

THE GRIMROSE PATH

A TRICKSTER NOVEL

ROB THURMAN



A ROC BOOK

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Praise for the Trickster Novels

Trick of the Light

“Rob Thurman’s new series has all the great elements I’ve come to expect from this writer: an engaging protagonist, fast-paced adventure, a touch of sensuality, and a surprise twist that’ll make you blink.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Charlaïne Harris

“A beautiful, wild ride, a story with tremendous heart. A must read.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Marjorie M. Liu

“A terrific premise. It’s got Vegas, angels, demons, and a hunt for a mysterious artifact that by comparison makes Indiana Jones look like he was grubbing in the dirt for Precious Moments kitsch. If I had only three words to describe this book, they’d be: Best. Twist. Ever.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Lynn Viehl

“Thurman weaves an amazingly suspenseful tale that will have readers so thoroughly enthralled from the first page that they’ll be unwilling to set it down. *Trick of the Light* is meticulously plotted, completely fresh, and one of the best books I’ve had the pleasure of reading. Readers are in for a wonderful treat!”

—*Darque Reviews*

“[An] inventive new series. . . . Trixa comes off as a strongwilled heroine with a long-standing ax to grind, yet that is only one facet of her character. The plot is suitably complex with enough clue dropping along the way to point attentive readers toward Trixa’s true nature while still packing plenty of surprises.”

—*Monsters and Critics*

“Another strong offering from the author of the Cal Leandros books. Thurman is adept at creating fresh characters, and snarky heroine Trixa’s first-person exploits in Vegas have distinctive details that leave a lasting impression. Fans and new readers will be clamoring for more.”

—*Romantic Times*

“Thurman has created an enjoyable extension of her world in *Trick of the Light*, with a heroine who (like Cal and Niko) has an unconventional family, an antiauthoritarian attitude, and a cheerfully vengeful nature. . . . Thurman has an easygoing manner with her dialogue and description. . . . The outcome of this story opens many new possibilities for this novelist, whose work compares well with Jim Butcher and Laurell K. Hamilton. This novel heralds the launch of a strong second series, and readers of urban fantasy will have much to anticipate with Trixa’s future adventures.”

—*SFRevu*

Praise for the Cal Leandros Novels

Madhouse

“Thurman continues to deliver strong tales of dark urban fantasy. . . . Fans of street-level urban fantasy will enjoy this new novel greatly.”

—*SFRevu*

“I think if you love the Winchester boys of *Supernatural*, there’s a good chance you will love the Leandros brothers of Thurman’s books. . . . One of *Madhouse*’s strengths is Cal’s narrative voice, which is never anything less than sardonic. Another strength is the dialogue, which is just as sharp and, depending on your sense of humor, hysterical.”

—*DearAuthor* . . .

“A fast-paced and exciting novel. . . . Fans of urban fantasy will love this series.”

—*Affaire de Coeur*

“If you enjoyed the first two wisecracking urban adventures, you won’t be disappointed with this one; it has just enough action, angst, sarcasm, mystery, mayhem, and murder to keep you turning the pages to the very end.”

—*BookSpot Central*

Moonshine

“[Cal and Niko] are back and better than ever . . . a fast-paced story full of action. . . . The plot is complex enough to please mystery fans, with supernatural elements that put this in the company of Jim Butcher and Charlaine Harris.”

—*SFRevu*

“A strong second volume . . . the supernatural elements meld seamlessly into the gritty urban setting. . . . Cal continues to be a wonderful narrator, and his perspective on the world is one of the highlights of this book. . . . The plotting is tight and fast-paced, and the world building is top-notch.”

—*Romantic Times*

Nightlife

“A roaring roller coaster of a read . . . [it’ll] take your breath away. Supernatural highs and lows, and a hell of a lean over at the corners. Sharp and sardonic, mischievous and mysterious. . . . The truth is Out There, and it’s not very pretty.”

—*Simon R. Green*

“A strong first novel.”

—*SFRevu*

“Cal’s a sarcastic, sardonic narrator who pulls the reader into his world, both the good and the bad. Tightly plotted and fast-paced . . . full of twists and turns.”

—*Romantic Times*

“A subtly warped world compellingly built by Thurman. . . . This book has an absolutely marvelous voice in Cal’s first-person narrative. The combination of Chandleresque detective dialogue and a lyrically noir style of description are stunningly original. The reader’s attention is captured and held from page one.”

—*The Green Man Review*

“A damn fine book, and excellent first effort.”

—*Rambles*

“Gripping, fast-paced fantasy.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“Engaging. . . . The characters are well-drawn and memorable.”

