



MORTAL PRINCESS

SHADOW  SHIFTERS

TIA DIDMON

MORTAL PRINCESS

A SHADOW SHIFTERS NOVEL



TIA DIDMON

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Mortal Princess

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CHAPTER 1



Riley knelt beside the freshly planted bed of roses, daisies, and an array of other shrubs. Her fingers brushed the soft petals as her knees dug into the churned dirt. “The garden is beautiful. My father will enjoy the view from the cabin.” Though dusk was upon them, the subdued light seemed to enhance the colorful bounty.

Colton touched her shoulder. “Gardening was Oliver’s favorite pastime, and he planned to build this garden when his son became a warrior. I will finish his son’s training, but I wanted to create the garden in his memory.”

Riley stood and slipped her arm around her mate’s waist. “He would have loved it.”

“Does Oliver’s son understand that it wasn’t you who killed his father?”

“Yes. Anaisa has been helpful in this regard. She tested my blood to ensure that all traces of demon venom were gone and that Deruthel, will no longer have access to my mind. Still, be wary. Anyone they bite can be infected and influenced.”

Riley sighed. “I know. We should have Anaisa do routine sweeps of the clans until the war is over.”

“Dannika has already made an arrangement with her. Considering how intelligent Deruthel is, Dannika wants the inspections to be random. No one will know when Anaisa is coming. Or who she will test. As it’s more damaging to go after a leader, those of us with higher rank within the clans will have more frequent testing.”

Riley slipped her fingers between his and they walked away from the cabin to the surrounding pasture. She'd always assumed it was to make it look like a yard for the cabin, but had noticed the clan used it for events. One's like her impending bonding ceremony. She pointed at several clan members piling folding chairs and tables by the tree line. "What are those for?"

Colton winked at her. "Dannika's bonding ceremony included a wedding. Since we were both originally human, I think it's a tradition we should continue."

"Are you sure it's not the presents?" she asked nervously. She wanted to bond with Colton more than anything in the world, but the public aspect of a wedding and standing before her father, who had graciously offered to conduct the services, was nerve-racking. Being the center of attention had never been her thing, though despite rarely wearing them, she loved the idea of a dress.

Her favorite Barbie dolls, growing up, had always had pretty white dresses with sequins and silver sparkles. Little girls dreamed of their wedding day and she had been no different in that regard. Strange how her fantasy had changed. She was marrying the man of her dreams, but he wasn't human and neither was she.

Colton tipped her chin up when he stopped in the middle of the field that would become their wedding chapel. "You are nervous. What is it? I understand it's customary, but I hope you're not having second thoughts."

Riley slipped her hands around his waist. "No, not at all. I'm more concerned about the public aspect of the wedding. Dannika will be here, as will the leaders of the other clans. It's a perfect opportunity for the demons to hit us. Everyone they deem valuable will be in one place."

Colton kissed her forehead. "Ferguson is taking care of the security. Admittedly, it's not something we've had to worry about before. Reaper attacks on home territory were rare. Since the demon incursion, everything has changed."

“That’s an understatement, but I wouldn’t trade my life for anything. I never fit in when I was human. There was always something different about me, despite how much my mother and father loved me.”

Colton’s eyes flickered with black smoke. A testament to his alpha’s emotions. “You are exactly where you are supposed to be.”

She smiled up at him. “Thank you for being my mate. I love my life with you, and having my father part of it for the next thirty or forty years is a blessing I will never take for granted.”

“I am the lucky one. Your strength and your forgiveness are a gift I will never take for granted and I can’t wait to make our union official before our friends and family.”

She kissed him and the fire in her blood spiked. His shadow wrapped around hers, cocooning her in his warmth as they entered the pathway. Their shadows reached for one another as their emotions collided, heightening every sensation.

They coalesced in the living room, and her hand reached for the couch to steady her momentum as Colton’s body pushed aggressively against her. She loved him like this. On the edge of control. A wild animal that hungered for her alone.

His hair slid along her cheek as she nibbled his ear, and his low growl vibrated against her throat. The whispering caress sent an erotic fire racing through her blood and he slid his hands to her breasts, rolling an erect nipple between his fingers before tracing down her ribs and along her belly. The heat his fingertips created pooled in her core like a volcano waiting to erupt.

She reveled in the sensations his erotic touch produced. Every stroke left a firestorm in its wake, a dark hunger that needed to be sated. She wanted to scream for relief, but the air caught in her throat when his hand moved to her pants, slipping them down her thighs. A sensual caress that inflamed her further.

He released the button on his jeans, springing his thick cock from its confinement before positioning her legs on either side of his. He could shift her clothes to the shadows, but she loved it when he unwrapped her like a present. Riley moaned when his fingers slipped between her slick, heated flesh, parting her tender lips and pressing inside her.

She arched toward him, riding his hand, almost coming apart as he worked her. His mouth tugged hard on her nipple, causing a rush of liquid between her thighs, coating his fingers in her warm juices. He moved her above his straining cock as his tongue lavished her nipple. The sensations coursing through her body had her heart pounding in her chest. It was heaven. It was hell. She wanted more.

Colton's eyes lit with blue hunger. He would devour her. Consume her body and soul. She wanted everything he offered and more. He kissed her neck, then thrust up through the tight folds of her silken sheath.

Air rushed from her lungs when he cupped her ass, holding her in place as he impaled her over and over. There was no thought. No reason. Only hard, unmitigated bliss, fueled by passion and dark power.

She clutched his shoulders as if they were the only haven in the tornado of emotion assaulting her body.

“Don't stop.” She loved being on the edge with him. Reaching for the heavens. She should be embarrassed, but her body was on fire, a bomb teetering on the brink of detonation.

He pumped harder, anchoring her hips with his hands. She put a hand on the couch to combat the building pressure. Her nails dug into his flesh, and blood welled up on his skin. The sting of pain spurred his aggressive nature. He was in no more control than she was, and she loved it.

Rippling waves of pleasure washed over her skin, causing her to grip him in a velvet vise. She screamed his name as he went over the apex, holding her to him like he would never let her go. She floated in a sea of bliss, content to stay there forever.

Colton eased out of her and then got a warm cloth to clean her. His attentive nature was as endearing as his lovemaking and she thanked God for the gift she had been given. When he was finished, they dressed and sat on the couch. He pulled her onto his lap so she could lay her head on his shoulder.

“Why haven’t there been any reaper or demon attacks in the last week? They need blood to feed,” she asked.

“Ferguson is asking the same questions. He knows they are still here, but they are being very discreet. They are planning something and it’s making Dannika nervous.,” Colton said.

Her fingers caressed the base of his neck. “She thinks they are regrouping. The calm before the storm sort of thing. I was hoping we could visit my father. I want to see if the herbs Anaisa gave him are helping.”

His shadow enveloped hers without her having to stand. She appreciated his gifts. He was a seasoned shadow warrior, and she still had a hard time traveling the pathways alone. Her molecules swirled around him in a loving tango as they made the short jump to the cabin. They coalesced outside, holding hands as they ascended the few steps to the entrance.

Riley opened the door to find her father in his favorite chair. Usually, he was sleeping, with his leather-bound bible in his hands, but today he was reading from it as two shadows sat on the couch listening to him. He lowered the book when he saw her. “Riley, I was hoping you would stop by.” He nodded to the two men. “Lance, Jeremy, do you mind if I visit with my daughter for a little while? We can resume in an hour.”

The two men nodded politely, then left.

Riley frowned. “They didn’t have to leave. I just wanted to see if you were stronger.”

Daniel stood, though his legs were a little shaky, and he used the chair arms for support. “I feel better than I have in years. Anaisa is a miracle worker. I will never be able to travel the pathways alone, but I love the new garden your fiancée created. I sit on the porch and drink Ana’s tea while admiring it.”

Riley went over and hugged her father. “I’m glad you are feeling better. You don’t need to navigate the pathways. If there is an emergency, one of the seniors will travel with you.”

His smile could still light up a room, and pointed to his chair. “Have a seat. I have something important to ask you.”

Daniel took his seat. “Sounds serious.”

Riley faked a serious look. “Very serious. You have mentioned to Colton that you wish to marry us, but I wanted you to walk me down the aisle. How are we going to put you in two places at once?”

Daniel’s smile reminded her of a little boy who had his hand caught in the candy jar. “I have arranged for another to walk you down the aisle. I want to be the priest to conduct your wedding. Is that alright with you?”

She knelt down beside his chair. “Of course. I wouldn’t trust anyone else, anyway. Whoever you choose to walk in your stead is fine with me.”

Daniel ran a loving hand over her cheek. “I am blessed to have such an understanding daughter. One that would put her father’s happiness first.”

Riley’s face sobered. “You lost so much because you took me in. I am the one who is lucky.”

Daniel patted his bible. It was an action he did often, and she wasn’t sure if he realized he did it. “Your mother would be so proud of you.”

She hadn’t thought about her mother in a while. The life and death choices and upcoming war had occupied her mind, but as she sat there talking about her impending nuptials, she felt an emptiness in her chest. Every girl wanted their mother to help them get ready on their wedding day. Riley had discussed this day often with her mother growing up. What they would do. What kind of dress she would wear? How her hair and makeup would look. There was a vise in her heart at the thought of doing this without her mother. She had gotten used to life without her mother years ago yet, today it felt like it was yesterday.

Daniel tapped her cheek. “Don’t be sad, Riley. I assure you that Cami is not. She wanted this for you since you were a toddler. Just because you can’t see her doesn’t mean she isn’t there.”

Riley smiled. “That obvious, huh?”

He shrugged. “Maybe a little.”

Black script formed before Colton and his eyes turned black before he turned toward the bay window. Riley noticed a dozen cougars racing toward the forest as the hum of the pathway vibrated from the stress of multiple shadows entering it at once.

“What is going on?” she asked.

Colton’s eyes met hers. “We are under attack. It appears the demons were silent because they were preparing for war.”

They both bolted for the door as a scream echoed around them.

CHAPTER 2



The door slammed shut as they raced outside and down the steps. Growls echoed around them, seeming to come from multiple locations. Riley turned in a circle, glancing back at the door. “Where are they? Is dad safe?”

Colton turned as the breeze brushed his hair from his face. The chiseled angles seemed more pronounced with the hard look on his face. “Lance is on his way here to protect Daniel.”

Her heart stuttered as Colton flexed his fingers. His molecules phased, forcibly holding back his alpha as it pushed to enter the pathway and fight the invaders. “You go. I will follow as soon as Lance gets here. I don’t want to leave dad undefended.”

Colton hissed. The sound was inhuman. “I will never leave you alone again. You are not a soldier. The children and fledglings have been escorted back to the sanctuary. I protect you above all others. My brethren are trained warriors. They will withstand this siege until I take you to the sanctuary.”

Riley stepped away. “I am not hiding while you fight. You don’t have time to take me, anyway. We have lost enough time waiting for Lance.”

Colton’s eyes flickered with black smoke and the muscles in his neck tensed. “You are the most important person in this clan. The demons and reapers seek to acquire you. They will stop at nothing to...”

Lance coalesced beside them. “I have come to protect the priest. You may leave Riley in the cabin. There are twenty demons outside the sanctuary. You cannot enter. Those inside are safe.”

Colton swore under his breath. “Did the fledgling soldiers make it to safety? Did Lucan?” Riley understood Colton’s need to protect his friend’s son. Having been used by Deruthel to kill his best friend still gave Colton nightmares. He rarely slept before that incident and now, even less so.

Lance glanced at the cabin. “No. They were cut off by the demon horde. They are in the forest a mile from us and are fighting their way here now.”

“How many demons are attacking us?” Colton asked.

Lance pointed to the east. “We are fighting on five fronts. There. Just outside the sanctuary, and three more random locations in the forest. One is outside your home. There would have been another skirmish here, but Ferguson intercepted the demons in the pathway. He killed them all.”

Riley’s jaw dropped. “He killed a dozen demons in the pathway? How?”

Lance shook his head. “Steele wants to know the same thing. We assumed he collapsed the pathway, but then the demon limbs began to exit without their heads. We don’t know what he did, but he ensured no one got near the priest. He is fighting with the queen’s reapers close to your tree house now.”

Colton’s body relaxed. “Riley, I think you should stay with Daniel. I want to help Lucan’s group make their way here.”

She fought back the feeling of being inadequate. She had fighting skills, but they were those of the human world and only a reaper blade could deter a demon. “I will stay here and help Lance protect dad. Help Lucan and the others.”

“Lance, who was training the fledglings when we were attacked? Who is leading them?”

Lance glanced toward the forest as a reaper death scream pierced the air. “Luke is leading them. His ability to sense

reapers and demons prior to them exiting the pathway saved them. He steered the group away from the sanctuary before it was too late. The group is intact, last I heard.”

Colton molecules disintegrated and moved over her body in a dark caress before the hum of the pathway tickled her ear. He was gone in an instant, and she turned as Lance grunted.

The black blade sticking out of his heart dripped with blood and stained the grass beneath his feet. His jaw dropped open as he fell forward and Riley grabbed his shoulders to break his fall, stumbling back from the momentum of his weight landing on her. “Lance!” Her eyes met those of a man she wished she would never see again.

Breck’s eyes glowed an unnatural red. He looked different from the last time she had seen him. Angrier. Deadlier. It was hard for her to pinpoint the differences. He just seemed more. Did reapers evolve? How had Ferguson gotten as fast and strong as he had? Why hadn’t she seen these signs in Breck before? “Hello, Riley. We have been looking for you.”

Riley scrambled out from under Lance’s body. A knife to the chest would incapacitate him, but it wouldn’t kill him. As long as the traitorous reaper was focused on her, he may leave Lance alone. She sprinted to the forest line, hoping to lead Breck from the fallen cougar clan leader and her father, but she barely made it ten steps when she was hit in the back of the head.

She stumbled forward, trying to regain her footing, but her hands bit into the ground as she fell and scraped along the uneven earth. Small rocks embedded in her skin as she grappled to get her footing. She flipped to her back as Breck approached with a long blade hovering over her chest. “I won’t go with you. I don’t care what Deruthel wants.”

Breck sneered. “Your deal with the general no longer applies and we aren’t here to abduct you. We are here to ensure you never interfere with our plans again.”

He raised the sword as if he intended to remove her head. She knew the demons needed her blood to make the breeders. It never occurred to her they would kill her. Would Deruthel

sacrifice her after she had done as he asked and cut off the realm from the king? Deruthel couldn't be trusted, but he was a military genius. He would never waste a resource. Sadly, he looked at females as necessary pieces to a fruitful ecosystem. He neither loved nor cared for them. Still. He wouldn't sacrifice something he needed. "You won't kill me."

Breck paused with the sword at her throat. "What you don't know will kill you. Goodbye, Riley." He wasn't lying. He was here to kill her. She sent a silent prayer that the clans would take care of her father and Dannika and closed her eyes. Accepting her death was one thing, but watching it was another.

The loud thump and the thin scratch at her neck had her snapping her eyes open. Breck had been launched twenty feet away and Colton's alpha stood beside her with his eyes on the reaper.

"I had promised Ferguson I would let him kill you Breck, but it seems I will have to break that promise," Colton said.

Breck's form rippled and bulked out. She had seen his shadow form before, but it was much larger now with shades of red amidst the gray. Similar to the demons he had chosen. "You are no longer a threat to me. Either is Ferguson."

Colton's alpha growled. "Surely you are not that delusional. While you have been altered in some way, even Deruthel is wary of an alpha, especially Ferguson."

Breck smiled, exposing his fangs. They were longer than a shadow's and slightly curved. "We are the dawn of a new species. The shadows will have a choice. Either join or die." He lunged at Colton so quickly, his molecules left a blur of black and red in his wake.

Colton moved equally fast, avoiding the strike, and his reaper blade flashed in the air as it cut through the haze. Breck's scream pierced the breeze, but he materialized ten feet away with a slash along his chest. Painful but hardly mortal. "You may be stronger and faster, but you lack patience. You chose to turn reaper, and your lack of conviction shows in your fighting style."

Riley was so intent on the fight between Breck and Colton, she never noticed the reaper sneaking up behind her. Lance called out. "Riley!"

She turned as a reaper she had never met before lunged for her. Lance was still on his stomach, though he was attempting to crawl toward her. His blood left a black trail on the grass beneath his body. "Stay where you are. You are in no condition to fight."

The reaper growled at Lance. "I will put him out of his misery when I am done with you."

Lance hissed. "Leave her alone, Edwin!"

Riley moved to the side, crossing her feet as she inched closer to Lance. "Edwin. I don't think we have had the pleasure. What do you want with me?"

Edwin's lip curled, and she noticed his teeth were slightly curved. Was Deruthel experimenting on the reapers who joined him? "I am here to relieve you of your life."

"Why? I did as Deruthel asked. He promised me a two-week amnesty. We still have a few more days," she said.

Edwin sneered. "Deruthel is gone. The king has taken the general's body. Ashkara will feast on your remains this night. We have promised to bring him your head."

Ice slithered through her blood. Was the reaper lying? She wouldn't put it past Deruthel, but he would not have ordered her death. Would he? Was there some kind of pertinent information she missed? "I don't believe you. We severed the demon world from this one. The king was trapped in the last world you colonized."

Edwin shrugged. "I don't care if you believe me. It will not change the outcome. You die."

"If Ashkara really did find a way to overthrow his son, why would you side with him? He will annihilate the reapers once the war is over. There will be few breeders, if he is able to create them at all. Those women will go to his chosen. His first generation."

Edwin spit on the ground. “You know nothing. The first generation will be sacrificed. Not us. The demon horde cannot sustain a viable ecosystem. Only Ashkara will remain when the war is over. Him and us. The humans will be food and nothing more.”

“I am aware of Deruthel’s design for a human farm, but that included me,” she said.

“You changed everything when you sided with Deruthel. I should thank you, but the king has ordered your death.”

Riley circled the reaper. She believed him, but why would the king care about her decision to help Deruthel. Ashkara was here now and if he planned to use his son’s blueprint, he needed breeders. He needed her and Dannika. His actions were unnecessary if the realms were severed. She could do no further damage to the king. Why would he sacrifice his chance for a viable breeder? “Why? The king shouldn’t fear a lowly female. He is the most powerful demon ever born. Or was that all a lie?”

Edwin hissed. “Ashkara is a god. He was forced to diminish himself because of your interference. He will be restored to his former glory, but that requires sacrifice. His demon children will be that sacrifice. The shadows do not require the blood the demons do. Ashkara must plan accordingly for his future.”

“That doesn’t explain why he wants me dead?” Surely a demon as powerful as Ashkara wouldn’t fear her. She had the fighting skills of a toddler compared to the king.

Edwin’s eyes flickered with red fire. “I will ensure you never interfere with the king’s plans again.”

Riley pursed her lips. Nothing the reaper said made any sense. “The portal is closed. I can’t change what has happened even if I wanted to.”

Edwin glanced around as if he made a mistake. What had he said that he didn’t want overheard? Had he lied about Ashkara? The portal? Killing the demons? “It doesn’t matter. You will die and the new regime will be put in place.”

