget him. But he didn’t need to know why I was desperate to strengthen my fire magic. The Conclave wasn’t for outsiders. “Even though the Fae cannot lie, that doesn’t mean I have to answer your questions.”

“Then why should I answer yours?”

I shrugged. “It’s nothing to me. I only hoped to learn the strength of your magic.” A horror occurred to me. What if he’d been bluffing and didn’t have the knowledge I sought, the knowledge I’d begged the Ancients to return to me. I whispered a word of power, hoping he hadn’t destroyed my earth rune in our scuffle.

“Whatever strength I have is hard won,” he said. “My father took off before I was born. I’m not even sure he was a fire wizard. I only know that he was a wizard.” His words confirmed that my truth spell held. I could tell from his wrinkled forehead and squinting eyes that he hadn’t meant to speak that truth to me.

Before he could anger over my use of that spell, I offered him a truth in exchange. Holding my hands in front of me, palms up, I called forth my fire magic. Not all Elementals could control all five elements. All could control at least one of the four primary elements: earth, wind, fire, and water. Only those who could command all four might also have the gift of the fifth element: blood magic. We were known as the Hands of the Ancients. Only Hands, like me, were eligible

to compete in the Conclave, and not competing wasn't an option. Except my fire magic had gone wrong, and I couldn't qualify until I fixed it.

Waves of heat curved the air above my hands, but no flames emerged. No fire. It had been this way since Sorcha helped us escape the night of the solstice. For three months, I'd not been able to control my flames. Now we were two days from the start of the Conclave, where I'd be expected to pass my qualification and compete against the other apprentice Hands for a chance to take my mentor's place as Guardian of the Elementals. And here I stood, exposing my weakness to a half demon and hoping he'd be able to help. The demons had a hand in helping that madman Edric destroy generations of Fae. I shouldn't trust him, but I couldn't ignore the fact that he'd found me just after I'd completed my spell asking the Ancients for help.

I glanced up from my hands and met his eyes across the clearing. "They smolder but won't ignite."

He paced toward me and slipped his hands under my own. Heat warmed my skin everywhere he touched me. I jerked my hands away, but he caught my wrists and held them.

I locked eyes with him, glaring. "What are you doing?"

"Wait," he said. His eyes remained locked with mine, but he released his grip on my wrists. The heat returned, warming the backs of my hands like the summer sun on my face.

I closed my eyes, relaxing into the sensation rather than letting it burn.

"Look," he said.

I opened my eyes, glancing down at my palms, which hovered above his in the air between us. Twin flames danced above my skin. I lifted my hands in wonder, letting the flames flicker up toward my fingertips. It was a fraction of my full

strength, but they were the first flames I'd succeeded in casting since I'd been captured. Then they were gone.

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