—*Italics*

More Praise for Rob Thurman

“A touching story on the nature of family, trust, and love lies hidden in this action thriller. . . . Thurman (the Cal Leandros series) weaves personal discovery seamlessly into the fast-paced action, making it easy to cheer for these overgrown, dangerous boys.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

ALSO BY ROB THURMAN

The Cal Leandros Novels

Nightlife
Moonshine
Madhouse
Deathwish
Roadkill

The Trickster Novels

Trick of the Light
The Grimrose Path

Chimera

Anthologies

Wolfsbane and Mistletoe

EDITED BY CHARLAINE HARRIS AND TONI L. P. KELNER

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*To Michael and Sara
(who take me to lunch when I'm out of mac 'n' cheese).*

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Prologue

Spilt milk.

My mama had a saying for every occasion under the sun, but even she didn't lay claim to that one. I didn't know who did, but everyone had heard it. It had been around forever. Don't cry over spilt milk. There's no point to it. You can't change it, can't put it back, can't make it better. You simply cleaned up and went on.

Because that was life. Life wasn't always fair. And some things in life couldn't be undone. They could be avenged—damn straight, they could—but not undone.

They could teach a lesson . . . if anyone was around to learn from it—or smart enough to get the point.

Yet the bottom line was always the same—spilt milk was spilt milk. An inconvenience or a pain, or an annoyance or sometimes even a tragedy. But whichever it was, it didn't matter. You might want to, but you couldn't turn back time. You couldn't close your eyes and pretend it was a bad dream. You couldn't avoid the truth and that was a cold hard fact.

You couldn't unspill that milk.

You couldn't make it better. You couldn't make it right.

I stood and looked at the shattered glass, jagged tears glinting in the sun. I looked at the metal coated with blood—so very much blood—the same color as the darkest crimson rose, and I decided that hell with old sayings.

I was undoing this.

I was making this right.

And I'd like to see the son of a bitch who thought he could stop me.

Chapter 1

Life was a trick.

That was what it boiled down to in the end; life was one big trick, one huge April Fools'. You might think that could be a bad thing . . . depending on whether you were on the giving or receiving end. But that didn't matter as much as you'd think it would. It was what it was. At the very end of it, we all ended up on both sides. The universe was fair that way, because everyone, without exception, had something to learn. We were all naughty in one way or another.

And tricks were lessons in disguise. They taught you right from wrong, safe from dangerous, bad seafood salad from good seafood salad. Have you ever had bad seafood salad? That's the worst eighteen hours of your life and a lesson you'll never forget. Have you ever put an old lady in the hospital after mugging her for her Social Security check? The lesson regarding that, you might not live long enough to remember or forget.

Life was a trick, a trick was a lesson, and I was a teacher—the majority of the time. I didn't teach at a school. The world was my school, and I had a zero-tolerance policy. I taught the teachable. And the others? Those who couldn't or wouldn't learn? What's a woman to do in that situation?

Apply a "Darwin's rules" attitude and let the pieces fall where they may.

My name is Trixa, and I'm not a woman. I'm female, most definitely that, but I'm not precisely a woman. Trixa was one of the names I'd had in my lifetime, one of many—we con artists had quite a few. This one though . . . This one was one of my favorites, because I was a trickster, born and bred one of many trickster races. It was why I enjoyed the name so much. I'd rubbed salt in the faces of my enemies for the past ten years and not once had they seen past a simple name. Demons, some were stupid and some were bright, but all were arrogant, which made them blind. The same went for angels. As they were flip sides to the same coin, it wasn't surprising. And humans . . . Please, don't even get me started on humans. They were the entire reason we tricksters existed. Or since we had predated them, I guess we chose them as a reason to exist. Those of the supernatural world never were quite as much fun to fool, to put in their place, and life could become fairly pointless without purpose. Everyone needed a purpose.

Without a purpose, why get up in the morning? Why eat? Why not just meld with the earth that made you and wait to turn into fertilizer? Someone could grow some nice marigolds in you. I like marigolds, but they weren't much of a career choice.

Taking humans down a notch or ten, that was a purpose all right, and damn entertaining too. Not that I ever received a shiny red apple for educating the masses, but taking pride—and more than the occasional excessive glee—in my work, that was enough. Although jewelry would've been nice too. I liked jewelry better than marigolds.

A variety of tricksters were loose in the world—pucks, also known as Pan, Robin Goodfellow, Hober and so on. They were one race of identical brown-haired, green-eyed cocky immortals. All male—appearance anyway. A person would need several PhDs in biology to get a handle on their actual reproduction, but you didn't need a GED to get a handle on anything else regarding them, physical or speaking. Sexually speaking . . . not speaking at all because it was rude to with your mouth full. They not only cowrote the Kama Sutra, but they posed for it as well. That's all I'm saying.