She didn't know what was the truth only that whether it was Deruthel or Ashkara, demons never kept their word. "Maybe I should make one last attempt to open a portal. You know, just to see what would happen."

Edwin screeched as he lunged at her.

CHAPTER 3



Edwin's claws reached for her before he was propelled backward. Riley had no idea what had launched the angry reaper twenty feet in the air and judging by Edwin's shocked expression as he was hurtled in the air, he didn't either. Black mist swirled like a swarm of angry bees before Ferguson coalesced like an enraged god between her and the startled reaper. His growls sent a slither of ice down her spine and she forced her body temperature to regulate itself.

She glanced around as several reapers and demons entered the clearing, pausing on the one she knew well. Halak was shouting and pointing at her as a wave of red bodies rolled from the forest like a tsunami from hell. Black horns and bloody teeth flashed against the bright moonlight like an omen of death. As strong as Ferguson was, not even he could fight a horde of that magnitude.

The whirling sound in the air grabbed her attention and her eyes met Colton's as the demon blade slashed his chest. Blood burst from the wound, steaming down his chest as he turned and elbowed Breck in the face. The audible crack echoed over the sound of demon feet thundering toward them.

The serrated flesh on Colton's chest began to heal. Tissue and blood vessels melded with one another, closing the long wound like a meaty zip-lock bag. Shadow regenerative properties were a miracle, but they needed one now on a gigantic level. She never had a chance to voice her prayer, but it was answered when wolf and bear clan members coalesced in the field between her and the thundering horde. Shrieks of

anger and retribution echoed in the air as the shadow clans intercepted the demon army.

Riley had never gotten used to the sound of a reaper's scream when he died and those of the demons were just as blood-curdling. The dying and maimed screeched their hatred as reaper blades bit into enemy flesh and black blood ran like a river over the once beautiful field. She moved behind Ferguson, who remained in front of her. "You need to help them."

He glanced back at her with glowing red eyes. They were dark blue when he was in his human form now and the vibrant crimson had her stepping back. "Never fear me, Riley. I would never hurt you." His voice vibrated with that of his alpha.

She put her hand to her chest to slow the thrumming staccato. "I know. You are a little intimidating when you go all alpha on steroids, though."

Ferguson's lip twitched, inadvertently flashing his fangs. "Not to you. I can't leave you unprotected. I have asked Colton to return to your side. I wish to be the one to relive Breck of his life."

She touched his arm and the slight tick of his jaw alerted her to the rarity of the action. Few people went near the reaper. Only Dannika and her dared touch him. He wasn't mad, but he was still unused to affection. "The demons did something to Breck. He is stronger and faster. You should probably know he said they are here to kill me."

Smoke rolled off Ferguson's shoulders. "They are trying to assassinate you? Not abduct you?"

Riley nodded. "I guess I pissed off the king."

Ferguson turned to watch the fight between Colton and Breck. "You are right. He is far faster and larger than he was before. His shadow form is not an alpha, but it appears just as strong. Do you know what Deruthel did to him?"

Riley decided now wasn't the time to reveal the entirety of her conversation with Breck. Whether they were dealing with Ashkara or Deruthel as Ferguson assumed, was irrelevant.

They knew which body was commanding the demons, they just weren't sure which mind was driving the bus. "No, but he suggested this was the future of the demon species."

Ferguson motioned to Colton. When her mate dematerialized and formed beside her, Breck turned to his new opponent. Despite his cavalier attitude when he was discussing Ferguson with Riley, the fear when he saw Ferguson smile at him was unmistakable. He screeched, then disappeared into a shadow pathway.

Ferguson hissed and dematerialized to follow him, but the demons and reapers began to disappear as if Breck were their leader. Halak glanced around as if surprised by the fleeing demon horde, but was forced to follow his brethren when four shadows from the bear clan advanced on him.

Colton took her hand. "This skirmish is over, but it is only the beginning."

Her eyes met those of her mate. "Why do you say that?"

"Whatever the demons did to Breck, he is far more powerful. He is still afraid of Ferguson, though."

Her eyes fell on the field littered with dead demons, reapers and shadows. "Was it me or did it seem like Breck was leading that army? Halak looked surprised when the demons followed Breck."

Colton surveyed the devastation on the field. "There is no reason for Deruthel to trust Breck over Halak. Perhaps this group of demons was led by Breck. Halak may have had his own squad. They attacked in multiple locations."

Her shoulders sagged as she saw Steele closing the eyes of one of his fallen clan members. There was a noticeable gap between the dead man's head and shoulders. "That could be it, but I am no longer sure if Deruthel is in control.

Colton turned to her. "What?"

"I had a conversation with Breck and I should fill Dannika in on the details. When can we meet with her?"

Colton moved his fingers in the air and black script formed before him. It dissipated as another message replaced the first. "Raine and Dannika are on the way. They want to talk to Steele and Ryder. We will meet in the cabin in five minutes while the clan members return their dead to the clans and burn the demon bodies."

They walked to the cabin entrance in silence until Riley noticed a white flower with blood staining the petals. Oliver's garden was marred by the death and retribution of the demon invasion. The dripping petal was an omen of things to come and none of it was good.

She entered the cabin in silence allowing Colton to steer her to the couch. She flopped down, much like she had done when her mother had died. "It was horrible. So many lost."

Her father's eyes were sad and understanding as she met his gaze. "War is always a sad waste of life. There is no reasoning with demons, Riley. The shadows must fight or we are all lost."

She pulled a string on the end of her shirt. "I know. It's just so unfair."

"I know it is, Honey," Daniel said as the door opened and Dannika walked in.

The queen looked stronger than she had the last time Riley had seen her and she hoped whatever had plagued her was starting to pass. There was still a pale quality to Dannika's skin, but the dark circles beneath her eyes had faded and her cheeks held a healthy flush.

Dannika walked over to Daniel and gave him a brief hug though he remained in his chair. "Steele and Ryder will be here in a moment. We need to discuss this attack. It was on a far larger scale than we expected and Deruthel kept his demons in check until today. There were no reports of missing women or murders so we are not sure where they were feeding."

Colton pointed at the chair across from him and Riley. "Grab a seat. Riley has some information for you. She had a

discussion with Breck before Ferguson arrived itching to kill him.”

Dannika sat down as Raine sat on the armchair. Riley had noticed they sat that way often though she suspected it was Raine’s way of watching over his wife. “Ferguson gets his knickers in a knot every time Breck gets away. If he doesn’t kill that traitor soon, I swear he is going to throw a tantrum.”

Raine huffed. “That’s not something we should joke about. If Ferguson lost his temper, it would decimate the entire mountainside.”

Dannika patted her husband’s leg. “I was kidding. He would never do such a thing.”

They all glanced at the door as Steele and Ryder entered followed by Stern. Dannika’s face lit up when she saw the bear clan member she had saved with her blood. “Stern, it’s so good to see you.”

Stern winked at Dannika. “You too, Mama.”

Steele smacked Stern’s arm lightly. “She is the queen. Show some respect.”

Dannika laughed. “Technically I turned him, so he isn’t exactly wrong.”

Ryder had an exaggerated expression of disgust. “Don’t encourage him. He already has an ego the size of Texas.”

Riley smiled, thankful for the brief brevity. “Now that everyone is here, I need to tell you what I learned.”

Ferguson entered the room and slammed the door. The door jamb cracked as the inhabitants went silent. Only Daniel’s breathing could be heard as Ferguson’s eyes met Dannika’s. “The little weasel got away. His enhancements have given him surprising speed.”

Dannika’s brows furrowed. “Enhancements? What are you talking about?”

Riley leaned forward in her seat. “I chatted with Breck before Colton came back and he told me that Ashkara is in control. I don’t know if this is a ploy by Deruthel, but Breck

believed it. He said the king enhanced him. He is still a reaper, but he is stronger and faster. He also said he is the future of the demon species, whatever that means.”

Dannika glanced at Ferguson. “Whether it’s Deruthel or Ashkara running the show, the demons have a king. Was Breck really that strong? What will be the ramifications if the demons augment all the reapers this way?”

Ferguson’s eyes flickered red before turning to a deep blue. “He was unusually fast. I lost him in the pathways and was forced to exit due to the number of demons following me in the stream. If the demons enhanced all the reapers this way, it would be catastrophic. They would essentially have an army of alpha shadow warriors. We have more in numbers, but would be lacking in strength.”

Dannika closed her eyes for a moment. “You said the pathway was overrun. Were they after you or protecting Breck?”

“I don’t know, but we must put down the reapers who joined Breck before they can be enhanced. Now that the king wants Riley dead, we cannot afford to let any of them live,” Ferguson said.

Dannika hissed. “They were here to kill Riley? I assumed they were trying to abduct her.”

Riley sighed. “I had a conversation with Edwin after Colton attacked Breck. He said the king has ordered my death to ensure I don’t interfere with his plans again. I’m not sure how I could now that the portal is severed.”

Dannika touched her knuckle to her lips. “That would give the impression that they aren’t lying about Ashkara. You followed Deruthel’s plan. How was he able to switch places with his son after the portal closed? We should consult with Anaisa on this. It won’t change what happened, but I feel we are missing something. Whether Ashkara or Deruthel is in charge, they should have wanted you alive. Your blood was the only element that was close to creating a stable breeder. You are the last person they should kill.”

Stern growled low as his eyes flashed with that of his bear. “I will kill the entire reaper clan before I let them near Riley.”

“Settle down Grizzly Adams. No one is getting near my sister. This raises a question though. If the king is willing to sacrifice Riley, then he is afraid of something.”

“I was thinking the same thing. When I mentioned that to Edwin he looked like he may have tipped his hand. Is there some way to create another portal? Another location or chalice. Something we have missed? Maybe the demons have a failsafe we aren’t aware of,” Riley said.

Daniel opened the bible in his lap, moving his hand over it in a loving manner. “If the demons want my daughter dead, then they fear she can do something to thwart their victory. I have no idea what it is, but Riley should find out.”

Steele cleared his throat gently. “We all respect you, Daniel. Your presence in the community is a gift. Some would say from God. But Riley is a fledgling and cannot conduct an investigation of this magnitude.”

Daniel laid the red ribbon over the page. “I am not the gift you were given. Riley and Dannika are. Riley is the only one who can figure out why the demons want her. If it is she they fear then it is she who you must put your faith in.”

Steele looked like he wanted to argue, but Dannika thrummed her fingers on the armchair. “He’s right. This is too important to leave to someone else. Only Riley can figure out why they want her dead. I agree it must be some kind of failsafe or use of her blood that they fear. The only thing that Ashkara should fear is Deruthel and if Riley has access to him in some way, we need to find it.”

Ferguson crossed his arms. “You think Riley has a connection to Deruthel?”

Dannika shook her head. “I doubt it, but it isn’t necessarily something she can actually do, but something the king fears she might be able to do.”

Colton rubbed Riley’s back. “You want Riley and me to lead this investigation?”

Dannika nodded. “While she is the only one who can truly find the answer to her connection in this, I need the clans to know you are part of it. They already believe I favor her, but I am sure they feel the same way about their own family.”

Ryder walked around the couch to stand in front of Dannika. “I am sorry my queen, but I feel this is a mistake. While we would need to consult with Riley, I don’t believe she is the right person to head this investigation. She is a fledgling and Colton’s priority will always be her safety, as it should be. I believe either Steele or I should head this investigation.”

Dannika sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. “Are you questioning my authority?”

Ryder’s hands fisted at his sides. The bear clan member was unused to being opposed, and it showed. “We unanimously agreed to make you a clan king. Queen in your case. The reapers are a hair’s breadth from defecting. This will send them running to the demons. Whether you agree with my assessment or not, the truth is the reapers have lost faith in you.”

Stern grabbed Ryder by the shoulder, turning him abruptly around. “How dare you say that to Dannika? She never wanted to be queen. Who in their right mind would want that kind of responsibility? Don’t whine about her decision because you are feeling inadequate.”

Ryder growled at Stern. “You are biased because Riley is Dannika’s sister. You feel a blood connection. You are as biased as Dannika.”

Stern punched Ryder in the face before Ferguson grabbed his arms and pulled him back. “I am not biased, you are. You can’t fathom a young woman with that kind of responsibility, but she is the best person for the job. I will kill every reaper to protect the queen. That is my job and yours.”

Dannika held her hands up. “Settle down both of you.”

Raine scratched his head. “Damn it, Stern. You just managed to insult your alpha and the reaper holding you in one sentence. You got balls, bear.”

Stern stepped away from Ferguson when the reaper let him go. He glanced at his temporary captor. "I don't think of Ferguson as a reaper anymore. He doesn't feel like one."

Dannika glanced at her. "I know. It's the same for Riley and me, but I didn't realize you noticed it too."

Ferguson looked between the girls and Stern. "What are you talking about?"

Riley pursed her lips. "The longer you have been... clean of human blood, the less you feel like a reaper."

"Have you noticed this with any of the others?" Ferguson asked.

Dannika and Riley shook their heads before Stern spoke. "I haven't, but you're kinda the grandpappy of the reapers. It may take longer for the others to feel more human."

Dannika put her hand over her mouth to cover her laugh. "Grandpappy?"

Steele had been quiet throughout the discussion. "I agree with Ryder. Dannika, if you prefer to have Ferguson head the investigation then the reapers will understand. We need Anaisa's help and she is more amendable to Ferguson than Ryder or I."

"You are missing the point of this investigation. The demons fear Riley because there is something she can do that no one else can. Anaisa may be able to give us some direction, but only Riley can figure out what that is. My decision is final."

Steele's lip curled. "Ryder is right. Look what your decision is doing to the clans. You are blind to Riley's weakness due to your blood connection to her."

Dannika stood up. "You want to lead the clans? Be my guest. I never wanted any of this. I would be happy to retire in a little house by the sea. You can stick your assumptions up your ass and choke on them."

Steele stepped toward the queen. "You are barely out of the fledgling stage of your development. It was ludicrous of us

to expect you could handle this kind of power. You are crumbling like rotten wood. You have the strength of a day-old fawn.”

Raine hit Steele before Ferguson forcibly inserted himself between the two alphas.

Daniel met his daughter’s sad gaze. “This is how it starts. It isn’t the demons themselves who will constitute our destruction. We will do it ourselves by not trusting our allies and belittling the family we hold dear.”

“Do you think the demons are trying to cause dissension between us? Maybe this was Deruthel’s plan all along. He may have told the demons he is Ashkara, but no one can really confirm that. He puts contingency after contingency and we are always three steps behind him,” Riley said.

Daniel nodded. “There is no way to know, but only you have a connection to him. Only you can discover the truth.”

CHAPTER 4



Daniel's observation had created a lull in the room. Every alpha in the cabin was considering his words. Steele and Ryder stood in the corner with their arms crossed. They weren't speaking but their posture and close proximity to one another alerted Riley to their unified decision. Neither wanted her to be part of the demon investigation.

Colton continued to rub Riley's back in an effort to calm her as they waited for Anaisa to arrive. The clan leaders had agreed they needed more information, and she was the only person who had contacts in the spirit world. Even then, there was no guarantee the dead knew what the demons were doing or who was pulling their strings.

Ferguson exited the cabin to meet Anaisa's truck and escort her inside. The Haitian priestess' beauty never ceased to amaze Riley. Her dark skin and long braids had only a whisper of gray yet she knew the leader of the Haitian village had to be in her late forties or early fifties. She was wearing her signature white dress and a yellow sweater. The muted tones accented the creamy quality of her skin. A tan leather satchel hung from her left shoulder.

Anaisa went to Daniel and bent over to kiss his cheek. "How are you feeling today? I hope the herbs are helping to keep your strength up."

Daniel smiled. "They are. I was able to go almost two weeks without feeding."

Anaisa patted his hand. “That’s good. It’s not a replacement for feeding, Daniel. Just a means to give you more time in between.”

Daniel sighed. “I know. It is difficult for me to accept this aspect of my life. I hope God will forgive me.

Anaisa knelt in front of the priest. “God does not judge a cougar for killing its prey. The shadows are part animal. You must accept that he chose to put you on this path because you were needed. Surely, you understand that.”

Daniel nodded. “That is true. I should not question my destiny. I am being rewarded with more time with my daughters.”

Riley turned as Dannika quickly wiped a tear from her eye. The queen was still struggling with Daniel’s perception that Riley’s twin was also his daughter, one he had failed. Despite her repeated attempts to reassure him that the events of her life were not his fault. That he had no way to know she was still alive.

Anaisa stood. “You do have an exceptional family.” She turned to Dannika. “What can I help you with Dannika? You seemed distressed on the phone.”

Dannika glanced up at Raine who sat on the side of her armchair. “The demons attacked us. Some of the reapers have been... enhanced. They are stronger and faster. Almost like an alpha. They were here to assassinate Riley. Their actions go against everything we know about Deruthel.”

Anaisa’s eyes widened. “No, they should want her alive.”

Ferguson moved to stand beside Dannika. With Raine on one side and the ancient reaper on the other, she looked like a goddess between her guard dogs. The queen moved an errant strand of hair from her cheek. “That’s why we called you. A reaper told Riley that Ashkara has taken control of Deruthel’s body, but we know he is devious and may have said this to usurp total control over the demons.

Anaisa put the satchel she was carrying on the floor beside the coffee table. “Daniel, I must commune with those that have

passed. Are you comfortable being in my presence while I do this or would you prefer to retire to your room?"

Daniel's eyes lit up like a schoolboy's. "I would consider it an honor to observe your communion."

Anaisa smiled as she placed the satchel on the table and began to remove the contents. "You never cease to surprise me. I'm not sure all priests are so liberated."

Daniel tapped his bible. "If you were to have visited me at the church, you would have been free to observe my sermon and our choir songs."

Anaisa put a wooden bowl on the table before filling it with herbs and placing a candle in the middle. "You are a credit to your faith, priest." She took out a long match and lit it before her eyes moved around the room. "Do not interfere. I prefer to commune in my own home, but we need answers now. The war has begun and we teeter on the precipice of annihilation." She dropped the match into the bowl and smoke waffled into the air filling the room with the scent of jasmine and licorice. Smoke drifted toward Riley and she wondered if there was a draft in the room.

Every shadow in the room held their breath as Anaisa's eyes turned white. She grabbed both edges of the wooden table, appearing locked or frozen. Forced to watch a movie that only she could see.

Ferguson stepped forward when she whimpered in pain, but Dannika grabbed his arm and he stopped while keeping his gaze on the beautiful priestess. "She is in pain," he said.

Dannika released his arm. "I know. Some of the souls she talks to are less than pleasant. She described it as emotional pain more than physical. She gets glimpses of their lives and the reasons they are unable to move on."

Anaisa face softened before she whispered. "Emmanuel."

Riley leaned forward. "She has found her brother."

"Do you know why her brother is trapped in the veil?"

“He protects his sister. We met him at the Haitian village. Anaisa was concerned that he was able to manifest in our world. She felt the boundaries between our worlds were thinning, but she didn’t know why.”

Anaisa took a deep breath as her eyes returned to their natural dark brown. “We have a serious problem.”

Dannika leaned forward. “What did your brother tell you?”

“That Ashkara’s means to transfer his consciousness is the reason for the boundaries between the veil and our world weakening.”

