

J. D. BLACKROSE

"Action, demons, wizards, and plenty of snark—not to be missed! This one is a winner all the way around!"

—
BONITA SOLEY
NetGalley reviewer on
Demon Kissed

Fae Crossed

THE SUMMONER'S MARK SERIES

Fae Crossed

Book 2 in the Summoner's Mark Series

by

JD Blackrose



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Chapter 1

Jonah didn't like me very much.

I sat at my sister's table. Her husband, Jonah, sat across from me, and Ruthie, their daughter and my niece, was next to me in a high chair. The square table sported a white embroidered tablecloth, candlesticks, a wine glass, and a challah, a traditional bread for the Jewish sabbath. It not only tasted delicious fresh, it also made the best French toast the next morning. The setting made me nostalgic, and I fought back tears remembering those peaceful times when it was just my sister, my mom, and me.

Jonah glared at me, furrowed his brow, and stabbed a fork in the direction of my face. "What's wrong with you?" he snapped, his frustration at my presence overshadowing his manners. "Why are you crying? You should be happy to be here. You're lucky Mikayla is such a forgiving sister. I wouldn't have invited you."

Mickey shot him an irritated glance.

Though Jonah criticized me for being emotional, his aggression had nothing to do with my unshed tears and everything to do with how my summoning had placed his wife and daughter in danger. Though that demon situation had been resolved, he still didn't want me anywhere near his family. Mickey and I had made our peace, however, so Jonah suffered my presence, though not gracefully.

"This food smells so delicious. Exactly like Mom used to make. It brings back a lot of memories," I whispered, then bit my lip to keep from bawling. Mom had passed a while ago, and I couldn't recall my father's face. Mom had done her best to keep up with traditions, and Mickey had made the same recipes we'd eaten together as kids. Each bite was a trip down memory lane.

I stroked Ruthie's head as she shoved a fistful of mashed sweet potatoes in her mouth, grinning as orange goop oozed between her fingers and baby teeth. I vowed not to be like my father, whose disappearance still colored our lives. I swore I wouldn't miss any more important moments.

Mickey kissed me on the head. "I'm glad you're with us."

My midsection vibrated, and I couldn't tell if it was my phone buzzing or my stomach growling.

The reverberation at my middle occurred again. Definitely a muffled phone vibration.

I wondered if any other summoners had out-of-office messages saying they couldn't answer because they had Shabbat dinner plans?

Probably none, but how would I know? I'd only met one other summoner—Trace. After my summoner's mark, the Kiss, came in, my mom hired him to train me. I still didn't know how she'd found him. I'd gone through her things after she died and found nothing to indicate where he'd come from or how she'd reached him. Not a phone number, an email, or address.

To further complicate matters, he'd disappeared before completing my instruction. I wished there was a summoner convention where we could trade secrets or have seminars on "Demon Contracts and Loopholes" or "Tips for Dealing with Dragons" or "Best Incense for Removing Rakshasa Stank." For all I knew, there weren't enough summoners around to even have a convention.

Hell, there probably weren't enough for a picnic.

I had no right to a pity party. Due to my dealings with a demon, I'd messed up my relationship with my sister, and my brother-in-law still held it against me. Mickey had forgiven me, and that's why I was here, at her home, for Friday night dinner. Now that things were safe, I'd eat this amazing food, hug Ruthie, ignore my phone, and be grateful.

My younger sister was five-three, dark haired and had warm, chocolate eyes. I was five-ten, dirty blond and green-eyed, so we didn't look alike, and I'd bet money that no one would describe my eyes as "warm." At best, I'd probably get "guarded," "apprehensive," or "wary." I'd place money that the word "crabby" would sneak in as well.

Mickey studied me across the table. "Why didn't you bring Asher to dinner? I told you to invite him."

I'd wanted to avoid this conversation, but Mickey had our mom's knack for pinpointing uncomfortable topics and forcing me to face them.

"He . . . uhm, left town."