There was my partner at the bar, Leo, better known as Loki, who was a god first and foremost, and

only a trickster because he excelled at it and enjoyed it, but not because he'd been born one. His was calling, not a birthright. There were also those among us who were just spirit . . . energy, gossam molecules strung together like a kite string, no more solid than the wind, and even I had trouble understanding them. And kicking back to have a margarita with them to talk work, that was completely out of the question.

Then there was my kind—shape-shifters. We were hundreds, thousands of legends—Coyote, Kitsune, Kokopelli, Nasreddin, Raven, Maui, Veles—too many to name. Most people had long forgotten those names, but we were still only a Wiki away. We weren't immortal, but we didn't have to worry about watching our cholesterol either. I'd been around to see the sky darken half a world away when Pompeii had died. My brother and I had watched it and for a moment we were put in our place. We had held hands and felt an unfamiliar feeling of mortality sharp and cold cut through us as the sky turned from blue to black. We could trick all we wanted, but nature itself would always have the last laugh.

But now? Now I was still a trickster, but a shape-shifter no more. I was a thirty-one-year-old human—I was actually all human races on Earth. I had done that always. Genes speak to genes on a level people can't begin to detect, and if I were all people, then I went into every situation with the tiniest of edges, my foot in the door. It had been more helpful back in the day . . . when family, clan, tribe, had mattered to a constantly warring people. They were still constantly warring, but the genes mattered a lot less now. And that was a good development for humanity in general, but I still tried to keep the edge.

While I was all races, two did rise to the top. That's what people saw. Eyes I'd admired the last time I'd been on the Japanese Islands, the mouth that was a fond memory of the years I'd spent in Africa and wildly cork-screwed black curls and skin that were a mixture of both places. I'd spent a lot of time rethinking that hair every morning when I fought the good fight with it and usually had my ass kicked and my brush broken. Ah, well, who the hell was I to say what it should do anyway?

Did all of that make me a romance heroine who had men flinging themselves at my feet to protect my dainty foot from a puddle? Carrying all my groceries like I was a fairy princess with a waxed manicure? Hell, no. It had them tilting their heads trying to figure me out. People liked to label things. I puzzled them, which was good. People needed to be puzzled, curious, unsure. That's what kept you alive in this world. It was what made life interesting.

No, I wasn't beautiful. I chose this body. I *made* it. Why would I want to be beautiful? Fields of wildflowers were beautiful. Waterfalls were beautiful. Secluded beaches were beautiful. Size-zero vacant-eyed and vacant-stomached runway models were beautiful . . . at least that's what society told us, but society had a vacant brain to match those vacant eyes. Not one of those things, vacant or otherwise, could put a pointed heel of a boot through a demon's stomach and a bullet in his scaly forehead. I could. I was unique.

I could not . . . *would* not be tagged, identified, labeled, or stamped.

Unless it was by the fashion industry. I scowled at the sweatpants and T-shirt I was wearing as I came down the stairs that led to my apartment over my bar, Trixsta. The sign in the window was red neon to match everything else red in my life. Did that mean I wore a lot of red clothing? Maybe. But more than that, it meant I signed my work with the color—names changed; colors never did. I applied that signature to all my work, and I still did my work, my true work—human or not.

And Las Vegas was the perfect place to do it—a city of deceit and sin. It was a wonderland for both tricksters *and* demons. We did have demons aplenty, but as far as I knew, there were only two tricksters here currently: me and the one fiddling with the television.

Leo turned the TV on and wiped a film of beer off the screen. My bar was small; the brains of my clientele even smaller. It was the only excuse to waste good beer—or mediocre beer with good beer prices. If you couldn't tell the difference, that was your lesson for the day. A trick a day kept boredom away, but the thought of making money off the drunken or idiotic couldn't cheer me now, not with what I had to do.

"Exercise," I muttered, and then repeated it because it was simply that horrifying. "*Exercise.*" I glared at Leo as if it were his fault. It wasn't, but he was the only one around to blame, so I took the opportunity. "I have to go run, lift weights, and do other things banned by the Geneva Convention. When your Internet steroids arrive, don't go wild and take them all at once."

With his long black hair pulled into a tight braid, copper skin, and eyes as dark as his hair, Leo looked pure American Indian, and he would look that way for four or five more years—but for one exception. That exception showed itself right then. Leo disappeared in front of me and where he had stood flapped a raven who croaked, "Must be jelly. Jam don't shake like that." I thought about swinging at him, but I settled for retying the knot on my sweatpants. Lenny or, as we called him in raven form, Lenore—Poe, you couldn't avoid it—landed on the bar. "Want fries with that shake?" he asked as he preened a feather.

