

Up In Smoke

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Chapter One

“Beautiful in is beautiful out, that’s what they taught us at Carrie Fay, and I absolutely believe it’s true. I mean, think about it—the sort of person you are doesn’t just stay inside you, now does it?”

Before I could sort through that odd bit of logic, a cold, wet blob smelling of earth and minerals was slathered across my mouth. “Mmmhmm,” I contented myself in answering.

“I’ll wipe off your lips, but no talking, sugar. We can’t have you moving your mouth as the mask dries. Anyway, it’s absolutely true. Just look at you, for instance!”

The petite, blonde, perky woman in front of me who had been applying an olive green clay mask to my face stepped back to consider me, a small bowl in one hand, her other hand sheathed in a latex glove covered in the same gloop. She waved at me with the bowl. “You don’t look evil in the least, and yet here you are, about to wed a demon lord!”

“Sally, I’m not marrying Magoth—” I started to say, but she cut me off with a frown.

“No talking, sugar! I just told you that! Where were we? Oh, yes, how appearances can be deceiving.” Her frown deepened somewhat as she eyeballed me. I squirmed in the chair, never comfortable to be the center of anyone’s attention...with one notable exception.

My heart gave a little quiver as a familiar ache started within me at the vision that rose in my mind’s eye—a man laughing with utter delight, dimples set in his beautiful latte-colored skin, his silver eyes flashing like quicksilver. Just the thought of him had my heart speeding up even as I mourned the fact that I hadn’t seen Gabriel in over a month.

“You look like a normal woman—although I have to say that the 1920s flapper hairstyle you seem to enjoy is a bit less than mainstream—but other than that, you look perfectly normal, kind almost, not at all like you were to become Mrs. Demon Lord.”

“I’m not marrying Magoth,” I said trying not to move my lips.

“Oh, well, consort, marrying...it’s all the same thing, isn’t it? Just a smidgen more on your forehead, sugar. You need a lot of exfoliating there. Whatever have you been using on your face? No, don’t answer, let the mask dry. Here, do you want to see yourself?” Sally put down her things and peeled off the glove, admiring her handiwork for a moment before offering me a mirror.

I kept my jaw clamped shut as I said slowly, moving my mouth as little as possible, “No thanks. I’m a doppelganger. We don’t have reflections.”

“You don’t? I never noticed that.”

“It’s not something that most people know. ”

“Must make plucking your eyebrows difficult.” She admired her own image in the mirror for a moment, fluffing up a strand of extremely styled blonde hair before setting down the mirror, giving me a big sharky smile. “Even if you can’t use the mirror, you have to admit that all this is awfully romantic.”

“Romantic?” I asked, my thoughts immediately turning to the dragon in human form who made my knees weak.

“Yes! Terribly so!” She must have seen the look of confusion in my eyes because she continued on as she packed away into a small pink duffel bag a good fifty pounds of cosmetics and accompanying items. “Magoth making you his consort, and giving you access to all that goes with such a position, I mean. It’s so incredibly romantic that he

wants you so much he's willing to overlook the fact that you're not at all suited for the position. It just goes to show that even a demon lord has his soft side."

I rolled my eyes. "Magoth has no soft side, and he doesn't want me. Nor have I said I'd become his consort. I'm a wyvern's mate, and that is where my heart lies, not here in Abaddon with Magoth."

Sally's jaw sagged a little. "You're a wyvern's mate? The dragon kind of wyvern? The leader of, what do they call them, a dragon sept?"

"That's it," I answered, still trying not to move my mouth at all. The mask was drying, pulling my flesh taut, which didn't make it easy.

"A wyvern's mate!" She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Then what are you doing here?"

I sighed. "It's a long story, too long to tell you now, but the abridged version is that when my twin created me, I was bound to Magoth as his servant. Because I'm a doppelganger, he used me to steal items he wanted. One day I ran across Gabriel—he's the wyvern for the silver dragons—and we discovered I was his mate. Magoth found out about it, and demanded I steal a priceless dragon artifact for him, the Lindorm Phylactery. I refused and gave it to Gabriel, instead."

Her eyes, kind of a muddy green, almost popped out of her head. "You *refused*? You went dybbuk?"

I nodded.

"Sins of Bael! But...you're still alive. And whole. Not to mention the fact that Magoth told me you agreed to be his consort. Why would he say that, let alone allow you live *without* being in perpetual torment, if you went dybbuk?"