She paused with a potholder in her right hand and a spoon in the other. "When will he be back?"

I rubbed my forehead. That traitorous, skulking, love-'em-and-leave-'em, gorgeous bastard had left me after a single night of passion. I'd woken to find an origami bird on my pillow and no Asher. At least I thought it was a bird. While sleeping, I'd rolled over and smashed it with my forearm, and the mangled paper made it hard to tell. I could make out wings. Since he knew of my love for birds, that was my guess.

"Don't know. I've called his mobile, but there was no answer. He's not at work either. He disappeared without saying goodbye."

He'd surprised me by bugging out after our night together. I knew he had his secrets, but hey, so did I. There'd been no reason for him to run away.

Jonah fed Ruthie another spoonful of potatoes but gave me a sidelong glance. "Maybe he saw the weirdness in your life and decided he couldn't take it."

A cruel observation, but possible. Then, I remembered something. "He left six months' rent, cash."

Mickey fed Ruthie a spoonful of green beans, which my niece promptly spit out. "It sounds like a family emergency. He'll be back. His behavior was rude, but I'm sure there's a reason."

I shook my head and pushed my plate away although I'd only eaten only a few bites. "He doesn't have parents or siblings."

"Then there's no excuse, and he doesn't deserve you. Put him in your rearview mirror. You're too good for him."

I didn't feel "too good." I didn't feel good at all.

Chapter 2

If you want to hustle up money fast, bartending at a fae bar is a terrible way to do it.

Joey's bar door opened with a slam as two young men, drunk as skunks, pushed it with their feet.

"Canwegetadrinkaroundhere?" the first one said, sloshing his words together so I had to concentrate to understand what he was saying. They stumbled over one another and cut quite a profile in their rainbow shirts, cargo shorts, Vans, and wrists wrapped in coordinating pink and purple bandanas. They swayed on their feet, and the taller one propped his friend up on the wall, holding him there with a shoulder to protect him from falling. They giggled at some unspoken joke.

"They must have come from the Pride Parade downtown," I whispered to Joey, my half-gnome boss. I found their flamboyant entrance endearing, but by the tapping of her hairy foot, I could tell she wasn't impressed. "They like to hold it in early September."

I studied the two men and realized the problem. These guys were human. Utterly, completely, totally, adorably human.

I smacked my head with my palm. "Ah, right. They shouldn't be able to see this place."

An elf I didn't know stood and cast a glamour so smoothly, I would have missed it if I hadn't been watching. A gasp spread around the room.

"Hey now, chaps," he said, sounding and looking like a British pensioner. "How about I call you a taxi to take you two home, safe and sound? No time to be pissed in the streets these days. Not safe."

He stepped outside, leaving the door open and waved an arm. A cab appeared in seconds, faster than one ever came when I needed it, and he handed one of the guys a couple of twenties, whispering something in his ear. They thanked him with sloppy handshakes and back-pounding hugs, which he took with good cheer. He gave them a jaunty wave as they drove off.

The elf closed the door and returned to his true self. That's when I noticed he was extraordinarily tall, at least seven feet. He paused a moment, studying the crowd. Our patrons stayed preternaturally still in his presence as he approached the bar.

He tapped his lip as he looked at Joey. "I think," he said with a grin and an Irish lilt, "that those two lads drank so much, they slipped through the veil and mistook a *fae* bar for a *gay* bar."

Joey swallowed. "I'll strengthen the wards. I know it's important to keep humans out."

He didn't acknowledge her but turned to peer at me. "You're the one who helped Pinky, am I right?"

"Yes," I replied. "Can I pour you a drink?"

His eyes lit with pleasure. "I could use a wee dram."

I reached for a nice Glenfiddich 12-Year-Old, but Joey stayed my hand and pointed to a high cabinet I'd never opened. She handed me a key to unlock its glass door, and I stood on a stepladder to retrieve an unopened bottle.

"What's your name?" I asked the new elf.