Riley blew out a long breath. “So, it is the king. Not Deruthel.”

Anaisa nodded. “We must find a way to repair the damage the king has wrought or the dead will rise.”

Stern rubbed his forehead aggressively. “Are we talking zombies? The walking dead kind of shit?”

Anaisa blew out the candle. “No. They will not have a corporeal form, but their energy can cause all kinds of damage. If they get strong enough, they will be able to possess the living. Then the word zombie becomes a more accurate description.”

Riley waved the smoke from the candle away from her. It seemed to form a line straight to her. “How do we stop Ashkara and strengthen the veil? We have already severed the portal. Is there something we have missed?”

Anaisa put the candle back in her satchel and grabbed the bowl. “I am unsure how Ashkara created this weakening of the veil. I assume it has something to do with his mind overtaking Deruthel’s and his other subjects. If the portal wasn’t closed, I would suggest sending him back to his former world, but that doesn’t appear to be an option.”

“Emmanuel didn’t know how to strengthen the veil?” Riley asked.

The priestess placed the wooden bowl containing burnt herbs in her satchel. “He doesn’t know. At least, not yet. While

the inhabitants of the veil are unsure how to fix this problem, they are sure there is only one person who can fix it.”

“Who?” Riley asked.

“You. The king has ordered your death because he knows you are the only one who can thwart his plans.”

Riley swallowed hard. “How?”

Anaisa shook her head. “I wish I had an answer for you. Time moves differently in the veil. I will provide any new information as it is disclosed to me.”

Riley’s shoulders sagged. “So Ashkara was successful in switching his consciousness with Deruthel. The general is in the old demon home world and we are forced to fight a war with the demon king.”

Anaisa slipped the satchel over her shoulder as she stood. “Yes, and if we lose not only will humanity fall but the world between the living and dead will merge. Ashkara may not even realize what bringing his power to bear on our world has wrought.”

Steele stepped forward. “Do you know what powers Ashkara possesses now? He was forced to leave the majority of them in the previous world, was he not?”

“He is diminished, but he was circumventing our natural order before he commandeered Deruthel’s body. If I had to guess he was bestowing power on select individuals so he could utilize their talents once he was here. This transfer of power has disrupted our natural order and unless Ashkara and those he... enhanced are killed. The veil will continue to weaken.”

Riley stood up. “We assumed Ashkara did something to Breck. Shared his blood or experimented on him. Could the enhanced power alter the reaper in a physical way?”

Anaisa closed the flap on her satchel. “Yes, depending on what power was bestowed, but genetically he will remain a reaper.”

Ferguson growled. “We have no idea what we are fighting. Ashkara could have enhanced his entire demon army.”

Anaisa shook her head. “He had limited access to our world, and he was forced to use the last surge before severing to exchange his mind with Deruthel. We know the general had significant gifts and those now belong to Ashkara. I can’t tell you who has been enhanced or what power they possess only that you must destroy them.”

Ferguson huffed. “I did not require another reason to relieve the traitor of his head, but I assure you it is my first priority next to the queen and Riley’s safety.” Ryder moved to stand beside Steele. “This is more serious than we thought. I agree with Ferguson that the ladies’ safety must take priority. Steele and I should head the investigation into Ashkara and how we strengthen the veil.”

Anaisa pointed to Riley. “Did you see the smoke attracted to her? The trail it made to her soul.”

Colton glanced between Riley and Anaisa. “We all saw it. What does it mean?”

“I did not cause that manifestation. That was the inhabitants of the veil letting Riley know she is the only one who can save them. Ashkara wants her dead because she has a means to overthrow his rule. If you stop Riley from discovering what her power over the demon king is, you may as well fall on your reaper blades now. It will be a far kinder death than that which will follow the war. I am not sure even the king realizes the damage he has done or the consequences of his actions.”

Steele rolled his shoulders. “Surely you aren’t suggesting we make a decision of this magnitude based on the direction of candle smoke. There could simply be a breeze in the room.”

Anaisa met Steele’s irritated gaze. “I assure you there is not. Heed my warning or perish with the rest of humanity. The choice is yours.”

Steele’s shoulders rolled with black smoke. “And the Haitian village will just sit back and wait for the fall of this

world. You will do nothing to sway the balance in our favor.”

“I will provide you with any information I am given. Information you are incapable of retrieving on your own. Make no mistake. This is a test. If we are unable to trust one another. To work together to find a solution, then we will fall. Riley is the only one who can find a way to save us. I cannot force your hand. I can only inform you of the consequences if you ignore my warning.”

Ferguson’s eyes flickered with red. “That is the second time you have been discourteous to the priestess. She has given you everything in her power. Her gifts come at a price and you are insensitive not to have noticed the toll her communion with the veil has had on her.”

Riley took a hard look at the priestess, noticing the circles beneath her eyes. She had shown no evidence of fatigue when she arrived. “Anaisa, are you okay? We do kind of take you for granted.”

Anaisa smiled at Riley. “You and your sister have shown me nothing but kindness. I feel privileged to have earned your trust.” She winked at Daniel. “And I have become quite fond of your father.”

Steel cleared his throat. “I apologize if I gave the impression that I don’t appreciate your help Anaisa. I did not realize the effort your gift causes you. Ferguson had every right to reprimand me for my lack of foresight.”

“I accept your apology clan leader,” Anaisa said.

Ryder glanced at Riley. “What is it about Riley that the king fears? There is no way for her or anyone else to open a portal.”

Anaisa turned to Riley. “I don’t know, but there is something else I came here to tell you.”

“What?” Riley asked.

“We were forced to tell Lexi the truth about her sister. She would not drop her investigation and would have put herself in danger. She knows about the shadows and the demons.”

Riley closed her eyes. “She was going to expose the clinic, wasn’t she?”

Anaisa wet her lips. “She was going to expose the shadows. She didn’t know the difference between a reaper and a demon. She got footage of a shadow clan member. Had she gone public, it would have destroyed the clan’s faith in us. We told her everything. She wishes to speak with you, Riley.”

Riley’s stomach flipped, and she knew that would not be a conversation she was going to enjoy, she hadn’t exactly lied to Lexi, but she hadn’t told the entire truth by any means. “Did she agree not to leak the footage?” Riley didn’t have to ask how Lexi got it. The woman was a whiz at hacking. She jacked a video feed somewhere. Shadows were trained to avoid such devices, but if the camera was off when they arrived, they may not have noticed it activated.

“She understands we are in a war and that her brother and sister were victims of it. Her grandmother is an elder and has assured us Lexi will not try to expose us or the demons. She will not stand down, however. She wants to help eliminate the demons.”

Riley nodded. “She is an exceptional hacker. I’m sure we can use her skills. I will talk to her as soon as we figure out what has spooked the demon king. Hopefully it’s something we can use to defeat him.”

Ryder rubbed his chin. “Riley used the demon chalice to open a portal. Is there a chance there is another artifact on this world she could use to re-open it?”

Riley turned to the bear clan leader. “That’s an interesting idea. If there was such a thing Deruthel would have brought it here hundreds of years ago. He plans for every contingency.”

Anaisa shrugged. “It’s possible, but if that is the case then only Riley can use it. At the end of the day, this realm rests in her hands.”

CHAPTER 5



Riley tensed, but Colton pulled her beneath his arm. Being told you literally had the future of humanity on your shoulders was not something she could take lightly. She forced her breathing to remain even when it threatened to come in long gasps, reminding her of the panic attacks she had experienced the year after her mother's death.

Ryder walked over to the bay window that overlooked Oliver's garden. "If Ashkara believed that Riley could reopen the portal or create some other connection to the previous demon world, wouldn't he want her alive? It would give him the chance to reclaim his former body. The entirety of his power. He strikes me as a creature who would crave such a thing."

Anaisa moved toward the door. "I agree he should want his power back, but if Ashkara is here, then Deruthel now resides in Ashkara's body. Perhaps there is a reason he wishes to make sure there is no further contact with their old home world, but I do not know what it is." She glanced at Ferguson. "I must return to my village and lay down."

Ferguson moved to the door and opened it for her. "I will accompany you to the village." He followed Anaisa after she exited the cabin.

The leaders waited until the door closed and Ferguson got in the truck with Anaisa.

Raine slipped his arm around Dannika's shoulder. "I have to agree with Ryder. Everything we know about Ashkara

suggests he would want his power in our world.”

Riley nibbled her lip. “Deruthel felt Ashkara’s body was too powerful. That he could not create a sustainable ecosystem if Ashkara’s body made it to our world.”

Dannika nodded. “Yes. He believed his father would be cut off when the portal collapsed. The worlds are severed, so Ashkara should want Riley’s blood to create a breeder. There is something that we don’t know. Either a contingency that Deruthel put in place or another way to make contact with the previous world.”

Riley arched her eyebrows. “An artifact that acts like a cell phone?”

Dannika leaned back. “Even if there was such a thing. It wouldn’t do any good without the portal.”

Steele rubbed his chin. “We are going in circles. We need more information. If Ashkara is willing to sacrifice Riley, then there is something here we can use. We just need to find out what it is.”

Riley nodded. “Ashkara is more powerful, but more impulsive than Deruthel. He appears to lack the foresight of his son. He didn’t say he would create his own ecosystem. He planned to use the blueprint Deruthel had created.”

Colton touched her chin, turning her toward him. “What are you thinking?”

“That maybe his vanity and short-sightedness is something we can use. There may not actually be anything in our world that can help us, but Ashkara either believes there is or is taking precautions because he fears Deruthel will find a way here that Ashkara never thought of.”

“You think this could be a precautionary measure? That he fears Deruthel that much?”

Riley shrugged. “Deruthel was almost successful in overthrowing his father. Remember that Ashkara did the same to his. It’s a family tradition.”

Steele paced by the door. “You raise an interesting point. We don’t necessarily have to have an artifact that can counteract Ashkara’s power as long as he believes we do. Or at least have the capability to acquire it.”

Colton arched an eyebrow. “You are suggestion we bluff? It has been many years since I played poker, but the stakes could not be higher if we lose.”

Steel huffed. “I would never gamble with the fate of humanity, but what choice do we have?”

Daniel’s eyes closed. “It’s simple, really. You do as the priestess requested. You allow Riley to find out what the demon king is looking for and allow her to use it to trick the king.”

Dannika smiled. “You make it seem so simple.”

Daniel’s voice was low, as if he were drifting off to sleep. “Beating the devil at his own game is a practice as old as time. Have a little faith.” The cabin was silent until Daniel’s slight snoring filled the room.

Dannika stood. “Let’s take this outside.” They all silently exited the cabin. The breeze brought the smell of smoke and burnt flesh.

Riley glanced at the clan members in the distance. They surrounded a pile of bodies on top of a fiery pyre. “Are those the dead demons?”

Colton nodded. “We burn them to ensure they don’t contaminate the ground.”

“They can do that?” she asked.

“We don’t know, but we aren’t taking a chance,” Colton said.

They were still watching the clan throw bodies on the fire when Ferguson exited the pathway with the familiar hum. “We weren’t the only ones you got hit.”

“What does that mean?” Dannika asked.

Ferguson glanced at the smoke. “The demons attacked the humans as well. It was well coordinated. They hit simultaneously. I need Raine to do some damage control. He needs to speak to the lead detective and steer the investigation in the direction we desire.”

Dannika swore under her breath, then touched her husband’s arm. “You need to go.”

Raine glanced at Ferguson. “Can you escort Dannika home? Colton and Riley can join me at the attack site in an hour. I need some time to... speak with all those involved.”

Ferguson nodded, then took Dannika’s arm. Her sister smiled as she shifted to the shadows under Ferguson’s command.

Raine disappeared a few seconds later as Riley turned to Colton. “I guess we have some time to kill.”

Colton nodded to his leader, then took her hand. She was surprised he hadn’t taken a pathway, but was pleased he decided to walk. “You have something on your mind.”

He sighed. “That obvious, huh?”

“A little.”

“I don’t like the way Steele and Ryder are treating you. They are displaying a lack of faith in Dannika’s leadership abilities, and that isn’t good for anyone. It wouldn’t bother me if they kept their opinions to themselves, but they were openly hostile.”

Riley nodded. “I know. I don’t think it’s personal, just the fact that I am a fledgling. But I honestly thought Ferguson was going to bust a nut.”

Colton laughed. “Your sister’s vocabulary is rubbing off on you.”

“Probably. She is right, though. There is something Ashkara is afraid of and I need to figure out what it is.”

He pulled her against his body. “We need to figure out what it is.” As they neared their home, Colton’s shadow enveloped hers and they raced up the tree to coalesce in their

living room. His lips were on hers before the thrill of lust hummed through her blood and he shifted their clothes to the shadows.

The memories of the events in the field outside Oliver's garden dissipated when he kissed her. It was a primitive and explosive possession as his mouth fed on hers. A warning and an omen that she belonged to him alone. He eradicated every sane thought from her head, numbing the pain and replacing it with passion and ecstasy. She could feel his hands move under her shirt, worshipping every curve as if she were his own person totem. Her breath hitched, but his mouth never ceased its erotic exploration, a series of addictive kisses that stole her will and succumbed to his inhuman desire.

Riley squeezed his shoulders. His hair caressed her wrist as he moved down her neck. A feathery touch that heightened every sensation. The whisper of sensual fire that sent a firestorm racing through her blood. She clung to him in a tornado of ecstasy when he cupped her breasts, rolling her erect nipple between his fingers before sliding his hand along her ribs and belly. Each deliciously torturous caress had her legs moving restlessly.

Every touch left a firestorm in its wake. She wanted to scream for relief, but dry air caught in her throat when his hand moved to her thighs. Teasing. Taunting. She moaned when his fingers slipped between her slick, heated flesh, parting her tender lips and pressing inside her. A moan escaped her lips as she snapped her teeth together.

She arched toward him, almost coming apart right there as he stretched her tight sheath. His mouth tugged hard on her nipple, causing a rush of liquid between her thighs, coating his fingers in her hot juices. He nudged her thighs apart with his knee as his tongue lavished her nipple. The sensations coursing through her body made her heart thump in her chest. A steady staccato of desire.

Colton growled as his eyes lit with hunger. He wouldn't devour her. He would consume her body and soul. She froze as the predatory eyes moved to the valley between her breasts. He kissed her neck, then trailed kisses down her abdomen until

reaching her navel. She panted as his hot breath seared her flesh and ensnared her soul.

Air rushed from her lungs when he cupped her ass, holding her in place. His teeth scraped over her sensitized skin as a low growl of male satisfaction escaped his throat. A warning. A claiming.

She clutched his shoulders as if they were the only safe haven in the tornado of emotion assaulting her body. “Dammit. Do something,” Riley gasped.

She hated that she was begging. Pleading with him. He would see to her needs there was no doubt in her mind about that, but he would wait until she was drenched in desire and begging for him to assuage her hunger. A feast only he could provide.

He spread her thighs wider, and she put one hand on the couch to support her weight. Breath caught in her throat when he blew cool air against her heated core. Every muscle tensed as his tongue slipped between her lips. And her fingernails ripped into the fabric of the couch. When her cougar and her shadow teetered on the edge of her consciousness, she felt more animal than human. A predator waiting for its mate to see to her needs.

His first foray into the sensitive folds had her crying out. Her nails dug into his skin, causing blood to well up on her fingertips. The jolt of pain spurred his aggressive nature, and Riley realized he was in no more control than she was. He was a ravenous animal engorged in his feast.

Colton licked her like he was starving. His tongue was rough and aggressive, an extension of the predator he was. She fought for breath as her stomach coiled. Her breasts jutted out as she arched back further. All the while he held her locked to his marauding mouth, devouring her, lapping her hot milk like a hungry cat. A being pushed to the brink of its animistic control.

Rippling waves of pleasure cascaded over her skin. Claws pierced her skin, but she barely noticed. She couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t catch her breath. When she pushed on his

shoulders, his magical tongue stabbed deeper, licking the cream from her sensitive channel. She screamed as her body came apart, exploding with tiny fireworks beneath her skin and behind her eyes. His name escaped her lips as if she were calling to god.

Colton could've been carved from stone. His taut muscles and glowing pupils roamed over her as he stood. His piercing eyes were stark and filled with lust. "You are a miracle. I will never let you go."

He whispered the words in the low undertone of his alpha, but he may as well have screamed them. The beast within her rose to meet the cougar it had chosen. It growled its approval and its acceptance. She opened her mouth to respond, but no words would escape. She would never disagree with his claiming of her, but she feared the consequences if she failed in her duty to the clan. The world.

He pulled her against his body. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Riley? Whatever happens, we are in this together. A day or a lifetime, it is you and me."

She would've given them anything at that moment to get him inside her. To relieve the mounting pressure that he had created. Giving up her soul, would be easier than giving up his. Whatever the consequences, she would deal with them later. She could never change his mind and she didn't want to.

"Yes."

He drove into her, parting her slick flesh, stretching the tight muscles with the battering ram. Lightning raced through her blood, burning away the sting of pain of his invasion. His fingers gripped her ass so tightly she was sure they'd leave a permanent impression. He thrust deeper and deeper, over and over, until she was breathless, her body a slave to his magical possession.

She gripped him fiercely, hanging on as if her life depended on it. He felt too large, and her too tight, but it only added to the mounting pleasure. Her shadow coiled around them in a dark mystical embrace before his rose to do the same. A black tornado of desire and ecstasy. A visible creation

of their lust. Their union. One that wouldn't end until they took their last breath.

He rocked her with every brutal thrust. Their souls were as much a prisoner to the relentless passion as they were.

She screamed when his cock swelled, and he bit down on her neck. The stinging pain sent a raging inferno of pleasure through her body. She clamped down, milking his cock with her orgasm.

Her body quivered as her shadow retracted. She kept her eyes averted as it took one last caress over Colton's body before resuming its place within her.

She couldn't move. She had fighting competitions that lasted an entire day and hadn't felt this kind of exhaustion. Her body was limp, her mind fractured as she contemplated what was to come. The penalty for her failure.

Colton tipped up her chin. "You're worried and you have every right to be, but trust in us. We can do this."

Her emotions were too raw to oppose him. He was right but her fear that she wasn't enough still plagued her. How did a fledgling fight a god? "I believe in us. I do. Not knowing what I am supposed to do or what we need to do is the problem."

Colton slowly pulled away from her, then replaced their clothing. "We will figure it out. Ferguson will be contacting us soon. Did you want to check on Daniel before we head out?"

She loved that he always thought of her father. "We could also check on Lucan. I forgot to ask if everyone made it back to the sanctuary."

"The fledglings are fine and the clan members have healed. We lost one bear clan member and a wolf clan member. Neither are men, you know."

"I'm glad Lucan and the others are alright. I'm sorry about the ones we lost."

Colton kissed her forehead. "It is the nature of war."

“I know, but I don’t have to like it.” Her eyes moved to the black script forming before Colton.

“It’s time. We need to meet Ferguson and Raine at the kill site.”

CHAPTER 6



Riley and Colton coalesced in front of the witness stand. The gleaming polished wood was streaked with dark blood. The paneled walls and empty benches were similarly marred. Her fingers moved over the small desk for the court reporter and court clerk. The judge was wearing a black robe and was slumped over his desk, overlooking the sea of bodies in his courtroom.