"You'll be the one who's fried and served up with mashed potatoes and cornbread stuffing when I get back," I promised, enjoying the vengeful mental image. "I'll make you the early-Thanksgiving special."

If birds could snort, Lenny would have. At one time, three months ago, Leo might've been able to give me something to think about. After all, he'd been a god; I wasn't. But both of us were human, more or less, now, at least for the next four or five years, thanks to my showing off and an artifact which I thought the experience might do Leo some good. For me, there were no shape-shifting powers, no powers of any kind except a natural biological defense against telepathy and empathy and the ability to tell my own *païen* kind when I saw them no matter what shape they wore. Leo was one up on me. He was stuck in human or bird form, and it was my fault. I'd drained my batteries by overusing my powers to take down the killer of my brother in an extremely showy and vengeful way. I wasn't sorry. The bastard had deserved it. He'd killed my family, my only sibling. For what I did to him, things like dismemberment-loving demons themselves would've applauded . . . no, I wasn't sorry. I would never be sorry for that. I'd only regret I couldn't do it a few more times.

Oddly enough, even after that show, a sentient artifact that I'd been using as a bargaining chip against Heaven and Hell had thought at the time that I was a good influence on Leo/Loki. The Light of Life, the artifact, had decided he should stick around with me for those four years it would take me to recover my shape-shifting abilities. As it was more powerful than Leo and I combined, it didn't ask for permission either. It neutered him—on the god part at least. The rest of him, I assumed, was in working condition. Although as I had to exercise, it would've been nice for Leo to have suffered a slight bit more. We'd see how many funny quips about my weight he'd make while buying Internet steroids *and* Viagra.

Not that my humiliation stopped there. My mama had laughed herself sick when I told her anyone who thought I was a good influence. Then again, Leo had been a very bad boy in his day. He had once wanted to end the world—Ragnarok, the Norse end of days—and that had just been for kicks and a way to waste a boring afternoon. But that had been when he was Loki, a long time and a lot of raging darkness ago. He was different now. So many say they want to change; he was one of the few I'd seen do it. He was one of the few with a will stronger than the shadows that had filled him up. The shadows that were there still but leashed. Is it nobler to be born good or to be born on the farthest end

of the bloody spectrum and have chosen to be good? When I looked at Leo, it was an easy question answer.

Ancient artifact or not, he would've stayed with me, to help if worse came to worst. He was the way. I would've done it for him if the situation were reversed. Friends . . . You didn't take them for granted. But that didn't mean I had to listen to his jokes about my ass. That was the great thing about being a shape-shifter. Calories? Fat grams? Whatever. Turn them into extra hair or an extra inch in height or shed them as pounds of water. Or in the other direction, if you wanted to be a two-hundred-pound coyote with the voice of an avalanche, take the extra you needed from the dirt, rock, or the moisture-soaked air around you.

But now I was human, and had discovered living off diner food. . . . It was less than a block away, what could I do? I packed on five pounds in two weeks. She Who Would Not Be Labeled had become She Who Must Find the Nearest Gym. Leo, with his damn male metabolism, was still sucking down all that was fried with no signs of a potbelly as of yet.

Men. I hated men sometimes.

But I hated demons more. And as I ran down the sidewalk toward the grubby gym seven or eight blocks away, I got to prove it.

I kept a slow and steady pace. It was February now and still not too bad. When it came to summer I'd drive to the gym, seven blocks or not. If you ran in the Vegas summer heat, you were either insane, suicidal, or a fire elemental out for a stroll. I ran past porn stores, liquor stores, more porn stores, a tiny car lot . . . and that's where I stopped. I saw the blinding flash of a grin and puppy dog brown eyes, man's best friend, as a perfectly tanned hand patted the cloth top of a black convertible as the car's mouth moved a mile a minute, pouring like the best caramel syrup over a pudgy tourist. A car salesman. A used-car salesman. If you're after someone's soul, you should be a little more imaginative with your disguises than that.

Not that this guy was after someone's soul. I usually didn't interfere there. That was between Heaven and Hell and that tug-of-war known as humanity that lay between them. They had some reasonable enough rules set up. First, you had to be of age—mature mentally; no trading your soul for a Tonka Toy or a pony. These days that tended to mean you were old enough to drink, vote, and die. Second, you couldn't trade your soul for a righteous and selfless act. You couldn't trade it to save the polar bears or stop world poverty or even save your child. Hell and demons either weren't allowed to simply couldn't do good, no matter how many souls they received in exchange. Which made sense—evil did not beget good. Bad luck for the polar bears.