He laughed. "I'da no sooner give you me real name than turn meself into a frog, lass. But ye can call me Liam."

"Okay, Liam, here's something I've never poured." I showed him the bottle, and his eyes widened.

"Redbreast 21-Year-Old Irish Whiskey? Oh, Joey, ye know the way to me heart. Be careful with that, Rebecca Naomi Greenblatt. Every drop is gold."

He used my full name. That bothered me. From everyone's reactions, I could tell he was someone of authority, so his use of my full name was a power play. I stifled my irritation and opened the bottle while he watched me like a hawk.

"Neat? Ice? Splash?"

"Splash, please."

I poured two ounces, added a touch of water, and handed it to him with the amount of reverence it appeared to deserve.

He accepted it with two hands, swirled it, and breathed it in.

"Spicy. Nectarine." He took a sip and chewed it, breathing through his nose. "Ah, Joey, you've done me good with this. Zesty, fruity. A touch of pepper, methinks. Wonderful."

"I'm happy you like it," she said, her voice low and quiet.

He sipped and asked me a question. "Why did you help Pinky?"

"No one else would."

“Yes, but he wasn’t one of yours.”

I had no idea what he meant. “He’s my friend. No one else protected him. He was lost and wanted to go home. Everyone here”—I gestured to the bar—“made fun of him.”

“Aye. That they did.” He growled at this, and I swore the fae in the bar, who’d been remarkably quiet, all winced.

A few more sips later, he finished his whiskey. He placed his glass on the counter and clapped his hands. “That’s why we’ll help strengthen the bar’s wards.”

The fae stiffened, and several grumbled.

“What about a favor imbalance?” asked another elf, while his friend pawed at his elbow, clearly not liking that his compatriot had asked this question. “What will they owe us in return?”

The elf’s friend shook his head and slid his stool away from him as if to say, “I tried, but I’m not with stupid.”

Liam glared at the elf, power crackling around him. I jumped back and noticed Joey’s head bowed, eyes on the ground. What the hell was going on?

“This favor *will* balance the scales. We owe Rebecca for helping Pinky, since none of you saw fit to do it. You all left the poor boy over here to suffer, knowing his mother was begging for someone to find him.” Liam shot a look at the pixies at the round tables and pointed to the one I privately called Gimlet girl, but whose real name was Laurel. “Even you and your sisters. On three.”

On the count of three, every fae in the bar closed their eyes and did something magical. My hair blew back as a magical waft of glowing power pushed its way outward toward the walls. The air pressure increased so suddenly, I thought I’d pass out. My eyeballs pressed against my lids, my tongue against my lips, and my cheeks hollowed. I blinked against it and fought to stay upright.

And then, it dissipated, fading like it had never been.

Liam wiped his hands together. “Joey, the wards should hold now. Evans?” He addressed the elf who’d asked the question about favor imbalance. “You’ll be bringin’ Joey new crystals tomorrow to solidify the magic.”

Evans croaked out a “Yes, my liege.”

“I’ll be takin’ my leave, for now. Rebecca, save that bottle for me. We have further business.”

Every fae in the room lay draped over their table or had their head in their hands. I’d made it to my feet but leaned on the bar top, so all I

managed was a finger wave. Liam strode to the door, but instead of opening it, he walked *through* it, disappearing from sight.

“Was that who I think it was?” I asked.

“Shhh!” said Joey from where she lay on the floor.

Evans staggered to the bar and held up a finger, indicating I needed to wait, listening to something I couldn’t hear. He hesitated a few more seconds, then nodded, visibly relaxing, as did the entire bar.

Evans rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. “Yes, Beccs, that was Oberon, and I’m afraid he’s taken an interest in you.”

“Shhhh! Don’t say his name again. He might come back,” said Joey.

“His taking an interest is a bad thing?” I asked.

Joey motioned for the bottle of super primo Redbreast. I handed it to her with a glass, and she poured herself a drink and slurped it down. “It’s dangerous. The king’s attention is rare and complicated, and always, always alarming.”