She was thankful that the jury box was empty alerting her their proceedings had been of a minor nature, but the gallery had not been so lucky. Both the plaintiff and defendant were slumped over their tables along with their lawyers.

The judge's gavel lay on the floor in the middle of the room as if it had been thrown. The wide central corridor had several bodies who'd attempted to exit the room hastily, but were dropped before reaching the brass handles of the heavy doors.

Her fingers want her mouth. "Why would they attack a courtroom?"

Ferguson stood beside the judge, looking over the files on his desk. "The overt nature of this attack shocks me, considering the demons and reapers had been so quiet the last couple of weeks. This is complete madness. Even Raine will have difficulty altering the perception of this attack."

"What does he plan to do?" Riley asked.

"We are going to go with the lone gunman routine and alter the humans' perception of the wounds. Raine has to alter

each human individually, and the chances of him getting them all are slim. This is a nightmare.”

Ferguson brought the file closer to us face. “Did you find something?” she asked.

“I believe I have figured out why they chose this location,” Ferguson said.

Colton surveyed the carnage. “These people were massacred, not fed on. What possible reason could the demons have for such a public attack? If Ashkara is utilizing Deruthel’s blueprint, he should be keeping a low profile until he has increased the size of his army. If the humans became aware of the demons and reapers, they would wipe us all out.”

Ferguson nodded. “You’re right. Deruthel would never have acted so rashly. But the trial was being held for a member of the Haitian community. It was a minor offense. He got into an altercation with another man. The majority of the guests are also Haitian.”

Riley sucked in her breath. “Does Anaisa know?”

“Not yet. This courtroom was targeted because the majority of the humans in here have Haitian blood. The wards around the village make it difficult for the demons to attack. Since the elders and members with significant power are aware of the upcoming war they stay within its walls.”

Riley focused on the woman who sat on the witness stand. Her mocha skin and long, braided hair reminded Riley of Anaisa. Her dress was a deep purple and her braids had white ribbons versus the colorful ones of the priestess. She looked no more than thirty, though her eyes were wide open with the pupils a dull milky color. “This woman was healthy and young, but they didn’t abduct her. Do you think she had the wrong bloodline?”

Ferguson placed the file back on the desk. “That’s extremely observant of you. As far as Raine and I could discern, no women were taken. We watched the surveillance videos. While there are none within the courtroom, there are in the hallway. Everyone who entered this room is still here.”

Colton approached the plaintiff. “You think this is a retaliation tactic? A message for the priestess, perhaps? That the target here was the Haitian members and everyone else was collateral damage?”

Ferguson moved to a body in the gallery. “No, I don’t think so. I may have come to that conclusion had this been the only attack, but we found three bodies by the river. They were dumped prior to this massacre, but we just discovered them.”

“Who were the other three?”

Ferguson sighed. “Two of the women had ID on them. They were patients from the clinic and had been missing for a few days.”

“Were they experimented on?” Riley asked.

“No. They were murdered and dumped prior to any experimentation. They have the correct bloodline, so their murder is surprising.”

Riley’s jaw dropped. “The king is killing women with priestess blood. That goes against everything we know about him. Why would he risk losing his breeder pool? Deruthel said the demons would revolt without women. He would never have murdered priestess’s descendants, or experimented on them, for sure. But kill them?”

Ferguson’s head snapped up as black script formed in the air before him. “Raine found two more murdered women. Both Haitian. They are in the ladies washroom.”

“What is going on?” Riley whispered.

Ferguson’s eyes flickered red. “Ashkara is assassinating everyone who was given your blood or related to the priestess.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “Then he wouldn’t have any breeders.”

“If he plans to remain in this world, perhaps he believes he doesn’t need them. If he uses the humans like farm animals, then his only concern will be monitoring their reproduction.”

“What about the reapers and Demons? Would they accept such a fate?”

Ferguson shook his head. “Unlikely, unless he believes he has found an alternative.”

“What?”

“I have no idea.”

Riley glanced around the courtroom. “He knows the priestess descendants are his only chance at breeders. Even if he wants me dead, it doesn’t explain him killing all of them.”

Ferguson’s eyes moved over a new message in black script. “The women were patients of the clinic. So were two of the women in the courtroom.”

Riley turned to the dead woman on the witness stand. “What are you saying?”

“The king isn’t killing descendants of the priestess specifically. He is killing the ones that have been given your blood. We know the clinic was used to administer your blood. Raine believes all women administered your blood should be protected.”

Riley’s gaze moved around the room. How many other massacres would happen because of her? Because she was too weak to stop the demons from experimenting with her blood. “I caused this?”

Colton touched her back. “This is not on you. Deruthel started those experiments. As twisted and sick as they are, they had a purpose. What Ashkara is doing is a reaction of fear.”

Her eyes narrowed on her mate. “What could he be afraid of, taking such a drastic action?”

“You. Whatever you can do scares the shit out of him. For him to openly kill like this, I assume you can reopen the portal. I can’t think of any other explanation.”

Riley rubbed her forehead. “No. The portal is severed. Even if it wasn’t. Ashkara would have access to unlimited power. He would want that. He outsmarted Deruthel once. I am sure he could do it again.”

Colton touched her arm. “Honestly, I’m not sure he could. Deruthel is smart. I think Ashkara made the switch because he had so much power his son couldn’t fight him. Deruthel is in possession of that power now. If there was even the smallest gap on the portal. A pinprick of a hole, then Deruthel would attack his father.”

“That’s true. He wouldn’t hesitate to annihilate Ashkara or imprison him in the old demon home world.”

Ferguson sighed. “The king intends to kill you, Riley, and anyone given your blood. Many of the residents at the Haitian village have utilized the clinic. I must help Raine with the humans. I think you and Colton should visit Anaisa. Tell her what has transpired and tell her to keep her people at the village.”

Riley was sick of looking at the dead faces in the courtroom. “We will be happy to visit Anaisa.” She shivered as Colton’s shadow enveloped hers.



They coalesced at the tree line of the forest. The walk over the clearing was slow and peaceful. It gave Riley a moment to collect her thought before she was to inform the priestess of the massacre.

They reached the gates and were surprised to find the entrance empty. The priestess had a sixth sense about visitors and a member of the village always met them. The fire pit had only a few embers left and leaves blew through the courtyard.

The village was an eclectic array of colored houses and bright shrubs, yet today it seemed muted and the light drizzle weeping from the clouds added to the dreary effect. “Where is everyone?”

Colton pointed to Anaisa’s house. “I feel them, but they are all inside their homes. I’m not sure they weren’t informed about the massacre?”

“Raine interceded with the police. They haven’t had a chance to inform the prospective families of the attack.”

They were walking toward Anaisa’s home when Emmanuel appeared in front of them. His form was translucent as he held up his hand. “Please give a message to my sister. She is too distraught to heed my call.”

Riley’s heart sank. “She knows what happened?”

“She knows members of her flock have passed, but not the details. The walls between your world and mine are thinning. You must find the source of the infection.”

Riley glanced at Colton. “We thought it was the portal. It’s closed... or are we mistaken?”

“The portal between worlds is severed, but a tie remains. You must find the blood tie before it’s too late. Return what has been taken. That which does not belong.”

“None of the demons belong here,” Riley said as Emmanuel’s body began to fade. “Wait!”

“You are the only connection, Riley. The king has slaughtered innocents out of fear, but only you can return what was stolen.”

Riley held up her hand but Anaisa’s brother had returned to the veil of the dead.

She turned to Colton. “What was stolen? What does he mean?”

Colton took her hand. “I don’t know, but hopefully, the priestess will have some idea.” He led her toward the lavender door. Every time they had visited Anaisa in the past, her door had been open. This time it was closed and a black wreath was hung from a long hook.

Riley knocked. The wind blew and the moisture in the air, whipped against her face. She began to wonder if the priestess intended to answer and was about to turn away when the door slowly opened.

Anaisa’s eyes were red and puffy. She wiped a tear from her face. “If you have come to tell me I have lost members of

my community, I will save you the trouble. I heard their cries as they entered the veil.”

Colton put his hand to his chest. “I am sorry for your loss, priestess. Emmanuel said you were aware of their deaths, but not the circumstances. He also gave us a warning.”

Anaisa stepped back. “You saw Emmanuel, here?”

Riley nodded. “He met us at the gate. I thought that the portal was causing the veil to weaken, but Emmanuel said that is not the case. It’s getting worse.”

Anaisa ushered them inside. They followed her to the living room where sweet-smelling herbs burned in a bowl on the coffee table. “I believed that the severing had stopped the erosion of the veil. Did Emmanuel say why he didn’t contact me himself?”

Riley nodded. “He said he tried. That you were too distraught to heed his call.”

She rubbed her temple. “I allowed my grief to affect my communion. I am sorry. There is no time for such foolishness. We are at the crossroads of annihilation.”

Riley touched Anaisa’s shoulder. “You are entitled to your grief, Anaisa. I wish there was something I could say to soften the pain, but it seems I am the cause of their deaths.”

Anaisa’s eyes snapped to Riley’s. “Why would you say such a thing?”

Riley sat down on the couch and waited for Anaisa to take the chair across from her. “The demons killed everyone in the courtroom. Your people were there for a minor case, but the demons killed everyone in that room. We found the bodies of three other women with ties to the clinic.”

Anaisa sucked in a breath. “They are killing everyone with ties to the original priestess. Why would you think this is your fault?”

Riley pursed her lips. “Not just ties to the priestess. Women who were given my blood. Ashkara wants me and anyone with my blood eliminated.”

The priestess leaned forward. “Why would the king of the demons fear you? The portal is severed. You cannot create another.”

Riley threw her hands in the air. “That’s what I keep saying. We all assume I can make another portal, but I am not convinced.”

Anaisa leaned back in her chair. “I asked those beyond the veil, if the worlds could be reconnected. I was told that no life form may pass between the worlds.”

Riley bit her thumbnail. “No life forms? What about an inanimate object? Your brother said that which was stolen must be returned. I was thinking of an artifact. Something like the chalice, that could create another fissure?”

Anaisa grabbed a bag of herbs from a box on the table. “Emmanuel told you something had been stolen and it must be replaced?”

“Yes. Do you have any idea what that is?” Riley asked.

“No. But I will contact my brother in the veil once I am able to calm my emotions. I cannot connect with him until I finish a purification ritual.”

“For those who have passed?” she asked.

Anaisa smiled. “For me. Those that I lost are the first of many. This war is not over. It has barely begun.”

“I wish that weren’t true, but we both know it is.”

Anaisa glanced at the door. “Lexi has been asking for you. I have convinced her to stay within the village, but it is only a matter of time before she wanders.”

Riley turned to Colton. “Should we talk to her now?”

Colton nodded. “Anaisa has lost enough of her people.”

“Where is Lexi?” Riley asked.

“At her grandmother’s house. She wants to investigate, but she fears for her grandmother’s safety. I did not know the demons were attacking recipients of your blood and warned all who are descendants of the priestess that they are in danger.”

“That includes Lexi and her grandmother?”

“Yes,” Anaisa said.

“I don’t mean to sound callous, but that may be a good thing. The longer we keep her here, the safer she is.”

Anaisa nodded. “I agree. I will keep this latest revelation to myself for now.”

Riley stood. “You will contact us if you get any more information on this artifact or item that was stolen?”

Anaisa nodded. “I have no knowledge of any artifact that could weaken the barrier between worlds, but finding out is my first priority.”

Colton put his hand on Riley’s back as black script formed before him. “Damn.”

Riley’s heart fell to her stomach. “What is it?”

“Ferguson found two more bodies. There was another attack.”

CHAPTER 7



Riley had intended to practice taking them through the pathway, but her emotions were too chaotic. After two failed attempts to create the container that allowed another shadow to travel with her, she relented and allowed Colton to shoulder the burden.

The stream was fast, and flickers of light surrounded them. There was a magical feel to Riley's non corporeal form where every molecule registered all aspects of her surroundings. It was a feeling of inclusiveness, as if the universe itself welcomed her into its arms. When her form coalesced at the edge of the pathway, she took a deep breath, preparing herself for the new kill site.

It took Riley a moment to realize where they were. Bookshelves went from floor to ceiling in rows and rows. Alphabetized stickers sat below the sign that read Historical Fiction. As she walked down the aisle, she came to a circular table with several books scattered on the top. "Where are the bodies?"

Colton pointed to the counter close to the door. "One is over there."

The cash register was open and several paper bills lay above the tray as if the owner were in the middle of a transaction when the attack occurred. The poster on the wall behind the counter displayed a book from a well-known horror author. The picture of a creepy clown gave Riley the shivers.

She grabbed a package of chocolates that sat on the counter with a variety of pens, candy bookmarks and other seasonal item in a display rack beside the cash register. Then put it back as she walked behind the register to the body laying on the floor.

The man's throat was ripped out and his sweater vest was so soaked in blood she couldn't tell what color it had originally been. "This was a feeding? Not an attack on a Haitian village member."

Ferguson exited one of the aisles. "I thought that too at first, but the second victim is on our list from the clinic."

Riley swore under her breath. "Where is she?"

"In the children's section." Ferguson held his hand up when he saw the fear in her eyes. "It's not a child, but I assume she has one or was shopping for a gift."

Ferguson led them to the back of the store to a colorful section filled with novelty books, a turnstile with pocket books aimed at teenage readers and a shelf full of board games, puzzles and plush toys. The young woman lay on the floor with several coloring books.

Riley stepped closer to the body to inspect the wound at her throat. The two puncture marks were thicker than those she had seen from previous reaper kills, but the result was the same. The woman's vibrant red hair served as a backdrop to her milky eyes and grey pullover. The logo on her shirt was that of the local college. "She is a student at Graydon College. Maybe twenty-two-years-old. Due to financial reasons, I imagine many of the students use the clinic."

Ferguson nodded. "She doesn't look Haitian, but we think they were administering your blood to create breeders and maybe not all the subjects have priestess blood."

Riley sighed. "We put the investigation into the second clinic on the back burner, but it seems the experiments are more widespread than we thought."

Riley moved the girl's hair to get a better look at the wound. "Can you tell if the reaper tried to turn her?"

Ferguson shook his head. “Some die before entering transition. This is true of both men and women. After death, there is no way to know. Humans return to their original form after death. As do the shadow shifters.”

“How are we going to spin this attack? It’s pretty hard to include a bookstore in a terrorist attack.”

Ferguson nodded. “Raine has suggested this is the work of a serial killer. He used this MO on previous reaper kills. He has told the lead detective that the killer is escalating and that people should remain indoors after dark.”

Riley’s gaze moved to the gold chain bracelet on the woman’s wrist. It was one half of a heart with the word Best written in script. “Raine told the detective or influenced him?”

“The detective never actually meets Raine. He simply thinks he has been given the information from a reliable source. You understand our need for secrecy. It is for humanity’s protection.”

“I know, but I wish we weren’t forced to mess with people’s minds. That seems like a violation.”

Ferguson’s eyes flickered red. “Their death would be more so.”

“What do you need us to do?” Riley asked.

Ferguson glanced at Colton. “I understand that Anaisa is distraught over the death of her people, but we need Lexi to help us alter some records. Raine can influence the humans, but he cannot change police reports that have already been filed. The courtroom was a massive breach. Raine has done as much as he can to slow the feed of information, but an officer sent in some information we want retrieved before Raine could get on site.”

Riley huffed. “Lexi is a little put off by me right now. She knows the truth and wants to talk to me. I was planning to go see her before you called Colton.”

Ferguson pulled a book with two dragons on the cover from the shelf. “She lost a twin. I know how difficult that can be. She will lash out, but it is not you she is mad at.”

Riley recognized the sadness in his voice. “You lost a twin?” The thought of another Ferguson look alike was scary and comforting.

His eyes remained on the book in his hands. “Yes. Like Lexi and Leah, we were identical.”

“What happened to him?” Riley asked.

Ferguson’s eyes met hers. “He was not a... strong reaper. The leader at the time was not accepting of weakness.”

Riley put her hand to her mouth. “The reaper leader killed him?”

Ferguson turned away. “He ordered my brother Fredrick to compete in a death match. He did not survive.”

“I’m sorry, Ferguson,” she said.

He didn’t turn around. “It was a long time ago. Talk to Lexi. We need her help.”

Riley felt her molecules dissolve as Colton’s shadow overtook hers and they raced toward the Haitian village. They coalesced by the tree line and walked toward the village. “Do shadows get frequent flier miles because we sure travel a lot?”

“Funny, but you are attempting to use humor to cover your concern. Is it Ferguson or the attacks?” Colton asked.

“I hate being so transparent, but the answer is both.”

“Raine will cover up the attack. It’s his specialty,” Colton said.

“And Ferguson? We have come to rely on his strength. The fear he instills in our enemies and the queen’s reapers, but we know nothing about his past. Did Dannika know he had a twin?”

Colton ran his thumb over her hand as they walked. “She said he had lost all of his family, but that is not surprising considering his age. Even if he had human descendants, I doubt he would be able to keep track of them after all these years.”

“Does anyone know if he had children?” she asked.

Colton nodded. “Dannika did, but he said his wife died at age nineteen and he never remarried before he was turned.”

“How old was he when he was turned?”

“I don’t know. We know little about his human life, and Dannika only asked about direct descendants. Honestly, I am surprised he told her as much as he did,” Colton said.

“Yeah, he is private to say the least.” A young man in his late teens met them at the gate. His bloodshot eyes alerted her to the fact he had been crying.

The young man wiped his eyes. “Lexi is waiting for you. Do you know the way to her grandmother’s house?”

Riley nodded. “We have been there before. There is no need to guide us.”

He looked unsure, but nodded and jogged toward Anaisa’s house. Colton and Riley strolled toward Lexi’s grandmother’s, stopping when Lexi stepped onto the porch.

Lexi crossed her arms. “Don’t come in. My gran is not up for visitors.”

Riley pursed her lips. “I know you are upset with me for not explaining my connection to your sister. We are forbidden to...”

“I’m not just upset you lied about being Leah’s friend. Ana explained the shadows and their need for secrecy. I’m pissed that you did nothing to stop this massacre. Why are you allowing the demons to kill more people? Experiment on human women?”

Riley stepped toward the porch but didn’t go up the stairs. “I was Leah’s friend. I would have been if she lived, anyway. I really liked her. I would have done anything to save her.”

Lexi’s face fell. The harness turned to one of pain. “You saw her die? Ana explained the shadows and the demons but I assumed Leah was just a casualty of the upcoming war.”

Riley sighed. “She was, but the demons were experimenting. They had injected Leah with a serum to try to facilitate a demon transition. She survived the initial

transmutation to a demon form, but it was not sustainable. She died in pain... it was awful. I would have done anything to spare her that.”

Lexi’s eyes filled with unshed tears. “She was in pain? Did she say anything to you?”

“She was a demon by that time. The Leah you knew was already gone. Before her transition, she told me about you. That she was proud of you. She was sorry her brother’s death would cause you and your grandmother pain. She was a kind person who thought of others.”