No, Heaven and Hell could play all the games they wanted. As one puck had first said a long time ago, caveat emptor. Buyer beware. Grown-up boys and girls should know better and if they didn't do well, Darwin had something to say about that too.

But this sleazy guy—demons and pucks both loved the used-car-salesman front—wasn't after your soul. I could tell by the especially bright glint in his gaze. He was after some old-fashioned fun. Ripping, shredding, tearing a man to pieces and if his soul whizzed upward like a sky-rocket, I doubt the demon much cared. Maybe he wasn't hungry. Demons ate souls. God no longer sustained them with his light and love and Lucifer was fallen himself. He couldn't. Demons had to feed themselves and Hell was nothing but one big pantry. But demons enjoyed other things than a light snack. They had hobbies the same as anyone else. Theirs simply happened to be killing. To a demon, killing was their only true passion. Trading for souls was entertaining and good nutrition, but killing someone . . .

Souls were a McDonald's hamburger, but killing for sheer butchery alone was an all-day ride at the amusement park. This demon was going for the loop-to-loop roller coaster all the way. It was Sunday

and the lot was closed, but he had lured some dumb-ass tourist lost from the main strip into the lot. The road to Hell is paved with a lot of things . . . some of them Hyundais. I sighed and hopped the rope that acted as an imaginary barrier between sidewalk and lot to follow the two men inside the tiny two-cubicle office. The shades were down. In Vegas, winter or summer, the shades were always down on that purple couch you bought six months ago would now be lavender, and a pale lavender at that.

Rather the same shade as the face of the tourist who was panicked and struggling to escape the other hand that held him by the neck. He was bent backward over a desk, his flailing arms knocking papers and salesman of the year awards onto the floor, and sometimes . . . just once in a while, you did get annoyed with the gullible. But you were more annoyed with one damn stupid demon who had set up his shop literally six blocks from your territory. A human had been running this place three days ago, a portbellied pig-shaped man with a comb-over and enough nose hair to trim into bonsai trees. The human alone marked him as nondemon, but he was gone now and a demon had moved into his place.

Demons were so easy to spot it wasn't even close to a challenge. This one had shiny blond hair, soulful brown eyes, not one but two dimples, and he threw off sex appeal by the bucketfuls—plus a manly I-could-be-your-best-bro, bro. He would appeal to men, women, and little old ladies. His charisma covered the spectrum. As I had made this body, so did demons make theirs. And they always liked theirs bright and shiny as a new penny. It was bait after all, part of the lure.

“Six blocks.” I pulled my gun, a Smith & Wesson 500, from the holster in the small of my back. That's why I kept my T-shirt loose. To cover the toys. “You set up your perch here”—I waved my other hand at the room around us—“sniffing for the innocent, the unwary, and the idiotic like this poor schmuck, and you do it six blocks from my place. My home. My territory.” He gaped at me. While he hadn't bothered to find out about him before now, neither had he bothered to do the same regarding me—a little sloppy on my part, a little fatal on his. The sloppiness stopped now. I blew his head off before he had time to blink his eyes or blink back to Hell.

He shimmered for a second into a man-sized brownish-green lizard with dragon wings, dirty glaucous teeth, a once-narrow but now-shattered reptilian head, and oozing eye sockets. The Smith had taken care of that. I doubt his eyes had been that same soft and soulful brown anyway. Then he was a pool of black goo on the worn carpet of the office, and while I felt for the cleaning lady, I had security tapes to wipe, a tourist to toss out on the street, and a gym to get to before all the elliptical trainers were taken. The tourist rolled to the floor, gurgled, and passed out either from lack of oxygen or lack of intestinal fortitude (balls for the more succinct of us). I wasn't disappointed. A little judgmental, but not disappointed. It would actually make things easier on me.

“Good old what's-his-name. I'm surprised he lived to this millennium.” The voice came from behind me. A familiar one, not in a good way either. I looked over my shoulder to see Eligos—“Call me-Eli,” he would always say with a grin that would suck the oxygen out of a room and half the brain cells out of your head. If you were human. Truly human, not just temporarily human. But that didn't mean I couldn't tell he was something to see all the same. Damned and damn hot, what a combo. He was also very probably the smartest demon I'd come across—what Hollywood likes to call a trip threat. Demons themselves were afraid of Hollywood, the only place where humans were more frightening than any Hell-spawn.

“You can't even remember his name?” I kept the gun loose and easy in my grip and blew a curl that had escaped my ponytail holder out of my eyes. “Some brotherly love there.”