Evans grimaced. “Not to mention Titania.”

“Titania! The queen? I have to worry about her, too?”

He nodded. “Naturally. If her husband shows interest in a female, you can count on her wanting to know why.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.” I rolled my neck and shoulders and got busy serving drinks to the suddenly parched crowd. Bolstering magical wards took a lot out of a person—or an elf, or a pixie, or a dwarf—as evidenced by the clamor for refills. Joey’s bar was about to have a banner night. I hoped my tips would reflect it.

“Why is Ober—ah, the king, concerned with me?” I asked my boss as she dipped dirty glasses in a cleaning solution and then rinsed them in clean water.

“You helped Pinky, for starters.”

I poured three drafts in a row, sliding them across the bar to a crew of elves, and opened a new bottle of chardonnay for the dwarves. I told everyone I’d be right back and hurried to the back rooms where Joey stored the extra liquor and supplies. We had to change out a keg.

“But I agree,” Joey said when I returned, wiping her wet hands on a towel and picking up where we left off. “That’s not enough to draw his eye.”

“His words reminded me of a server who waited on me in Gregory’s bar. Remember when I went with Laurel?” Laurel was a stuck-up pain-in-my ass pixie who only drank her gimlets with high-priced vodka. We didn’t like each other, but she’d taken me to Gregory

Adamos's bar when I was scoping him out. Gregory led a Greek mob syndicate and made bad choices. Of course, her helping me had a price. I now owed her a favor, and the weight of it pressed against my shoulder blades, itching and burning. I carried it all day, every day, heavy and burdensome. It slowed me down when I exercised and annoyed me while I slept. I couldn't wait to free myself of it.

Joey rubbed her hairy chin. "I recall. In what way?"

"The waiter spoke with an Irish accent and told me to 'stay interesting.' It struck me as odd, but there'd been so much going on, I blew it off."

Something niggled at the back of my brain, and I paused, thinking. I served a young dwarf a glass of merlot and didn't even remark on his choice of a red wine. I made a whiskey sour by rote and poured a shot of tequila, neat, without looking at the shot glass.

I was too preoccupied with letting this memory scratch its way to the surface.

When it came to me, I almost dropped the case of chardonnay I'd brought in from the back. I bobbled it, but didn't break it, and managed to place it on the floor so I could unload it. I stood and tapped Joey on the shoulder.

"You know," I said, my voice heating. "I bet he was also the elf who helped me dissipate the death magic. Remember the one with the Van Dyke beard? The time I almost lost control here in the bar?" I'd had death magic inside of me, and it had wanted out, so it had released harmful gray tendrils of magic into the bar. I'd reeled it back in, but it had been close. Ironically, that death magic had eventually morphed into a set of bow and arrows which I now had in my apartment. They'd allied themselves with me and had helped me kill a warlock.

Joey stopped drying a mug to contemplate my words. "Crud on a cracker. You're right. He's been watching you for a while."

I stored some of the wine but left out several bottles to chill. We were swimming with dwarves this evening, and they drank like fish. I grabbed a bottle opener and huffed out a peeved breath. "This can't be good. I feel violated."

A stout dwarf returned with the empty wine bottle and ordered two more. He paid for both and handed me a gold coin as a tip, whispering, "Good luck, girlie. I'd bet my beard that you'll see the king soon. Mark my words, he's wantin' something from you."

I leaned in closer and whispered back, "I can't imagine what, though."

He scratched his head. “Keep your head on your shoulders and remember that fae favors are double-edged. Whatever you think he’s doing, he’s really doing something else.”

A frog leaped from his beard, startling me. He caught it with a nimble swipe and put it back in the gnarly mess. “Don’t mind him. He’s a flirt.”

It was my turn to take a wee dram of whiskey. I poured it and shoved the gold coin in my bag, a knot of worry in my tummy that no alcohol could relieve.