“You witnessed the demon attack on her?” Lexi asked.

“The tail-end. Deruthel had already injected Leah with the serum. We didn’t know.”

Lexi dropped her arms. “I want to help bring those fuckers down. They destroyed my family and now this latest attack took the life of my grandmother’s best friend.”

“This friend was in the courtroom?” Riley asked.

“Yes. Gran’s best friend was named Lana. It was her grandson in the courtroom. Hector was always getting into trouble. Minor stuff, mostly. He didn’t deserve this.”

“No one deserves that, Lexi. We actually came to ask for your help. A police report was filed that needs to be erased. Can you hack that kind of database?”

Lexi glanced around. “If not, I know someone who can.”

“No human can know about us.”

“This report won’t be on shadow shifters or demons. If it’s a police report, it will be factual and no self-respecting police officer would make an initial conclusion this attack was demonic in nature.”

“That’s true. There were some references to puncture marks and drained blood in the report that we want removed. Don’t delete the file, just remove anything that sounds supernatural in nature.”

Lexi nodded. “I can do that. It will be regarding the courtroom massacre, so it will be filed earlier today. Do you have an exact time for the attack?”

“No. Sometime between nine and eleven. The doors were closed during that time.”

Lexi nibbled her lip. “Why are you altering reports? The humans will find out about the demons, eventually. They obviously aren’t hiding their movements.”

Riley glanced at Colton. “The longer we can keep humanity in the dark, the safer they are. Mass hysteria will not deter the demons.”

“Ana said you have someone who influences the humans. Makes them forget certain details and steers them to a more human connection.”

Riley cleared her throat. “His name is Raine. You met him when we visited you.”

Lexi’s fingers flexed. “The man I thought was your boyfriend? Was that joker trying to influence me?”

Colton smirked and turned away. “Joker?”

Riley tapped her mate’s arm. “Yes, but Anaisa warned that shadow gifts often don’t work on descendants of the original priestess.”

Lexi stepped to the edge of the porch, placing her hand on the white post that supported the second-floor balcony. “What right does he have to wipe people’s minds? Our brains are not like hard drives where you just shut them down and enter the information that suits you.”

Colton held up his hand. “It isn’t like that. He does not wipe people’s minds. He alters the perception of events. Only events pertaining to shadows, reapers and demons. He does this to protect humanity. Like Riley and me, Raine was once human.”

Lexi’s eyes widened. “The shadows were human? I thought they were descendants of the shifter races?”

“We are. But those that transition versus being born, were human,” Colton said.

“I guess I have a lot to learn about the shadows. In the meantime, I will take care of that errant report. I will delete any pertinent info and will have it coincide with what Raine told the detective.”

“Thank you, Lexi. I will have Raine stop by shortly and give you the pertinent information,” Riley said.

Lexi descended the steps. “I was hoping to come with you. I want to learn more about the shadows.”

Riley shook her head. “You can’t travel the pathways with us, but I promise to keep you informed.”

Lexi was quiet for some time. “Fair enough, but I plan to let Raine know what I think of his mind reboot. If he ever tries that shit with me again, I will roundhouse his ass.”

Riley coughed. “He won’t, but keep in mind we do not step foot in the Haitian village or interact with any of its members without Anaisa’s permission.”

Lexi shrugged. “I know that, and her permission doesn’t make it right.”

Riley and Colton nodded to Lexi and left the village hand in hand. Lexi watched them from the porch. “Should we warn Raine he is walking into a hornet’s nest?”

Colton pulled her against his body. “He can handle himself. He deserves a little payback for giving the impression you were his.”

“Colton, he didn’t...” she couldn’t finish her statement as her molecules dissolved with the undertone of anger.

CHAPTER 8



Colton's anger lashed out like a whip. Riley thought that it was jealousy, but he'd been teasing, well mostly, about unleashing Lexi on Raine. He respected the wolf clan leader and considered him a brother, but he admitted he wasn't above challenging his friend.

That wasn't what had his alpha growling in her ear. Riley hadn't noticed the message that had formed as they were entering the shadows. She felt his anger, there was no way to hide that, and he had redirected their course to intercept with Ferguson's new location.

They coalesced beside the large frosted window that faced the street with large black lettering on the pane. The row of plastic chairs faced the television set, which was currently set to the news with pictures of the courthouse. The reporter was speaking in front of the building, but the sound was muted.

Chipped folding tables and metal laundry baskets sat between the industrial washing machines and dryers that lined the walls. A broken security camera hung from wires in the corner. The white, tiled floor was streaked with bloody footprints between the two bodies that lay on the floor. She swallowed hard as the crimson pool spread from one of the bodies and absorbed a clump of dryer lint. "What happened? It looks like they were running in the blood."

Ferguson was rifling through a drawer behind the counter by the front door. A pedestrian stopped on the other side of the frosted glass then moved on without entering. "Why didn't she come in?"

Colton motioned to Ferguson. “She sensed his presence. You know how the humans feel about us.”

“But she didn’t see him.”

“It isn’t about sight. If you are within a predator’s territory, you know it. No human will enter while we are here. Ferguson will stay by the door to ensure we are not interrupted.”

She moved closer to the woman on the floor. The red jacket was undone and her long black hair covered most of her mocha skin. There were scratches on her arm where her sleeve was hiked up. “Are these defensive wounds?”

Ferguson pulled a wallet from the drawer. “I think so. Her bone structure was still returning when I arrived.”

Riley glanced at Colton. “Returning?”

“He is referring to her return to human form. She is a failed transition.”

Ferguson closed the drawer. “Yes, but she wasn’t changing into a shadow. At least not one I have seen before.”

“A demon? Was she an experiment?”

Ferguson flipped through several credit cards from the wallet. “Not a demon and not a shadow. I don’t know what she was supposed to be.”

The click and clack of buttons hitting metal as they tumbled in the dryer drums, echoed as they stood in silence. Riley thought about her conversation with the reapers. “Breck inferred there would be a new regime of reaper. Do you think they are experimenting with something new? That they have found something else that will work for their breeder pool.”

Ferguson held up the driver’s license of the woman on the floor. “Her name is Grace. She worked here and I bet my life that she is a patient of the clinic. Whatever they are doing, they still want descendants of the priestess.”

Riley huffed. “Just not ones that were given my blood.”

Ferguson nodded. “That is my assumption.”

Riley pointed to Grace. “She is a failed attempt at a new breeder. A shadow shifter female.”

Ferguson glanced at the door when a man touched the handle, then moved on. “If they attempted to make a shadow female, then something went wrong. Her bone structure was too distinct and her skin had a crimson color. She wasn’t a demon, though.”

“And the other victim?” Riley asked, glancing at the crumpled form of an older man in jeans and a black sweater.

“He was fed on. Collateral damage, but I believe there was another woman here.” He pointed to a pink leather purse on one of the folding tables with a stack of laundry yet to be folded.

“They took someone?”

“It appears so.”

Riley shook her head as the familiar hum of the pathway vibrated around them. Colton was expecting Raine to exit, but Ferguson called out before the reaper exited the pathway.

He slashed her arm before Colton could lunge at the growling reaper, sending him backwards into a cycling dryer. The reaper used the machine to steady himself as he returned to his feet. His eyes glowed with an ambient red that she had never seen before. His bone structure wasn’t quite right either. As if his cheekbones had been chiseled to aggressive angles and his ears pointed with an elven quality.

Riley backed away as Colton stepped in front of her. “What is that?”

Colton’s alpha emerged with an angry growl. The anger the reaper dared to touch his mate, a haze of red in his mind. “No idea.”

Ferguson moved from behind the counter, with his alpha emerging calmly. “Hello Germaine. Still doing Breck’s dirty work, I see. Where is your boss?”

Germaine’s lips curled over his thick fangs. They were nothing like Ferguson’s, appearing more like canines. “I no

longer fear you, Ferguson. We are stronger than you are now. I will rip you to shreds, then feast on your blood.”

Ferguson chuckled. “Your enhancements, if you wish to call it that, have made you stupid. You cannot feed on reaper blood.”

Germaine smiled. “It will not bring sustenance, but I will still savor your blood. Your loyalty to the queen is a disgrace. You should have led the reapers to victory centuries ago. Now you have missed the opportunity to be king.”

Ferguson smiled, but there was no warmth in it. His eyes flickered red as he spoke. “I have never, nor will I desire to be saddled with the likes of you.”

Germaine cackled like a deranged serial killer. His eyes darted around the room as if expecting something or someone else to arrive. “You are pathetic.”

Riley hissed and continued to hold her slashed arm. It wasn’t healing as quickly as it should and the pain should be fading. Colton wanted to attack the strange reaper, but he couldn’t leave his mate nor the kill site unattended. “What is wrong with him?” he directed the question to Ferguson.

The ancient reaper’s eyes rolled over the twitching Germaine. “I don’t know, but whatever they did to him is having an adverse effect. He was always an asshole, but he was quite intelligent. He is deteriorating.”

Germaine wiped some drool from his mouth. “You know nothing. I am stronger than ever.”

Ferguson nodded. “That may be true, but it won’t last. Your body is degrading as quickly as your mind. I assume you are an earlier version of this experiment. You keep looking to the pathway, expecting backup. I assure you it is not coming. You were sent to test your new skills before you die. Your master wishes to know if you are strong enough to beat an alpha.”

Germaine stepped back against the dryer. “I am stronger than you.” He smiled as the hum echoed over the cycling machines and a second reaper formed in the room. He was in

worse shape than Germaine and drooled when he growled before attacking Ferguson. There was no reasoning in those eyes, only a hunger and an insane need to kill. Colton didn't wait, he shifted to the shadows and reformed behind Germaine before ripping the reaper's head clean from his body. The reaper's scream pierced his heart, but there was no mercy for a being such as this.

Colton dropped the remains of the reaper as Ferguson did the same with the reaper who had joined them. With both bodies on the floor leaking black blood, he turned to Riley. "Honey, are you okay?"

Her eyebrows were scrunched, and her brow beaded with sweat. "What the hell is Ashkara doing to them? How do you make a reaper into that?"

Ferguson knelt by the body. "His bone structure is returning to normal. They could have been working on this reaper hybrid for some time."

Colton sniffed the air as the smell of rotten meat saturated the room. "What is that?"

Ferguson wiped his nose as if he could remove the overpowering odor. "His body is expelling whatever he was given." He stood, backing away. "Enhanced senses have their drawbacks when forced to inhale fermented reaper."

Colton agreed with Ferguson's assessment, but he was more concerned with Riley's lack of healing. "Riley, are you purging the venom?" he touched her arm gently.

She snapped it closer to her side and a flicker of red glinted in her eyes before she shook her head. "Sorry. It feels like I have fire in my veins. Am I going through another transition?" She glanced at the dead reapers. "I would rather die than turn into that."

Ferguson approached with a look of concern. "If the mutation is contained within their claws, then it could be trying to alter you. Colton, take her to Karam. He is at the wolf clan. I will call Stern for assistance to clean up this mess."

Colton didn't argue. His shadow dissolved encompassing Riley. His molecules swirled around her for several seconds before he realized he had nothing to merge with. Her shadow simply wasn't there. "Shit!"

Ferguson dematerialized and swirled over Dannika before reforming beside Colton. "She has no shadow. I am not sure if it is a permanent or a temporary result of the changes happening within her body."

Riley panted as she clutched her arm. "I'm not a shadow shifter anymore? What am I?"

Ferguson glanced at the dead reapers. "They traveled the pathway, so I don't think this is permanent. Can you shift to your animal form?"

Riley slowed her breathing. Tawny fur bubbled over her arm before subsiding. "I can't connect with my cougar. It's there, but it's like it's sleeping."

"Hopefully, it's the same with your shadow. The venom is blocking your ability to shift," Colton said.

Riley screamed and fell to her knees. Colton and Ferguson were at her side. "Make it stop. Please make it stop."

Colton felt like his heart was being ripped to shreds. The reality that he had failed his mate when she was the only person alive who could save humanity was a bitter pill. If she died, he would follow her, but then, so would the rest of the world. "Riley, tell me what is going on."

She rocked back and forth, clutching her stomach. "My organs are on fire. This is worse than transition."

Colton formed the script in the air, but it disappeared before Ferguson could read the message.

"Who did you call?" Ferguson asked.

"Jace. He can shift inanimate objects to the shadows. I am hoping he will be able to do the same for Riley."

Ferguson nodded. "Good idea. Camar was able to travel with Hakim, so if your cougar clan mate is strong enough, he should be able to travel with her."

Tears streamed down Riley's face and every one of them cut like a steel sword in the Colton's heart. "He isn't as old as Camar and he has never tried to transport a living being. I hope he is up to this because we can't take her outside in broad daylight."

The hum of the pathway vibrated before Jace emerged. His blond hair hung in a surfer cut, making him appear younger than he was. He knelt beside Riley. "Hey, what is going on? Steele told me to get over here immediately, but didn't say why."

Colton touched Riley's hand. "She has been infected with some kind of mutation. She can't shift to the shadows. Neither Ferguson nor I can transport her. We are hoping you can help. I know you haven't done a live transport, but we have no choice."

Jace glanced at the door. "That's not entirely true."

Ferguson touched the young cougar clan member's shoulder. "Tell us what happened."

The young man swallowed. "Are you going to tell Steele?"

Ferguson shook his head. "Riley is our only concern, not your past activities."

"It's not totally in the past."

Colton hissed. "Spill it Jace. What did you do?"

Jace glanced between Ferguson and Colton. "She was dying. Some shitbag shot her in the back. It severed her spine. They would have put her down."

Ferguson's eyes widened. "Are we talking about an animal?"

Jace nodded. "She was a police dog. Her human partner was dead when I arrived. She would have died if I hadn't shifted her to the shadows and repaired the damage before I returned her to her natural form."

Colton and Ferguson shared a look. They were both thinking the same thing. No shadow had such a gift and if he

could repair a dog, perhaps he could pull the venom from Riley's veins. "Can you repair, Riley?"

Jace touched her leg gently. "There is something here I don't recognize. I grew up with dogs, specifically German Shepherds. I know their anatomy. I have never studied the shadows. I don't know if we have differences from our human forms. Internally I mean."

Riley fell back, and Ferguson and Colton eased her to the floor before she curled up into the fetal position.

Colton shook his head. "When did you shift the dog to the shadows?"

"A year ago," Jace said hesitantly.

Ferguson put his hand to Riley's forehead. "She is burning up. Jace, have you checked on the dog since you returned it? Were there any side effects?"

Jace was quiet until Ferguson grabbed his shoulder. "When did you see the dog last?"

Jace swallowed. "Three minutes ago."

Ferguson blinked, and Colton was pretty sure it was hard to surprise the reaper. "Three minutes... you kept it? How could the clan be unaware of her presence?"

"Tonka is really quiet. She doesn't bark, and she is really smart. I shift her to the shadows if there is a danger of her being discovered and I take her hunting so she can do her business. Oh man, don't make me take her back."

Ferguson rubbed his forehead. "I don't think taking her back is an option. We will have to enlighten the queen about your ability, but considering you have had her for a year and were able to keep us unaware of her presence, I believe you are capable of ensuring her safety within your clan."

Jace's face lit up. "You will talk to Steele. Ensure I can keep her?"

Ferguson nodded. "If you can get Riley home safely, then we will thank the dog for training you in this skill."

Jace put his hands on Riley's leg as she moaned on the floor. "I can get her home safely." His shadow dissolved and swirled over Riley. His molecules seemed smaller almost grey as they seeped into Riley's body. Her head snapped back and her scream pierced the air as her body dissolved.

CHAPTER 9



Riley felt like her molecules were a swarm of bees. They circled around the container Jace had created but smashed against the walls attempting to escape. The pain increased the longer they were in the pathway and she was praying for death as they neared the exit into cougar clan territory. She knew emotions were heightened in the pathway, but her pain receptors were on overload, as if every molecule vibrated in agony.

She wondered if shadow molecules could separate. Could she explode into an atomic bomb of demonic origins? Would she destroy everything around her if she did? While she prayed for the pain to stop, she wouldn't allow humanity to suffer for her weakness. When her body reformed on the grass below her and Colton's tree house, she clutched the earth with bloody fingers.

The smell of iron permeated the air around her, and Colton cried out as he exited the pathway behind her.

"What is happening? I thought you were trying to heal her?"

Jace knelt beside Riley. "I was able to remove the venom that was not metabolized by her body, but her tissue is in flux. She tried to shift in the pathway. It would have killed us both."

Colton rubbed his forehead aggressively. "Her fingernails are bleeding."

Riley arched her back. "Take them off!"

She didn't have to explain further, and she was thankful. Her breath came in short gasps as liquid lava poured through her bloodstream. She had noticed a difference since returning to her human form. Perhaps it was the venom Jace had removed from her bloodstream, but she wasn't sure. Colton shifted her clothes to the shadows except for her bra and underwear.

While the irritation against her skin was gone, her spine felt like it was breaking apart. The tiny vertebrae cracked and spit like popcorn in an air fryer. Blood filled her mouth as she struggled to speak. "If I turn into one of those mutant things, promise me you will kill me."

Colton's face was etched in pain and he touched her hand gently. "I promise if it comes to that, we will leave this world together. I can't return to that loneliness. Don't ask that of me."

She forced her throat to swallow the blood in her mouth, hoping the acrid liquid would coat her dry throat. It felt like she had ingested iron-laced syrup and her stomach rolled in response. "Promise me you will see the demons defeated. Help Dannika, and the shadows first. Do that for me."

His lip quivered as his alpha wept. She could see and feel the shadow she had destroyed with her words. It knew she had lost hope. Whatever this was, she had no way to fight it. Ashkara sought her death, and he had found a way to get what he wanted. She guessed he always did, one way or another.

Her jaw dropped open as her back arched into an unnatural proportion and her skin split along the crackling vertebrae. Black blood rolled down her arms, and she imagined a monster in a horror film would have run from the sight of her.

Steele approached them. His eyes were in total shock at the sight unfolding before him. "What happened? What could cause such a thing?"

Jace stood. "The demons are experimenting with the reapers. One of them scratched Riley. His venom is altering her. She says it's worse than transformation."

“She is dying?” Steel asked in a hushed tone.

Jace nodded. “I recommend you get the queen here now. I am not sure she has much time.”

Colton leaned back on his knees before creating the black script in the air. She didn’t have to ask what it said as the hum of the pathway vibrated in the clearing only seconds later.

Dannika formed after Raine and attempted to run to her sister’s side. “No!”

Raine’s hands circled his wife. “She has been infected with something Ashkara created. You cannot touch her. It’s not safe.”

Colton hissed. “She will die for you and you treat her like she is a stain upon...”

Riley growled. “Stop. Raine is right. She can’t touch me. I won’t risk anyone else.”

Dannika got on all fours with her head a foot away from Riley’s. “What is happening?”

Colton sat down, crossing his legs. The look of defeat would have killed her if she weren’t already dying. “She got into a fight with Germaine. He was going insane, and he appeared to be degrading physically from the enhancements done to him, but he scratched her and this is the result.”

Dannika’s eyes widened. “Ashkara is experimenting on the reapers instead of the women?”