“Would you have me sing ‘Danny Boy’?” He was sitting on the other desk, one knee up, chin propped in his hand, his hazel eyes cheerful—if bright copper and green could be called hazel. “I have an amazing singing voice. I could've been Elvis. But I did eat him, so six of one, half a dozen of the

other. You always have to be specific with the trades. Famous singer . . . good. Famous singer who doesn't swell to the size of Shamu on fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches . . . better. But humans aren't very detail oriented. Short attention span. They're 'Tomorrow is another day.' Yadda yadda yadda." He switched from leaning forward to leaning back and locked his hands across his stomach. "But all beside the point. I want to talk to you, Trixa."

"Your attention span isn't all that great either, Eli, or do you remember what happened to the last demon I 'talked' to?" I wasn't talking about the one I'd just blown away. He'd barely been worth a breaking stride for. I was talking about Solomon, my brother's murderer.

He smiled, so flawless and white that an orthodontist would've fallen to the floor and genuflected before him and then no doubt offered him a blow job. Male or female, it wouldn't matter. Humans are slaves to their hormones and no one manipulated hormones like demons. "Oh, I remember. I remember that for all eternity. A: You made me piss a pair of Armani jeans that I was quite fond of. And B: You gave me the challenge that will occupy me to the end of time. Or the end of yours whichever comes first. It was worth losing the Light to you *païen* for that. Do you know how long it's been since I've been challenged? Not since the Fall." He shrugged and waffled a hand. "And even then, eh, we knew it was coming. Truthfully, I didn't care if we ruled in Heaven or not. I just wanted to mix it up. Make a little trouble." The smile was even brighter. "Because, Trixa, sweetheart, trouble is the only thing that makes existence bearable."

I'd promised the Light, an artifact from even before *païen* time, to Eli if he verified that the demon I'd suspected killed my brother was the real deal. He delivered. I didn't. I lied. Sue me. I'm a *trickster*. I lie, cheat, steal. . . . It all comes with the name. Although I did it typically to show a few humans the error of their wicked ways, make them a little better, and hopefully a whole lot smarter. But Eli hadn't known that at the time. The same as everyone else, he'd thought me human. But when it all went down—the taking of the Light, an unbreakable shield that would protect *païen* from Heaven and Hell, neither of which much cared for us, and the passing of Solomon—Eli had seen little Trixa in a brand-new way. When I'd finished with Solomon, before he melted to the black of liquid sin, he'd been in so many pieces, it looked like it had been raining demon parts. I'd shape-changed my heart once on that one—not that I had a heart in regard to Kimano's killer. But I had been something to see and be. Bear. Wolf. Fox. Spider. Crow. Dragon. Shark. All in one. And as I'd told Solomon then, when he'd ranked, it went something like this: gods, then tricksters, and then a damn sight lower . . . demons. I'd told him and I'd proved it.

And Eli had been part of the audience.

As far as he knew, I was still trickster, shape-shifter, all that had made Solomon look as if he'd fallen into a wood chipper. I had my shielding against empathic and telepathic probes to keep Eli from thinking I remained all that I'd been. I might be semihuman, but I'd die before I lost that last defense. I'd lost my offensive abilities for a while, but nature makes sure every creature keeps their defensive ones until there's nothing left to defend. It was a fortunate thing too. While angels had telepathy, and a host of other annoying habits, demons had empathy. It made it so much easier to trade for a soul when you could *feel* exactly what a person desired.

I needed to keep Eli believing I was a trickster at the top of her form, because while the ranking went gods, tricksters, demons . . . humans were far enough below a high-level demon like Eli that you'd need binoculars to see them. I still had my trickster mind, but I had a vulnerable ninety-nine percent human body and that made things more difficult.

"Fine. If you want trouble"—I checked my watch—"I can spare five minutes. That should give me time to kill you, wipe the tapes, and maybe browse for a new car while I'm at it." I smiled. I doubted

was too impressive a sight right then. I was an explosion of messy waves and curls anchored at the crown of my head with a ponytail holder. No makeup. The shirt that snarky Leo had had made for me that said SLAYER NOT LAYER on the front in the same bright red as my sweatpants, and a pair of beat-up sneakers. But Eli wasn't seeing me now; he was seeing me *then*, and I had that going for me for a few months at least.

"Oh, I want trouble." His eyes darkened and it wasn't with anger. Some serial killers had horrific childhoods that had tangled sexual and homicidal urges into one black, strangling noose. Demons had only needed that one spat with Daddy to get them there. "But it'll have to be another time. I want to talk to you about some demons." He straightened, turning serious . . . as serious as Eli came anyway. "Dead demons. Quite a few dead demons."