"Magoth is a bit...different," I said, only barely stifling the wry smile that hovered on my lips. "I guess he knows that being his consort is more of a perpetual torment than anything he could do to me physically."

"You find him unattractive?" she asked, shaking her head in disbelief. "He's gorgeous!"

"Physically, I think he's very attractive. What woman could resist those smoldering dark looks? Certainly the women of the last century couldn't. And didn't. You know he was a silent film star, yes?"

"Well, I know he looks kind of familiar." She thought for a moment then mentioned a name.

"That's him. The resemblance to his film self is more noticeable when he wears his hair slicked back. But regardless of his handsome exterior, it's the interior that gives me nightmares." I grabbed at her sleeve as she wandered past, continuing to gather up her things. "Sally, I know you're spending time in Abaddon as part of your application for the empty demon lord position, but I don't think you really understand what things here are really like, what the demon lords are. They may appear to be human, but they lost all shreds of humanity long, long ago, and Magoth is no different from any of the others...well, except he may be slightly more air-headed than the rest."

"Not the biggest garbanzo in the three bean salad?" she asked with a smile.

I gave her a wary look. "Not even close to it, no."

"That's all right." She patted my hand for a moment then turned to preen in front of the black draped mirror which sat in the room Magoth had (unwillingly) assigned to me. "I like my men a bit dim. Makes them easier to handle."

It was my turn to stare in disbelief, and stare I did. “It’s true I don’t know anything about your background other than you felt it important, for some reason that is completely beyond my comprehension, to try and obtain the currently vacant position prince of Abaddon, but that aside, I think you are grossly underestimating just what exactly is Magoth’s true nature. He’s manipulative, greedy, self-centered, ruthless to the extreme, and brings new meaning to the word ‘diabolical.’ In short, he is everything evil you can possibly imagine...and so much more.”

“Sweet, sweet May...singing my praises to the delicious Sally, are you? How thoughtful.”

The voice which spoke held a note of amusement that didn’t lull me into a sense of comfort. Magoth in a normal (read: evil) mood I could handle, but a playful, amused Magoth was especially dangerous.

“I’m simply telling her the truth about you,” I said cautiously, turning to eye him. As a mortal, Magoth had been an incredibly handsome man, with sinfully black hair and eyes, and a seductive manner that had left women over the centuries sighing...those who survived his attentions, that is. Although demon lords could change their appearance to suit their whims, Magoth had never altered his, finding that his true form suited his purposes just fine.

He leaned with languid grace against the door frame to my room, a wicked light dancing in his black eyes, his hair once again slicked back, making obvious the resemblance to his movie star self some ninety years before. “May I enter?” he asked now with a slightly raised eyebrow at my slowness.

“Sins of the saints, you make him ask to come into your room?” Sally’s little gasp of surprise drew Magoth’s attention to her as he oiled his way into the room.

“It is a little game we play, my sweet May and me—she insists that I not enter her so charming chamber without her express consent, and I pretend to go along with it. And speaking of games, shall we indulge in a threesome?” Magoth flung himself down on my bed and patted the mattress with a seductive look pointed at me. “I’ll have to let May go first, since she will be my consort, but you may feel free to indulge in your wildest fantasies with me, Sally. I’m sure May won’t protest if you ride me like a rented mule.”

“Oh!” Sally said, shooting me a quick glance, but I was unsure if she was startled by the thought of indulging in a threesome, or with the fact that I would apparently not be bothered about my so-called lover’s infidelities. “I don’t...um...”

“She’s not interested any more than I am,” I said, coming to Sally’s rescue. I would have added a frown at Magoth for lounging around on my bed, but the mask was now so tight it prohibited movement...not to mention the fact that Magoth wasn’t in the least concerned whether or not I frowned at his actions. “Did you want something in particular?”

“If I said you, would you hold it against me?” he asked with a waggle of his eyebrows. “And by *it*, I mean your delectable self. Naked? And dabbed with just a light touch of that edible jasmine oil I had made for you?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Take a look at my face, Magoth. What do you see?”

“I see a woman who is trying desperately to make herself beautiful for me, and yet, I already find you attractive. Did you want me to bed you wearing the facial mask? It’s

rather kinky, although not nearly so kinky has having you slathered in pig's grease and bound to that delightful little device I showed you in my playroom—"

I held back a shudder. "Your playroom could double as a torture museum, not that I'm going to enter it again."