“He is still experimenting on women too, but not those who were given Riley’s blood. He is killing those Hakim experimented on with Riley’s blood,” Colton said.

“The experiments on the reapers are failing, then? Will that help us?”

Colton’s eyes remained on Riley. “I fought Breck. He was enhanced, but he showed no signs of degradation. He is stronger and faster. Like an alpha, though he wasn’t meant to be.”

“Why would he experiment on the reapers? That wasn’t part of Deruthel’s plan, was it?”

Riley shook her head, but the small action split the skin at her neck. Her chest was instantly coated in black blood, though she looked like she was covered in tar. The hum of the pathway opening ended in a roar as Ferguson raced to Dannika’s side.

His shoulders rolled with black smoke, and the undertone of his powerful alpha echoed in the air as he spoke. “This cannot be. She should be immune.”

Dannika put her hand on Ferguson’s arm as tears streaked down her face. “It isn’t demon venom. Well, not exactly. Ashkara has made some kind of mutation and experimented on the reapers.”

“I know. I saw Breck, but it is ordained that you and Riley live to lead this war. I was promised.”

Dannika scrunched her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“A seer long ago told me there would be female shadows. I called her a liar. I was so close to killing indiscriminately at the time that I didn’t want to believe her prophecy,” Ferguson said.

“Did she say whether we would win against the demons?” Dannika asked.

“I assumed the war she spoke of was between the reapers and the shadows. I knew nothing of demons at the time.” He glanced around the clearing at the devastated faces. “Where is Karam? He should be trying to heal her.”

Steele knelt on the ground. “Jace, go get Karam. He is in the sanctuary. One of the children broke an arm rough-housing with his friends.”

Jace nodded and disappeared.

Steele cleared his throat. “Ferguson, you know Karam is unable to assist in a transition. The body must know what it is before he can repair it.”

Ferguson growled. “You should have called him to try. Even if he can dampen her pain, it is something.”

Colton whispered so low; Riley barely heard him. “I should have thought of that.”

Riley wanted to reassure him. She knew Karam couldn’t heal her. She was changing and didn’t know what that new form would look like or if she would live through the process. A growl echoed in her mind and it was not that of a cougar or wolf. Was she to be some kind of mutant animal as well? Would Colton keep his word when the time came? Would Ferguson take pity on her mate and carry out the death sentence for him? She hoped so.

The bones in her neck cracked and popped as she turned to the ancient reaper. As soon as their eyes met, he knew what she was asking of him.

“No!” Ferguson hissed.

The pathway hummed before Karam, and Jace formed beside Riley. The healer put his hand to his mouth. “Dear god. When you said she had been scratched... I didn’t expect this.”

“Can you help her?” Colton asked.

Karam knelt beside Riley and put his hand on hers. There was a flux of power, as if his molecules mixed with hers for just a moment before it receded. “I am not sure what to turn her into. Both shadow and animal are mixing. The new tissue is more amendable, but she has already transitioned. Shifted to her animal.”

Jace looked away as Ferguson stood.

“Jace, is there anything you can do?”

Karam moved his hands over Riley. “Jace is not a healer. Her tissue is changing and I cannot heal what is not broken. She doesn’t know what she is. It is the same when I attempt to aid in a transition.”

Ferguson kept his eyes on Jace. “But he has repaired tissue using the shadows. He is contemplating something.”

Karam looked up at Jace. “You healed a fellow shadow?”

Jace glanced at Steele, who had narrowed his gaze on the young shadow. “Jace, is there something you can do? We don’t have time for an explanation if you have an idea. Now is the time.”

Jace glanced at Riley. “I noticed something when I traveled with her. Something I only notice when traveling with the other clans. I can’t be sure unless I infuse her body and look for a template. They all have slight differences and...”

Ferguson held up his hand. “Jace, we don’t understand your ability. Whatever you are thinking. Just do it. Riley does not have a lot of time.”

Jace took a deep breath and dissolved. He moved over Riley’s body like a swarm of smoke, becoming less and less dense as his molecules filled the gaps between hers.

It wasn’t like the power of the healer. She felt like she was a map and he was looking for a route to a destination only he understood. Something new and untraveled. A treasure map to a forgotten city. Her breath caught in her lungs when he found what he was looking for.

Her body seized as he took control of every molecule, forcing it to follow the path he had designed. There was something familiar yet foreign about the blueprint he imposed in her mind and fur rippled along her arm before she realized what he had uncovered in their short trip in the pathway together. There were gaps in that blueprint, but he filled in those missing spaces from another shadow he traveled with often.

She embraced the change, hoping the young shadow could follow through on his unfathomable plan, because what he had chosen to try was nothing short of a miracle. The dark fur sprung from the splits in her skin like a blooming garden before the incisors cut through her gums and her mouth elongated, attempting to accept the new floor plan created by the ingenuity of the shadow.

Her body jolted as she completed the change in hyper speed. The new blueprint imprinted by Jace didn’t include the demon venom and her bones broke and reformed in a roar of

pain. She growled and swatted at the shadow who had caused her so much pain.

Dannika and Ferguson moved away from her with a look of shock and wonder.

Ferguson turned to Jace as he reformed several feet from Riley. The young shadow looked tired, and he clearly needed to feed. “What happened to her?”

Jace rubbed his neck uncomfortably. “She has bear DNA. I think she would have shifted, eventually.” He glanced at Dannika. “So does the queen. When Karam said new tissue is easier to heal, I assumed it would be easier to meld. Her bear had never formed before and the blueprint wasn’t complete so I had to fill in the gaps.”

Colton put his hand out to Riley, but she growled and swatted it away. “Is she still in pain? Is the venom...”

Jace held up his hand. “I made a new blueprint for her bear and didn’t include the venom. Since she had never shifted to a bear before, her mind accepted the new blueprint.”

Steele was staring at Riley in awe. “You created a poly shifter blue print? How is this possible?”

Jace shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with explaining his talent. “I couldn’t do it for someone who wasn’t a poly shifter already. She had the natural ability, it just wasn’t realized yet.”

“What did you mean by filling in the gaps?” Raine asked.

“Well, she wasn’t ready to shift into a bear form yet, but we needed her to do it now, so I filled in the information she was missing.”

“How?” Steele asked.

“I travel with Stern all the time. We hunt together. I am familiar with his bear and every molecule that creates it. His blood is that of the queens and Riley’s. I feel the similarities. I used his blueprint for the missing sequences. Other than being female, she is pretty much his twin.”

Steele’s eyes widened. “How did you learn to do this? There has never been a shadow with this type of skill.”

Jace turned to Ferguson. “You promised.”

Ferguson stood, pulling Dannika to her feet. “And I will keep that promise. Why don’t you bring Tonka here so we can all meet the... creator of this gift?”

Steele turned to Ferguson. “We have another shadow? He turned someone without telling me?”

Jace held up his hands. “She isn’t a shadow.” He dissolved as Riley growled.

Colton tried to soothe her, but her body was still recovering from the trauma the young shadow had imposed. She understood he had saved her life and could comprehend that the young man had performed a miracle, but her body still heaved as her internal organs continued to burn with the stress placed on them. “Honey, can you shift?”

She hadn’t considered trying to return to her human form, but now seemed like a good time. Her human body formed in her mind and she could feel her soul reach for the form it knew better than any other. While her mind and body knew what it wanted, even needed, her molecules would not cooperate. Fear sparked in her eyes as she looked at her mate.

“She can’t shift. I can’t feel her shadow?” Colton said.

“What do we do? None of us speak bear,” Raine said.

Dannika’s eyes met Riley’s. “Get Stern here. Jace said she is basically his twin in bear form. If anyone can communicate with her, it’s him.”

Colton created a message in black script. “I called him to us. The bear clan receivers will send him to us. I haven’t explained, just said it’s urgent.”

Raine arched an eyebrow. “Which receiver did you call?”

Colton met the gaze of the wolf clan leader. “All of them.”

CHAPTER 10



Riley's body became lethargic as the pain subsided. The reprieve gave her a chance to understand the new body that Jace had created for her. She understood he was right about the form being there already. It felt right to her, like an uncut diamond or a mound of clay yet to be molded.

She replayed the events of her transformation as she lay down on the earth. Colton sat beside her running his hand over her fur in a reverent manner. She had no doubt that if she was unable to shift to her human form, he would stay with her until she took her last breath. Her mate was happy simply because she was alive.

She had heard the conversation between Ferguson and Jace. She knew what Tonka was, but the prospect was still intriguing. Every person in the clearing was looking at her until the pathway hummed and Jace coalesced in the clearing. He put up his hand to Steele. "Don't freak out." The molecules around his legs swirled and formed a German Sheppard with its tongue lolling out of its mouth.

Dannika's jaw dropped. "A shadow dog?"

Jace shook his head. "She is just a dog. I mean, I healed her, but she is a normal dog."

Dannika shook her head. "I haven't been able to get near an animal since I transitioned. How is she comfortable with us?"

Jace glanced down at Tonka. "She was afraid of me when she was dying, but after I healed her, she wasn't."

Ferguson narrowed his gaze on the dog. “Jace, how did you heal her, exactly?”

“Same as I did for Riley, I guess. I fill in the gaps for the missing tissue.”

Steele shook his head. “A dog. You have been hiding a dog?”

“Only for a year.”

“A year!” Steele snapped.

Ferguson stared at the dog. “You filled in the gaps using shadow molecules.”

Jace nodded. “Yes.”

“She didn’t transition? What does she eat?” Ferguson asked.

Jace bent down and pet Tonka. “She likes canned dog food, but loves salmon and steak. I take it from the grocery store after hours and leave the money on the counter. I swear I never stole any of her food.”

Ferguson walked over to the dog and put his hand out. Tonka licked it and arched her eyebrows expectantly.

Jace cleared his throat. “He doesn’t have any snacks, Tonka.”

Ferguson’s lip twitched. “Not today, but I will rectify that the next time I see her.”

Tonka wagged her tail excitedly, as if she had understood every word.

Steele threw his hands up. “Am I the only person that thinks this is unnatural?”

Dannika moved over to pet the dog with Raine beside her. “If you want to throw stones, then technically Riley and I are unnatural. While we can’t steal pets from the human world, her existence is extraordinary.”

Jace explained Tonka was a police dog who had lost her partner in a shootout and was dying when he found her.

Dannika listened to the story, nodding her head occasionally. “Did the humans not look for her? Police dogs are considered officers and her department would have sent out a search party.”

Jace swallowed hard. “Yeah, I thought of that. I couldn’t fix her and send her back. I knew I had changed her enough that someone might notice. She heals faster than a dog should now.”

Dannika crossed her arms. “They didn’t look for her. How did you explain her disappearance?”

Jace looked at the queen sheepishly. “I went to an animal clinic. Three, actually, until I found the body of a German Sheppard. It had been put down due to cancer. I shifted the body to the shadows and installed the bullet hole I removed from Tonka and placed the body by the dead police officer. They believed that she died protecting her master, which would have been true. She was seconds from death when I found her. I didn’t take anything from the humans they hadn’t already lost.” His eyes filled with tears. “Please don’t make me give her up.”

Dannika glanced at Steele. “What do you mean, she can heal?”

“Well, she tore her fur on a jagged rock when we were running by the river and it healed in a couple of hours. She is still mortal, but I think she will live longer than a normal dog. I’m not sure, really. She is the only living organism I have shifted to the shadows, besides fellow shadows.”

Dannika put her hand on Jace’s shoulder. “You used this extraordinary talent to save my sister. We are all thankful for this gift. You do understand that we don’t know what your interference has had on Tonka, and you will keep her so we can learn. You have to agree that there will be no other animals or humans altered in this way unless we talk about it first. Since Tonka has been with you a year and you were able to seclude her from all the clans, you have already proven she will stay by your side.”

Jace looked down. “Even to help the animals?”

Dannika dropped her hand. “We must discuss any interference in the human world going forward.”

Jace nodded. “There is this cat at the shelter and she is really cute. Tonka likes her and...”

Steele growled, but Ferguson stepped in front of the young shadow. “Do not reprimand the boy for having an affinity for animals. He would have been a veterinarian had he not been attacked by Maddock’s clan and survived the transition. He was reaper bitten, and yet has none of the taint that usually accompanies such a turn.”

Jace glanced at Colton. “He gave me his blood and helped me transition to clan life. He loves animals too.”

Colton cocked his head to the side. “How do you know that? I transitioned long ago and have never gotten near an animal since.”

Jace shrugged. “I can feel it. Everyone here likes animals, loves them even, but you have accepted they won’t be part of our life. That doesn’t have to be the case.”

Raine huffed. “I am finding it hard to imagine Ferguson with a dog.”

Jace looked at the ancient reaper. “He had a cat. A white one he named winter.”

Ferguson’s eyes widened. “You can read minds?”

Jace shook his head. “No. Animals are a part of us. We connect with them as shadows and the human ones leave a... imprint on our souls that transition cannot alter. You loved her, so she is always with you.”

Ferguson looked to the forest. “What an unusual and beautiful gift you have.”

Tonka barked and Jace sighed. “I know. I will feed soon.”

Steel pointed at the dog. “You can communicate with her?”

Jace smiled. “No differently than her human partner did. She is intelligent and can tell when I am weak. She wants me

to feed and knows she will get to run. She used to hunt criminals, now she hunts deer.”

Dannika smiled at Jace. “You are a miracle, Jace. Take Tonka and head to the forest. I actually feel better that she is there to protect you.”

The pathway hummed. As Stern formed beside Jace he looked down at the dog. “Holy shit, Jace. You came clean about the dog.”

Jace’s molecules swirled around Tonka as the German Sheppard began to dissolve. “Yes, but I didn’t tell them you knew about her.”

Jace disappeared into the pathway as Stern turned. “Ah fuck.”

Dannika smirked. “We didn’t call you to talk about Tonka, though I am curious how long you knew about her.”

Stern glanced at Riley. “Two months now. Who is the new transition? Wait, that’s a female.”

“That’s Riley. Jace had to shift her to a bear to save her life after a mutant reaper slashed her. He is used to your ... map, as he calls it, to fill in any gaps in her bear road map. She can’t communicate or shift to her human form, so we are hoping you can help.”

Stern knelt down in front of Riley. “He explained how he saved Tonka, but I had no idea he could do something like this.”

Dannika stared at Riley. “He didn’t either. He created her bear form to save her. I’m sure you can see the similarities to yours.”

Stern ran a hand over Riley’s fur. “She is a smaller and obviously female, but other than that, she is identical to me. I can actually feel her.”

Colton kissed the top of Riley’s head. “Can you help her?”

Several of the queen’s reapers exited the forest, walking toward Stern and the new bear. They were obviously curious who the new member was.

Ryder exited the pathway and his gaze fell on Riley immediately. “A new bear clan member? Why wasn’t I notified?”

“It’s Riley, Ryder,” Dannika said.

The man leading the small group of reapers stopped. “That is the queen’s sister? Why is she a bear? We were not informed she had this form.”

Ferguson growled low. “It is not the queen’s responsibility to enlighten you about other members’ gifts or abilities. Riley has no idea what your skills are reaper.”

The reaper’s eyes flickered with red. “She agreed to keep us informed. Full disclosure, I believe she said. This is yet another lie.”

Dannika held up her hand. “Layton, I just learned of this myself. She only shifted a few minutes ago. Her bear form is not a secret. Everyone is aware we have a poly shifter bloodline.”

Layton narrowed his gaze on the queen. “Can you shift into a bear?”

Dannika paused for a few seconds. “Not yet, but it is likely I will be able to later.”

Layton huffed, and it was obvious he didn’t trust his queen. Ferguson’s control on the reaper clan was slipping. “You do not treat us as equals and you will use us as pawns in the demon war. When you lead, we will fight and not before.”

Ferguson growled, but Riley attempted to move, finding her body was heavier than before. Her strength was slipping, and she lacked the ability to feed. “What is wrong with her, Stern?”

Stern touched Riley’s fur. “She is too weak from the shift. She needs to feed, but is incapable of it. I don’t think she should remain in her bear form right now. It’s too risky.”

Colton grabbed Stern’s wrist. “She can’t shift back. That’s the problem. Can you find a way to help her? Figure out what she needs to strengthen herself.”

Stern concentrated on Riley. “She needs blood, but not animal.”

Colton shook his head. “She will never feed on a human.”

Stern turned to Dannika. “She needs blood replaced. Not to feed on. You are the only poly shifter and her twin.”

Layton hissed. “The queen will not give blood to any clan member. If she favors her sister, then she is no better than Maddock.”

Dannika’s shoulders flared with black smoke. “Maddock would have murdered his own son. He is a piss-poor example of a leader. I would watch my tongue if I were you before I am tempted to remove it.”

Ferguson moved in front of Dannika. “That is my job, my queen. You promised not to rob me of these little pleasantries.”

His low tone forced everyone in the clearing to stop and listen. The deadly nature and calm way in which he expressed his statement was not lost on Layton. He paled, but didn’t back down.

“I will not be cowed down by you any longer, Ferguson. You have proven less worthy than the queen. At least she took the opportunity to seize power. You ran from it.”

Ferguson’s smile could stop a snake in its tracks. “I am right here and am not running from anything. Especially from the likes of you. Why don’t we take this discussion to a more private setting?”

There was no doubt in Riley’s mind about what would happen if the reapers left with Ferguson. The ancient reaper’s eyes glinted with red death. He had come to the end of his patience with the reapers who followed Layton.

Layton stepped back, as did his followers. “You can’t threaten me.”

Ferguson’s eyes flickered. “Really. That’s exactly what I am doing.”

Layton turned to the queen. “If you show preference to your sister, then you can expect repercussions.”

Ferguson lunged at the reaper, but Dannika put a restraining hand on his arm. "Don't. I can deal with this." She turned to Layton. "I will help Riley and if you don't like it, then you can discuss alternate accommodations with Ferguson."

Layton huffed. "Typical. A woman who won't lead her followers, but will set her guard dog upon them."

Dannika's eyes narrowed. "You seem awfully intent on my leading the reapers into war. Tell me why you need a woman to fight your battles for you?"

Layton's eyes blazed. "I need no man or woman to fight for me, but a king or queen should fight with her own."

Ferguson's shoulders rippled with smoke as he alpha emerged. "Enough. She will never fight in the war. She is priceless and you are nothing but a pathetic excuse for a shadow who cowers behind those that are better than him. Leave or I will drop you where you stand."

Layton acknowledged the death in Ferguson's eyes. He whirled around with his followers behind him. "The queen is a farce!" he shouted as he strode away.

Dannika held out her arm. "Karam, can you take my blood and give it to Riley?"

The healer glanced at the trees. "Jace was going to bring my supplies from the sanctuary after he fed."

Jace coalesced a minute later and dropped the medical bag off for Karam. "I have to go. Tonka is tracking a rabbit. She doesn't eat them, but she sure likes chasing them." He dematerialized before anyone could respond.

Ferguson's alpha receded. "Is it me, or does he have a calming effect? It's almost like the priest."

Dannika hissed as Karam inserted the needle. "A priest for animals? Is that a thing?"