I tapped the barrel of my gun against my leg. "Really?" Now there was the best news I'd heard all day. "You want to throw a party at my place? I'll even throw in an open bar for the occasion, because, sugar, I am *that* excited about it. How many demons are we talking about? Fifty? Because I can do a theme party. El Día de la Muerte de los Demonios. Death of Demons Day. Like Cinco de Mayo only with piñatas that have little horns and forked tails."

"Cute. You're so adorable when you're tearing apart my rivals and blathering on about something which you have no utter fucking clue." He smiled again. This time the white teeth had turned to the mouthful of smoky quartz fangs. "But that's fine. I'm happy to have this conversation later. Maybe I'll go out and occupy the time by burning down a church. Barbecuing the faithful. I always enjoy that. A big side of coleslaw and I'll be in hog you-know-where." At the last word, he pointed a finger skyward and mock fired it.

Technically, that was Heaven's problem, not mine, but despite the lying, cheating, and stealing part I did have a conscience. Most tricksters did, as much as we'd deny it. That, combined with Eli not being in the mood for a little verbal sparring, was unusual enough to pique my interest.

I sat on the other desk and rested my feet on the large belly of the still-unconscious tourist. "Okay, grumpy hooves. I'll give you those five minutes. Better yet, I'll actually listen to you instead of killing you during them, because I'm sweet as cotton candy that way." I checked my watch again and snapped my own fingers. "Go."

And go he did. It wasn't fifty demons who had died. It wasn't even a hundred. That wouldn't be that unusual. Demons killed *païen* for sport and tricksters killed demons because of it. All *païen* weren't tricksters. There were vampires, wolves (werewolves to the fictionally inclined), nymphs, sprites, boggles, revenants, trolls, chubacabra, pukas, and thousands more. Some could take a demon and someone couldn't. So, if a hundred demons died in the past few years, that would be normal.

Nine hundred and fifty-six in six months was not normal.

I tapped my feet on the unconscious man's belly and watched it ripple for a second while he processed the information. "All right. I see your point. Someone has been eating their Wheaties, taking their vitamins, and chugging a whole lot of Red Bull on top of that." Inside I had more of that "holy shit, the sky is falling—don't let the demon see you sweat" attitude going on. Something that could do that... "Maybe Upstairs has decided to do some old-fashioned smiting of the wicked and wanton. Let's face it, you are both."

His teeth became human again as the smile became smug. "True. Wicked and wanton and I stand by my record placing in the top ten in my particular region of Hell. But, no. Not even in the War—or the Sacred Scuffle, Police Action, Hallowed Hoedown, take your pick—we didn't lose a third so many. Who do you think was most likely to rebel? The holiest of the holy? The Precious Moments Angels? The simpering weaklings who were no better than fluffy baby ducks with halos?" He snorted. "No. W

were the warriors. God's Righteous Fury. The Smitters, sweetheart, not the Smitees. Granted, we did pick up a slew of messenger angels, watcher angels—the minimum-wage pigeons who just did what they were told to do. And at that moment Lucifer was talking the loudest and God was letting the angels make their own choice. So we ended up with some weak-minded fluffy ducks after all. Like him.” He jerked his head at the stain on the floor. “But even Daffy there, to lose more than nine hundred of him in six months? That is...” He shook his head and slid on a pair of sunglasses. “I don't know what that is. No one seems to.”

I still kept my gun out as he slid down from the desk and headed for the door. Demons, higher-level demons like Eligos, moved faster than humans did. While I'd given myself an Olympic-conditioned human body when creating it, Olympic or not, it was still human . . . and five pounds heavier. “It's odd, impressive, and, all right, a little more than freaky, but why should I care? Whatever this is could kill every demon in Hell and it's not going to get my ovaries in a twist. There's a huge amount of 'I don't care' in this general area.” I waved my free hand around me. “You kill my kind. I kill your kind. This seems like a good thing for me and mine.” I wasn't that stupid. If someone or something out there could do what Eli said, it was bad, bad news, because who knew when your kind might be . . .

“Next,” Eli finished for me as he opened the door, a few blond hairs glittering in the dark brown of his hair, and looked back over his shoulder. Posed rather. Demons did like the hot rides they'd created to be admired. “I don't need to be an angel. I don't need telepathy to read that thought. I only have to know how smart you are. And that's almost as smart as you think.” He grinned. “Nice T-shirt, by the way. Can't wait to prove it wrong.”

The door closed and I slowly holstered my gun. Almost a thousand demons in six months.

Not in my best year ever. While I didn't care about the dead demons—no crying over spoiled sociopaths—I did wonder what this thing might do if demons started to bore it. I made a mental list of anything and everything I knew of throughout history, mine and the world's, that could do something like this.

It was a very short list.