"But, my sweetest of all sweet Mays, I assure you that a little tingle of electricity in clamps placed on well-oiled nipples can be stimulating in ways—"

"Will you stop?" I interrupted in a loud voice, not wanting to get him wound up again. "I am not going to sleep with you. Not now, not ever, and certainly not when there are pig's grease and nipple clamps around."

Sally sucked in another startled breath, no doubt in response to the manner in which I had addressed Magoth. "May, my dear, you must take a little smidgen of advice from one who is wiser and very, very slightly older—an attitude of respect, tinged with a tiny little morsel of humility, can go a long way when dealing with those in authority."

Magoth laughed, and rose from the bed, waving a hand that had his clothing melting right off his body. "Perhaps you just need to be reminded of what it is you are so callously and ignorantly spurning, my queen?"

"I'm not your queen," I said evenly, holding back my temper.

"Oh, my!" Sally's eyes just about bugged out as she took in Magoth in all his glory. "You're...er...aroused."

He leered at her as I said, "He's *always* aroused."

"My sweet one speaks the truth," he said, glancing down with pride at his penis. "I have incredible sexual prowess and can give pleasure for hours on end."

"Hours?" Sally asked, sounding a little breathless. Her eyes went a bit misty as she gave him a very thorough visual once-over.

"His idea of pleasure isn't the same as yours and mine," I said softly, leaning in toward her.

"How do you know what I find pleasurable?" she shot back, and for a moment, there was a glimpse of something in her eyes that might explain why a woman who appeared perfectly normal would suddenly decide she wanted to become a demon lord.

"I don't," I admitted. "But Magoth's form of pleasure usually holds a sting. Sometimes it's fatal."

"I haven't killed a woman with sex in days," he said with another leer, cocking a hip so his penis, tattooed with a curse put there by an unhappy lover, waved at me.

I shot him a horrified glance. He laughed again. "May, my adorable one, you're like putty in my hands. A silky-skinned, blue-eyed vixen sort of putty, but putty nonetheless. I take it my suggestion of a threesome is out?"

"Way out," I agreed.

"Ah." He glanced down at his penis in mock regret. "Perhaps the lady prefers a different color scheme? Maybe this would be more to your favor?"

His form shimmered for a moment, blurring slightly before settling down into that of a tall man with skin the color of my favorite latte, his hair lengthening into shoulder-length dreadlocks, a close-cropped goatee and moustache framing lips that were firm, yet so very sensitive. My heart leaped in my chest, thudding madly as I beheld the vision of the man for whom I had sacrificed so much. I fisted my hands, fighting to control the urge to strike Magoth for his cruelty, knowing that he was fishing for just such a reaction

from me. It took a moment, but at last I mastered my emotions and leveled him a gaze that by rights should have struck him down.

“You’re not even a fraction the man Gabriel is,” I told him.

“Ah but he’s not a man at all,” Magoth answered, looking down at himself. He shuddered delicately and returned to his normal appearance, thankfully complete with clothing. “I tell myself that one day I will understand your preference for the silver wyvern over me, but I begin to wonder if it is not just some perverse obstinacy on your part.”

I took a deep breath, ignoring the need to lash out. My voice was as bland as I could make it as I asked, “Was there something you wanted, a threesome aside?”

“How about a threesome *astride*?” he asked hopefully.

I tightened my lips.

“That dragon has ruined you,” he said with a sigh, shaking his head. “You used to be such fun. As it happens, I did have a bit of news about which I wish to inform you—”

I never heard the rest of the sentence. A faint tingling sensation swept over me for the space between seconds, then suddenly I was yanked out of the room, out of Magoth’s house, clear out of Abaddon, and plopped down in the center of a familiar room.

My vision, which had blurred for a few seconds resolved itself. A black woman with a white stripe in her shoulder-length hair leaned forward and peered at me through red glasses. “Are you all right?” she asked, concern evident in her warm brown eyes.

“I...yes. I think.” As I was about to ask who the woman was—and more importantly, how she’d gotten me out of Abaddon—a flicker of movement at the edge of my peripheral vision had me spinning around, my heart suddenly singing at the sight of the man who stood there.

“Gabriel!” I shouted, and flung myself into his arms as he ran forward to catch me.