Ferguson's gaze fell to the needle as it filled with blood. "Maybe. Karam, do not take too much."

Karam nodded as Dannika give the ancient reaper a withering look. “Who is acting like a father now?”

The healer pulled the needle from Dannika’s arm and pressed the plunger until a drop of blood exited the end. “I will give this to Riley, but there could be side effects. I don’t understand the process Jace used to create this form, so I can’t predict the effects.”

Colton nodded. “I don’t care, as long as Riley is alive.”

Karam inserted the needle into Riley’s neck as she growled. He was quick and efficient in administering the blood, and Riley felt the thrum of power race through her. It was different from her experience with Jace. She recognized this blood. It was like her own.

In seconds, her shadow rose from the depths of her soul, and her body began to morph. She took her first pain-free breath with human lungs. “Let’s not do that again,” Riley said.

Colton hugged her, kissing her cheek. “Agreed. You almost gave me a heart attack. Welcome back, princess.”

Dannika hugged her next. “I agree with Colton. You should be declared clan princess.”

Riley laughed. “I don’t think he meant it like that.”

Jace coalesced beside them with Tonka at his feet. He had a large slash in his chest.

Ferguson’s eyes flared. “Who did that to you?”

Jace struggled for breath. “Layton. Tonka and I came across him and his followers. He was meeting Breck. He attacked me and Tonka took a chunk out of his leg before I shifted us to the shadows.”

CHAPTER 11



Riley kept her arm around Colton's waist. While trying to focus on Jace and Tonka. He was double-checking the feisty German Sheppard hadn't been scratched or ingested any reaper blood.

"She has blood in her teeth but doesn't appear to have any adverse effects. It's the first time she has bitten a shadow," Jace said.

Dannika knelt down and pet Tonka. "What a good girl you are. I wanted to bite that nasty reaper too."

Ferguson eyes blazed as they narrowed in on the queen. "Tonka likely has some immunity due to your alternations in her body structure. We can give her a medal later for protecting Jace, but we need to discuss the repercussions for this defection and the reasoning."

Dannika stood and turned to her reaper clan leader. "If Layton had any idea what Jace could do, he would have taken him, not attacked him."

Jace ran his hand over Tonka's back. "She will die before she lets someone take me."

Ferguson's eyes softened. "I know. Tonka is more trustworthy than the entire reaper clan. Your safety is her only purpose. Dannika is right. We should keep your ability under wraps until this war is over. Tonka has been seen but everybody know you can shift anything to the shadows. We will be honest about your securing a pet without permission and omit the rest of the story."

Jace nodded. “Whatever you want. I’m just happy I don’t have to hide her anymore.”

Colton’s fingers played over Riley’s arm. The caress was soft and comforting, but her vision was starting to blur and refocus and she hoped it wasn’t an aftereffect of Dannika’s blood.

Riley cleared her throat. “I’m pretty sure they defected because you gave me your blood. I just don’t understand why they think that instigates a betrayal. Don’t most family members help their own?”

Ferguson shook his head. “Despite Layton’s words, I don’t believe their defection has anything to do with Dannika.”

The queen arched her eyebrows. “Why would you think that? I’ve had push back from Layton and his little group since I took over the reaper clan. Layton and Breck never got along, so I am still surprised by this defection.”

“Yes, that is off-putting. Since they have seen the damage, this mutation can do to the shadows, I find it hard to believe they would willingly join Ashkara’s experiment,” Ferguson said.

Riley grabbed her head when the trees began to spin around her. “Damn.”

Colton steadied her, pulling her against his body. “Riley. What is going on? Do you need to feed?”

“No. I feel dizzy, not hungry. I think I need to lie down,” she said.

Karam pointed to the tree house. “I would like to monitor Riley for a little while. I will go up with her and get her settled while you discuss the reapers.”

Colton turned her chin to meet his gaze. “Are you alright with me staying down here for a bit?”

Riley glanced up at the tree house. “You can see our bedroom from here. I will be fine. I would like to see if I can shift to the shadows and travel up by myself.”

“All right.”

Riley connected with her shadow, willing her molecules to separate and enter the pathway. The pain was minimal and her molecules felt electrically charged as if Dannika's blood had given her a boost. It took only a second to jump from the ground up to the tree house and into her living room. She coalesced a couple of seconds before Karam.

The healer looked her over. "You did not appear to have any struggles entering the pathway."

"No. It was fine. I am just a little tired. Actually, I feel better after shifting to my shadow form."

Karam smiled. "Your body may have needed a reset. What Jace did is quite frankly, a miracle, and I intend to harness his skill to aid in healing the children."

"They already have shadow blood. He could just shift them to the shadows and repair a broken bone," Riley said.

Karam nodded. "Many of us believed we were cursed and since Dannika's emergence, we have been given so many gifts, including your father. Our perception of our species is changing, and you and your sister are the catalyst."

"We have nothing to do with Jace's ability," she said.

Karam's eyes sparkled. "Yet this new faucet of his skill emerged only months before Dannika's transition. Some would call it coincidence while others would call it fate."

"And you? What do you think?" Riley asked.

"That nature provides what a species needs to survive. Any illusions we were cursed have been replaced by hope."

Riley hugged Karam, simply thankful he was part of their clan. Their family. Clan structure was changing, forcing them to work as a single clan. The wolf clan had a cartographer and an influencer. The cougar clan had a healer and Jace, whose skill was too incredible to define. She wondered what they would call it. The bear clan were all strong warriors, and she wondered what ability would emerge there next.

They both turned as the hum of the pathway vibrated and Layton coalesced in the room. His demon sword arced, cutting

through Karam's neck, practically dislodging his head as the healer clutched his neck and fell to the ground. The attack happened so fast he never made a sound before his blood began to spread across the floor.

Riley screamed, but a hand clamped over her mouth and a swarm of black mist overtook her body. The reaper behind her had an ability similar to Jace. He commanded her body to shift to the shadows and her weak attempt to fight him ended with her molecules separating and him imposing his will.

She flew across the pathway in pain, attempting to break free of the container that the reaper had placed her in. An invisible cage in which he held the key. She felt the anger and pain of the shadows following them, but the reaper who held her was fast and when their pursuers got too close, the thread vibrated with pain and loss. The reapers broke the stream and since they no longer had a creator, it was gone forever.

Her body dropped to the floor, and she whirled on her captor with a hiss. This reaper was not one of Breck's followers. "Who are you?"

Layton formed beside the reaper she didn't recognize. "This is Camar. He was once one of Breck's followers, but he came to me when he learned what Ashkara had in store for the reapers. Breck is a fool. He wishes to be Ashkara's dog. We wish to rule and the mutants will destroy this world before we can conquer it."

Riley glanced at the racks of guns on the walls beside the glass display of legalized self defense items. The lights were off and the room dark, but she recognized the pepper spray and the electronic whistles. There was another shelf full of holsters gun cases and cleaning kits along with various sized ammunition. "You think you're going to be the next reaper leader?"

Layton put his hands behind his back as he walked in front of the counter with a cash register. "I will not be the leader. I will be Deruthel's lieutenant."

She pointed to the array of guns. "You think you can kill Ashkara with guns? There's nothing in this gun store that can

kill a demon, let alone the king.”

Layton surveyed the shop. “This is not a gun shop. It is a shooting range. I care nothing for its contents, only that it is slated for some upgrades while the owner is away. We will not be bothered for at least a month. More than enough time to enact our plan. And you are going to help us.”

She swore under her breath. Layton had been planning this all along and they had fallen for his ploy of opposing the queen because she wouldn’t lead. Had he been working for Deruthel this entire time? “The general is gone. The portal is severed permanently. You have no way to bring Deruthel through, no matter what precaution he put in place.”

Layton laughed. “On the contrary, I speak with him often. You are correct in your assumption that the portal is permanently severed, but what Ashkara did was unnatural, and the universe has found a way to reclaim what was lost.”

Reclaim what was lost? The words echoed in her mind. Could this be what Emmanuel was talking about? That returning Deruthel to his body in our world was the only way they had a chance to win the war? With the power he had access to now, the general would be stronger than ever. Deruthel had proven to be a far better strategist than his father, and she was no longer sure he was the better option. “Assuming I believe what you’re saying. I’m going to need a little more information.”

Layton shrugged. “I will answer your questions, but you will help us either way.”

“What is wrong with the other reapers? What did Ashkara do to them?” she asked.

Layton growled. “Breck was a fool. He allowed Ashkara to experiment on his brethren. They were given doses of the King’s blood. The first few died immediately, but they decreased the dosage and mixed it with shadow blood. Breck appears stable, so it appears the king has stabilized the serum he is using. But they have no breeders. Ashkara intends to kill you, and you are an essential ingredient to create a breeder pool.”

Riley pursed her lips. “He is murdering anyone who was given my blood. Why?”

Layton hissed. “He fears Deruthel and you are the only one who can return the general to his body.”

“I’m not sure how I could do that, but why do you feel that Deruthel is a better option than Ashkara. They will both turn this realm into nothing more than a farm.”

Layton raised his eyebrows. “You are right, but Deruthel will have reapers and shadow women. Ashkara has mutated his, and those mutations will continue to evolve in ways neither Ashkara nor Deruthel can predict. He has done it before and it never worked out.”

Riley’s heart skipped. “Done what before?”

“Mutated residents of a new world. The king likes his experiments. It has never ended well.”

“What happened on the previous worlds?” she asked.

“They turned into something close to a demon, but their appetite was unmatched by any except the king. He was forced to kill every one of his mutations on every world because he lost control of them. Deruthel has put down more experiments than you can fathom. Not hundreds, or thousands, but worlds full of them.”

Riley shook her head. “Why would Ashkara attempt that again if all the others failed? He knows he cannot leave this world. He has to make a sustainable ecosystem, as screwed up as his intentions are.”

Layton nodded. “That is true, but his actions have made this impossible. He knows the reaper mutants will evolve past his ability to control them, but he will use them to slaughter his demon children.”

“What?” she gasped.

“The only way to make this realm a permanent home for the demon king is for him to be the last demon standing. He cares nothing for breeders as he intends to let his species die off except for him.”

Riley huffed. “You believe that? How can you be sure this isn’t Deruthel’s propaganda? He will say anything to ensure your help.”

Layton smiled. “You are intelligent. Of course, I considered this, but in Deruthel’s current body, he has unimaginable power. He will give that up to return here, but he shared his mind with me. I saw both his and Ashkara’s plan. The king has too many variables he has yet to account for. Deruthel has anticipated every outcome and has three strategies for any contingency. This is why he was able to leave a single thread to our world.” Riley’s mind rolled over the implications of Layton’s words. “His body can’t come back, only his mind. How did he create this thread?”

“I will tell you everything...” he glanced at the brochure rack, but his eyes appeared glazed over as if he were conferring with another. “Actually, Deruthel wishes to discuss the terms of your surrender and acceptance of the new regime himself.”

Riley forced her voice to remain even. “If Deruthel plans to create a stable ecosystem, what will happen to the demons, mutant reapers, and shadows?”

Layton’s eyes flickered with red. “The shadows that possess unique abilities will be given an opportunity to join Deruthel’s clan. The mutant reapers, the demons and the remaining shadows will be purged.”

CHAPTER 12



Riley walked over to a shelf containing T-shirts and caps with the shooting range logo. The foot bags for carrying weapons, protective earmuffs and paper targets sat beside it. She noticed the waiting area in the corner of the room with a black leather couch and matching chair with the coffee table covered in hunting magazines. She sat down on the couch, placing her arm on the back casually before she crossed her legs.

Layton's eyes moved over her with overt interest. "Please make yourself at home."

"How do you speak with Deruthel? We had an arrangement before he was banished to the previous realm. Provided he will make certain concessions I am happy to keep our original agreement. I have no loyalty to the demon king."

Layton glanced at Camar. "I will arrange a meeting between you and Deruthel, but I wish to get some information on the shadows and their abilities first. Dannika was not forthcoming with the reaper clan. We know about the cartographer and the compeller, in the wolf clan but little about the abilities in other clans."

"Raine calls it influencing. Not compelling." The reapers already knew about Raine's ability correcting the name made her appear to comply without adding new information.

Layton smiled. "He can call it what he wishes. He will be offered a position with our clan as will the cartographer."

“Since you killed the healer, I find it hard to believe you plan to offer all those with abilities an alternative to death.”

Layton sighed. “While a healer is considered a boon in the shadow clans, we do not want such a skill in the new regime. His death was foreordained. Only the strong shall survive and only a limited few will be allowed a mate. Tell us about the cougar clan. What extraordinary abilities does it possess other than the healer.”

“She glanced at Camar.” Jace had told them he was attacked. Layton had met Tonka. “Jace has the ability to shift anything to the shadows.”

Layton growled. “I met him and his pet. He is new to his gift, but I have Camar for such things.”

Camar glanced at Layton. “There is another with my gift?”

Layton nodded. “He is young and has adopted a pet dog. He is shifting it to the shadows. I imagine it is his way of practicing with a living creature. He is not a reaper and is still confined by his conscious.”

Riley bit her cheek to stop the obvious response to the Layton’s comment. Jace was a gift, and Camar was a monster.

Camar’s eyes flickered with red. “I wish to be the only one. This cougar must be purged.”

Layton waved his hand negligently. “I have no use for another. Riley, what other gifts are you aware of?”

“I don’t know many of the bear members and have no idea what gifts they have. Honestly, it isn’t something I have asked about. I can tell you that Ferguson is faster than anything I have ever seen, and I believe he has far more power than you realize.” She was thankful she had never asked about individual gifts. She hadn’t told them anything new and her statement about Ferguson was also the truth. They had to suspect he was more than he let on.

Layton’s lip twitched. “I agree. He has never been forthcoming about his secondary gift. His ability as a receiver is secondary, despite being able to create crude maps.”

“You seem to know more about him than I do,” she said.

“I was in the same clan with him since my transition two hundred years ago. Like him, I kept my primary ability to myself.”

Her heart stuttered. If Ferguson didn't know what Layton's power was, then they wouldn't expect it. “What is your ability?”

“You will find out soon enough.”

Her fingers pinched the black leather of the couch. “You still haven't told me why Ashkara wants me dead. Why he is killing all the females with my blood?”

“I told you it's because you are the only one who can bring back Deruthel.”

“But you haven't told me how? What is so special about my blood? Dannika and I are twins. Ashkara is not going after her.”

Layton shook his head. “The queen's blood is corrupted and even Deruthel is yet to figure out what happened. It was not originally so. He wishes to ensure you do not follow in your sister's footsteps. Deruthel hopes to correct the damage to your sister's blood, but if she cannot become whole, she will be purged.”

“Not going to happen,” Riley hissed.

Layton chuckled. “I wondered when your true nature would surface. Despite my origins, I prefer honesty between us. I will not lie to you Riley and so far you have done me the same courtesy. I expect that to continue.”

“Tell me what is special about my blood.”

Layton inclined his head. “Very well. Only your blood allows the communication between our world and the previous realm. The window is short and we must use more and more of our supply to create the thread of consciousness.”

Riley glanced between Camar and Layton. “Thread of consciousness? How do you create such a thing? Is this to do with the portal?”

Layton arched an eyebrow. “My gift is telepathy, but I can only create this bond with those I share blood with. I exchanged with Deruthel before he was banished to the former demon home world.”

Riley blinked several times. “How did Deruthel learn of your ability if you didn’t share this with Breck or the other reapers?”

Layton glanced at Camar. “Only my brother knows of my skill. We have worked behind the scenes to prompt Breck and Ashkara into certain actions. Deruthel knew there was a chance Ashkara would make a final play for his mind, leaving him no time to enact his counter-measures, so he created a back door. Me.”

“I assume this is a rare skill,” she said.

“It is. Camar has always been coveted for his ability, so we used that to stay informed in clan politics. I sent Camar with Breck while I remained with Dannika and with our telepathic connection, we manipulated both clans.”

Riley huffed. “You were not able to manipulate Dannika though, were you? All that bullshit about her leading the reapers into war was just a distraction.”

“Very good, Riley. Dannika began to suspect as much and when Breck ordered my brother to take the king’s blood, I was forced to put Deruthel’s plan into action. Besides, I couldn’t let him kill you. We have plans for you.”

“If you can already talk to Deruthel, why do you need me?” she asked.

“I have a telepathic bond with him, but I still need your blood just to create the connection. This thread we use is precarious, and it is collapsing. Your severing of the worlds was stronger than Deruthel expected. Soon the thread will cease to exist. Only you can stabilize it long enough for Deruthel’s mind to traverse the worlds.”

“He thinks I can help him switch their consciousness?”

“It’s unlikely Ashkara’s mind will make it back to the previous world. His consciousness will be trapped when the

thread snaps and he will be lost to the void. His body will remain a very large and powerful vegetable.”

“When does Deruthel think the thread will snap for good? How much time do we have?”

Layton rubbed his chin. “Not long. A week maybe. We had planned to put some additional pieces in place before we made our move, but Ashkara’s fear and attempts on your life have moved up our timetable. We will start the process now.”

“You said you used my blood to open communications with Deruthel. How?” she asked.

“Deruthel is in possession of your blood supply. I told you he plans for every contingency. It was the theft of your blood that made Ashkara aware that Deruthel may have an alternate means of interacting with this world. He is not aware of my ability or how this process works, but he knows Deruthel is an unmatched military genius. He is wise to fear his son.”

Riley nodded. “I agree that the general is intelligent, but Ashkara has the means to possess the minds of his followers. How come he didn’t do that to you? If he had learned about your ability.”

Layton moved his fingers in a black script formed before him. “I am also a receiver. Everyone thinks that my discussions with my brother are through script. Camar is also a receiver. It is such a common talent among the shadows that no one covets it. Especially not a king that can crush the will of his subjects.”

Riley nibbled her lip. “Your strategies could rival Deruthel’s. Surely you have considered he won’t let you live once the war is won.”

Layton inclined his head. “You are far more intelligent than I realized. Yes, I asked Deruthel about this, but he is far more powerful now that he has had access to Ashkara’s body. He has knowledge he didn’t possess before and will retain that knowledge when he returns to his body. He can overtake another’s mind, including mine, so he has no need to kill me. He can use my ability at his leisure.”

“That sounds reasonable, but tell me why you agreed to this. You will never be a king with Deruthel as your leader.”

“That is also true, but it is a choice between Deruthel or Ashkara. Deruthel has the military strategy to understand the limitations of this realm. Ashkara has already broken them with his creation of the mutant reapers.”

“With you here, there is no one to keep you informed of the demon’s actions. Ashkara could be aware of this plan by now. Since you pulled Camar as your spy, how would you know?”

Layton laughed. “You think that Camar is the only spy within the demon camp? I have told you multiple times that Deruthel prepares for every eventuality. I am a superior strategist. A skill that Killian, used to his advantage often. His son was too stupid to acknowledge my skills and turned to Breck instead. But Deruthel recognized my abilities immediately, and we have consorted since his arrival. Every action and reaction by both the shadows and the demon king have been anticipated and accounted for.”