I went on to my workout. Dead demons didn't make exercise and conditioning unnecessary. A creature making those dead demons made it only more necessary. Afterward I ran home to take a shower. I'd come to find out that some humans had the capacity to tolerate more annoyance and flat-out brutal torture than I'd ever given them credit for. . . . Having to genuinely earn your muscles—that was probably one of the most annoying things that I'd come across.

Give them credit? I was one of them now as much as I dragged my feet admitting it, trying to deny it with that minuscule one percent that wasn't human. The second I forgot that I was now exactly what I appeared to be would be the second a demon would do to me what I'd done to so many of them.

Either way, human, trickster or both, I saluted *Homo sapiens*, respected them more than I ever had, but the gym shower? Even I had to draw the line somewhere. I kicked ass either with claws, paws, or one helluva fashionable boot, but you couldn't convince me that mold didn't have its own gods and demons, its own tricksters and unspeakable monsters. I know one clump bristled at me the first time last time I'd checked out the utilities. I recognized evil when I saw it. I saw it that day on seventies-era avocado green tile and some evil you simply had to walk away from. My bathroom was minutes away. I'd wait. And I'd gotten ridiculously fond of soap that smelled of oranges and felt like silk against my skin. I'd been human so many times throughout my life, but this one . . . this one . . . It had really taken. I wasn't scared of much, but that came close to doing it.

Four more years. Who would I be then?

Me. I'd still be me. ~~Tricking and laughing my way through life as always. Nothing was going to change that.~~ I'd said that the past ten years. I could keep telling myself the same thing as long as I had to.

When I made it home, the closed sign was still on the door. I grumbled as I unlocked the door. Maybe Leo in his god days could make gold coins fly out his ass, but I knew the value of a hard-earned or stolen buck. It was two in the afternoon now and he hadn't opened the place when I'd left. What was he thinking? I was surprised we didn't have a few of our regulars going into DTs right then on the sidewalk.

Opening the door loudly, I made sure to close it more so behind me. There's no point in being pissed off if there's no way to share it. But before I had the chance, besides the door slamming, someone said, "You look like you were kicked out of a wet T-shirt contest." There was a pause. "I didn't know you could get kicked out of those."

Zeke. Straightforward tell-me-the-truth-and-I'll-tell-you-no-lies Zeke. Because lying was too much of a bother for him and if you lied *to* him, well, he'd probably just shoot you. He was sitting at one of the tables eating a pizza. Double cheese, pepperoni, sausage, mushroom, peppers, olives, and a cardiologist on call. Eating it in front of me. And there were bags . . . bags and bags in front of the table, full of garlic bread and cheese sticks from the smell of it. The exquisite smell that put the plumeria-soaked breezes of Hawaii to shame. That was worse than the wet T-shirt remark. I narrowed my eyes at him and dripped on the floor as he chewed and swallowed a bite. "You're . . . puddle-y." He looked at his Eden House partner across the table from him. "Is puddle-y a word?"

Griffin quirked his lips. "I think fewer moisture-related comments and more eating might be a good idea."

Red eyebrows pulled into a scowl. "You are not the boss of me." Slightly lighter red hair was pulled into a short ponytail . . . dry, not cascading buckets like mine. Zeke's shirt was a plain gray long-sleeve T-shirt and his jeans were faded. What he wore didn't make much difference to him. As long as he had a jacket to cover his gun, he was good to go. Fashion didn't appear on his top-ten list of priorities.

"In fact, I am the boss of you," Griffin said, reaching for his own piece of the pie, only with more napkins. "And you're the boss of me tomorrow. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Zeke gave a grin. He didn't smile often, so he didn't have much of a repertoire to choose from. Pissed and predatory. You-are-dead predatory. You-are- *beyond*-dead predatory. And that was the newest version that had cropped up since last November. Behind-the-bedroom-door predator. It was also happy and since Zeke had spent most of his mortal life barely comprehending the word, he forgave the pizza. It was good to see him this way. More free and open than he'd ever been when he thought he was human. When he thought he and Griffin were human.

I know. Vegas, right? Is *anyone* human?

Griffin and Zeke had been demon-killing partners at Eden House Las Vegas. There was also an Eden House Miami, an Eden House Los Angeles, Eden House London . . . Eden Houses all over the world. They'd been around for thousands of years, a secret organization created by man to bring Eden back to Earth. The key word being man. Heaven had nothing to do with its creation, but once the angels saw a source of free labor, they took advantage now and again. And they certainly didn't have a problem with Eden House trying to eradicate every demon it came across. It did a good job . . . on the slow, lower-level demons anyway.

The angels and the demons had both been after the Light for a long time. I'd just managed to get

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