Deruthel had seen what she did now. An intelligent reaper who was too proud to be passed over. He fell in with the demon general because Julius hadn’t acknowledged his military genius. He may have ensured the destruction of this world because his feelings were hurt. Well, if reapers had feelings. More like stubborn pride.

She did have to know that he was right about Deruthel. The Demon general hadn’t put one failsafe in place. He had several. Anticipating multiple actions and reactions. His forward thinking was unfathomable. Still, he was a being with a superiority complex, not unlike the reaper who looked down at her. The shadows had it wrong. They believe that demons were in control, but Ashkara was reacting to a plan Deruthel put in place before he was banished. The king didn’t realize he was reacting to a set of plans set in place by his son.

She swallowed hard, knowing she would hate the next part of her plan. She had to be careful, a reaper could tell if she was lying and she wasn’t sure if he could create a telepathic bond

which was the last thing she wanted. “Assuming I go along with your plan, what do we do next?”

Layton went to the counter and pulled a cold storage container from a shelf beneath the cash register. He typed in a number sequence and the silver case clicked. He spoke as he flipped open the lid and steam rose from the container. “I will take a sample of your blood and then you will perform the ritual to reach out to Deruthel. Once he is satisfied you will stick to your end of the agreement, we will enact our plan.”

Riley stood. “What ritual? How do I contact him?”

CHAPTER 13



Riley waited for the steam to dissipate above the cold storage container. It was more of a silver briefcase with rows of vials inside. “What is that?”

Layton removed one of the vials. “These are samples of yours and Dannika’s blood. Hers has proved useless, so I will take some from you to replace the corrupted blood of your sister.”

“Why do I need my own blood? Are you in possession of the chalice?” she asked.

“The demon caller is of no further use to us. You must mix my blood and yours in the temporal artifact. My blood will strengthen the connection you have with Deruthel.”

“I pour the blood into this temporal artifact?” She asked, trying to discern how this strange ritual worked.

“You will take my blood directly from the vein. It will burn first, but when the pain subsides, you will take enough to mix with your own and fill the container. You will feel Deruthel reaching for you. His time is limited to keep your conversation as short as possible. He will break the connection when he wills it.”

She glanced at a poster with the rules and regulations of the shooting range and wished there was such a thing for her current predicament. What kind of repercussions would there be for ingesting the reaper’s blood? Would he be able to read her mind? If she was Deruthel, she would want to know what

an enemy was thinking. “You are going to read my thoughts, aren’t you?”

Layton sighed. “I suggested that to Deruthel, but he does not wish me to take your blood at this time. I will probably take it at a later date when the new regime is in place. All members will be subject to regular inspection.”

“Mental intrusion, you mean,” she said in disgust, but secretly wondered if Layton was as smart as he thought he was. Deruthel should have had Layton use his telepathic link on her. The only reason not to, was if she would be given information that Deruthel did not want passed on to the telepathic reaper.

Layton shrugged. “You need not approve. You will be a breeder, not a queen.”

There was no way Layton would be a key player in Deruthel’s new plans and Layton was too caught up in his own cleverness to see it. She needed to find out what the general had in store for this world before she helped him reclaim his body. “Where is this artifact?”

Layton grabbed a large black duffel bag from the floor. She assumed it belonged to the shooting range but as Layton unzipped the bag and placed the carving of a large brain on the counter, she realized they had simply used to duffel to conceal its contents. “This is the temporal artifact.”

She approached the counter, looking over the strange artifact. “What is it carved out of and what kind of brain?”

Layton pointed to the temporal lobe. “It is not a carving. It is the calcified remains of the first demon king’s brain. He possessed abilities similar to those of Ashkara. He had also ascended when he died. When blood is added to this artifact, it amplifies the blood tie between those in communication.”

“This thing is the size of a large watermelon. Deruthel was not carrying this when he entered our world. Dannika would have noticed.”

“That is correct. This artifact is from the original demon home world. Deruthel brings it to a world hundreds of years

prior to assimilation. This was used with the original priestess, so the general could communicate with her.”

Riley ran her fingers over the calcified brain, she expected it to be as smooth as it looked but there was a sticky quality that made it feel like slick leather. She snatched her hand back. “Gross. Is there any other way?”

“No.”

“Okay, let’s do this.”

Layton took a needle from the cold storage case and inserted it into her arm. She glanced at Camar while Layton filled three vials with her blood. “I have what I need. You must take my blood. Once you purge it from your system, you will lose the ability to speak with Deruthel.”

Riley pursed her lips. “Where do you want me to bite you?”

Layton walked around the counter, so they both stood on the customer’s side. He handed her a vial of her own blood after removing the stopper. “After you drink from me, spit some of the blood in the vial to mix with yours. Then pour it over the artifact. Deruthel will know immediately and reach for you.”

Riley took the vial from his hands. “Where?”

Layton pulled her body against his, and she forced the beast within her not to react. It snarled in her mind with an image of a bear’s paw removing Layton’s head. She promised her angry beast it would get its chance, but they needed the smug reaper a little longer. He lowered his neck to her mouth. “Take what you need.”

Her fangs sprung and while she hadn’t intended to act on her aggressive nature, her newly formed bear had other ideas. Her fangs thickened to incisors as they punctured his skin, and he growled in pain as his claws bit into her side.

The first gulp of reaper blood burned as it slithered down her throat, but it wasn’t as bad as Dannika had described when she had been forced to ingest Killian’s blood. Their father’s blood. Layton had kept up the pretense of trying to accept the

queen's rules and hadn't fed on a human in some time. Dannika had wondered what the differences in the reapers would be with a clean diet, and while Layton wasn't there yet, nor would he ever be, Riley imagined Ferguson's blood would become more like a shadows' in time. She hoped she lived long enough to let the ancient reaper know.

Riley pushed away from Layton when his blood filled her stomach and her mouth. She spit the excess blood into the vial as Layton had instructed, then swirled it around to mix the two. Before moving closer to the temporal conduit on the counter, she held the vial up to ensure the blood was mixed properly. Then she poured the mixture over the demon brain.

For a moment, she thought she had done something wrong. There was a surge of power, but nothing happened. No flickering lights. No shifting to the shadows. Then her mind opened like a lightbox and her brain recoiled from the power inside her skull.

Riley. Deruthel messaged.

To say the general was more powerful than before was a substantial understatement. Her name vibrated inside the confines of her mind like an electric shock.

Tone it down. If you fry my brain, then I am of no use to you. Riley snapped.

Agreed. I need to reclaim my body. Ashkara is ripping the fabric of reality with his foolishness. Hakim laughs while waiting to rule both realms. Deruthel was true to his word and pulled back the level of power, but she could feel the effort it took.

The thought that the traitorous Bokor would have dominion was a nightmare none of them considered. *Emmanuel said we need to reclaim what was lost. Did he mean your body?*

Ashkara sent his mind into several of the demon horde. This connection is not natural to your realm and is breaking the barrier between the veil and your realm. While I will use a

similar connection to reclaim my body, this artifact and all those with telepathic abilities will be purged.

Layton won't like that. She messaged, not surprised the general was sacrificing Layton.

I must use him to enact my plan, but I cannot risk further degradation of the veil. The war must be fought on the corporeal plane. I have faith in my abilities to win using strategy. My father is scared and acting out of fear.

Why is Breck helping Ashkara? Doesn't he know what the king is capable of?" she asked.

He does, but he is a mutant version of Ashkara now. He has exchanged his will for immortality. All previous mutant versions had to be purged and the reapers who ingested my father's blood will meet a similar fate.

How will you create a stable ecosystem? The demons will not accept a world without breeders.

Thunder rumbled in her mind and she realized she was listening to a storm in Deruthel's world. My father was right about the death of my brethren. The demon species can no longer be contained within this realm. Only the shadows can exist, but not with my father's blood. I will rule them and their matings will be approved for the desirable abilities.

You are no different from your father then.

I will not break the natural order of your world. This lesson has taught me that only I can remain as a pure blood. My prodigy must be born of your world. As it exists now is how it shall be. I may even keep the humans in the dark about our existence. Ignorance is bliss, or so I am told. Deruthel messaged though she felt the connection slipping.

You plan to slaughter your own. That's a plan I can get behind. How do we return you to your body? I am going to kill you, but I will do it here. I won't pretend to be something else.

I accept your terms. You will lose, but I will use your body for my firstborn. Ashkara's weakness is his body. He is used to unlimited power and forgets the limitations of mine. He is vain

and cannot see you for what you are. He dismisses females and despite you proving your craftiness, he will again.

As she listened to Deruthel prattle on about the new order and his plans for his shifter demon hybrids, she wondered if she had made a mistake. Deruthel was far smarter than his father and she had no way to confirm what he said was true, other than Ashkara's attempts to assassinate her. Did she take him at his word and hope she interpreted Emmanuel's warning correctly?

What do I need to do in order to give you a connection to your body? Riley asked.

You must inject Ashkara, my body, with a vial of the same blood you used to connect with me. Then pour the blood on the temporal artifact.

The demon brain barely fits in that duffel bag. How do I hide something like that? she asked.

It is demonic in nature, so you should be able to shift it to the shadows. You will find a way or your world will fall and it won't be to Ashkara. He has sealed his fate either way in his foolishness.

It seems like I don't have a choice, she said.

You have been honest with me, so I will show you the same courtesy. It will take me several seconds to make the connection to my body. Ashkara will probably kill you once he realizes what you have done, Deruthel said, and she believed every word.

She wanted to tell Colton one last time that she loved him. That she would have done anything to go through the mating ceremony with him, but they had agreed that their lives were disposable if the choice was between them and humanity. Her sister and the shadows would continue, and that had to be enough.

So be it. What happens next?

Layton will take you to Ashkara.

CHAPTER 14



The instinct to break free of the reaper controlling her in the pathway was overwhelming, but she stilled the instinct. If she was able to breathe, she would have exhaled in relief as they neared their destination. She had no idea where Ashkara and his demons were hiding, but she knew they had moved a few times due to Ferguson's interference.

Riley coalesced in the middle of an oval-shaped dirt track surrounded by a fence. The ripped flags flapped in the breeze and she attempted to read the faded ads attached to the track rail, but didn't recognize any of the products. Rusted floodlights and striped poles sat at intervals around the track. The grassy infield was overgrown with weeds and the tiered grandstands of blue seating surrounded the arena.

She heard about the race track closing down when the owner had passed away and the family hadn't been interested in running the business. She heard it was up for sale, but that was years ago and it didn't appear to have been kept up. "Why are we here?"

Before Layton could answer, the center field rippled to expose over a hundred demons with Ashkara sitting in the middle on a gold chair. It was placed on a tiered pedestal that had once been used for the winners of the horse race.

Layton bowed to the king. "My brother informed me you wished to remove Riley as a threat, but I assumed under the circumstances, you would appreciate taking out your revenge personally. I assume a being as powerful as you would like her to suffer for her insubordination."

Riley forced herself not to smile. Layton was smart. Everything he said made perfect sense and no one could fault his reasoning, but if Ashkara killed Riley too quickly now, his own followers would question the action. Ashkara would expose his fear and could lose the faith of his horde. His numbers were too low to lose any of his flock, and he no longer had the strength of his former body. She wondered if he could still take control of dozens of demons at once. Maybe his limitations in Deruthel's body were harsher than the king expected.

She spit on the ground. "Why did you bring me here? Just kill me and get it over with."

Halak smiled at her. "Kill you? Now that you are here, you will be the king's personal breeder. You have decades of pain to make up for. Your actions cannot go without punishment."

The king's lip twitched. It was subtle, and she realized the king still wanted her dead. The demons expected him to be able to control her and not waste the resource of a female shadow in his possession. Of course, they thought he should keep her. They had no idea the king planned to sacrifice her. He likely said to kill her because he had an alternate plan and she had betrayed him, but now that she was here, there was no reason to kill her. Only use her. "I'd rather die."

Ashkara's eyes narrowed on her, and she could almost see what he was thinking. "You will be mine. You will serve me in every way a female should. It has been many years since I have coupled."

"Never going to happen. You can kill me, but I will never touch you."

Ashkara's eyes moved over Riley's body before he turned to Layton. "How am I to confirm your loyalty when you refuse to accept my blood? Neither you nor your brother are part of my army."

Layton went to his knees. "If Camar or I are altered, then I cannot get information from the clans. I still have spies within the clans and some are loyal to Deruthel, but if you wish me to

cease to acquire intel, I will accept your gift of immortality now.”

Riley had to admire Layton. He was incredibly convincing, and Ashkara growled at the mention of his son’s name. “There are reapers who remain loyal to my son?”

Layton nodded. “I was hoping to gather all the names before accepting your blood. Once I physically change, I can no longer pretend to be on their side.”

“My son is planning something?” Ashkara hissed.

Layton nodded. “I believe so, but I am unaware of all that it entails. I do know that he needs Riley. I believe that you should keep her close to you. If you control her, you control him.”

Ashkara smiled. “You were wise to bring her to me.” He motioned to Riley. “Bring her here. Chain her to my chair.”

Layton pushed Riley roughly. “Get going!”

She gave Ashkara a seething look while getting her true emotions bottled beneath the surface. The king smirked in his demonic way. He couldn’t see through his pride and ambition to see that he was being played. Still, there was a fire behind his eyes that hadn’t resided there when Deruthel had owned this body, and she wondered if the general was powerful enough to evict his father from the prime real estate of his body.

Layton cross-checked her across the back as they approached the chair on the three-tiered pedestal. She stumbled and fell at Ashkara’s feet, but didn’t want the reaper to think she would accept that kind of behavior. Her foot snapped back, connecting with Layton’s knee. The vibrating crack echoed as the reaper screamed and fell to the ground.

He was up with his fist flying toward her head when Ashkara stood. “Stop! She is mine to punish. If you are so careless as to allow a woman to best you, then you deserve the pain.”

Layton’s face flickered to a sneer, and she knew what he was thinking. The king had already misjudged Riley, and it

cost him his body. Reason prevailed, and the reaper lowered his head. “As you command, my king.”

The king descended the steps of the pedestal on the spindly legs that looked like they shouldn't support his weight. His clawed feet clicked on the smooth surface until he reached the ground. “You made a grievous error, Riley. You had an opportunity to be a queen. My first bride. Your actions did work to my advantage in some ways, so I suppose I should thank you, but instead you will suffer, unlike any female before you.”

She wasn't sure he was lying about using her actions to his advantage or if that was for the benefit of his horde. “You deserve this fate, Ashkara. A paltry version of your former self.”

Ashkara smiled viciously. “While I am forced to stay in this forsaken realm, and create a new legacy, it was an eventuality set forth when our females died. Jumping from world to world under these circumstances became unsustainable. You forced us to stay here, but I find I am enjoying the challenge. With you as my slave, I will find the next few weeks quite exciting.”

Riley growled. “You won't touch me. If you do, I will force you to kill me and you will never learn the truth.”

Ashkara's leathery skin arched above his red eyes. “The truth? That you are a pawn in my grand scheme? That you played your part perfectly to ensure I was in possession of my son's body when the realms were severed? What truth am I unaware of?”

“That you are about to be replaced,” she said.

Ashkara laughed. The low chortling grated on her eardrums, making her shudder. “There is not a being alive in this entire realm that can match my power. The strongest hunter you have is Ferguson, and as impressive as his skills are, he is no match for me.”

She was curious what the king had learned about the ancient reaper, but she didn't have time to dawdle. “I was

talking about Deruthel.”

Ashkara approached her. His eyes blazed with red fire. “I am aware my son left some followers to try to reopen the portal, but it will not work. Not even with your blood.”

Her smirk had the king leaning toward her. “You think he is trying to open a portal? Who is misinformed now?” Ashkara had looked too smug not to believe it was a portal. He was right that she was the key, but he didn’t appear to know how his son planned to dethrone him.

“How dare you speak to me in such a way? You are a female. A shadow. You are nothing,” the king roared.

She shrugged. “Whatever. I warned you, which is more than you deserve. When you are in a vegetative state drooling from the mouth in your previous world... well, I was going to say remember this, but you won’t. Everything you are will be lost. You will be a mindless beast, rotting for eternity.”

“Tell me why you say such things,” he demanded.

She turned away from him. The roar split her eardrums, before his clawed hand bit into her arm, abruptly turning her back to face him. She hissed as blood soaked her sleeve beneath his claws. “Go on. Kill me. My blood was already used. My death will ensure yours.”

Ashkara shook her as their surroundings wavered. It was the same as when they arrived, only now she appeared to be in a sealed bubble. The king did not want his followers to hear his conversation. Especially if it included a way his son could depose him. She hadn’t known the king could camouflage his surroundings and was curious how the ability worked. “Tell me what you are talking about.”

“No.”

He roared in her face and she choked on the odor of rotting meat, then wiped the spittle from her face. “Why should I? If you kill me, then my death won’t be in vain. If I help you, then you will rule this realm and the shadows will fall.”

Ashkara released her arm. “Do you believe my son will be a kinder master? He will crush everyone in this world and

remake it in his image. I have seen his blueprint for this world. I assure you, it will not be to your liking.”

She shrugged. “I believe that, but he isn’t breaking the barrier between worlds. You are.” She knew that key piece of evidence was something that would alert the king she had communicated with Deruthel.

The king hissed. “You have spoken with my son.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about the veil. What has caused the weakening?” he asked.

Her confidence took a hit. The king was being earnest. He had true concern on his face. Was it possible he didn’t know, or had Deruthel lied about the cause? Dealing with demons was the ultimate mind fuck. You never knew what to believe. “You honestly don’t know?”

Ashkara grunted. “The question is, do you? What my son told you is not necessarily the truth. If you tell me what he said, I will tell you if his theory is plausible.”

She nibbled her lip. “Deruthel said that you sent your mind into several of the demons to spread your power so you would still have access to it when you took over his body. He said that kind of telepathic power is too strong for this realm and it is breaking the barrier between the veil and our realm. Hakim is gaining in power and eventually this world will fall and you with it.”

Ashkara was silent for some time. She wondered if he would follow through on his promise to be honest with her. “His theory is possible and easily tested.”

“How?”

“I will reclaim the power I redistributed. If the veil is strengthened, then my son has given me a final gift.”

The surrounding bubble wavered before Ashkara’s eyes ignited in an eternal false. She felt the waves emanating from him. “What did you do?”

Ashkara looked away as if concentrating on something else. “Deruthel was correct. The veil walls are solidifying. I must rule without overcoming more than one or two minds at a time. Telepathic ability is precarious in this realm at best.”

“You are controlling Deruthel. You will always have one mind under control,” she said.

The king’s eyebrow arched. “Is that what he told you? That this body must be released to save the veil.”

“Yes.” Technically, Emmanuel had told her first, and she believed the priestess’s dead brother rather than either of the demons.

“I am not controlling Deruthel’s body. I have usurped it. My residence in this body is permanent. Not even my son can create a bond strong enough to overpower me.”

She thought about the king’s words. He usurped a body. “Is that like a ghost possessing a dead person or something?”

Ashkara nodded. “That is an interesting analogy, and in this case, it is close. I was not dead but the possession of my son’s body is accurate. You have severed the means for his return.”

She understood what Ashkara could not. The veil was breaking down because he had broken the barriers of this world when he took over Deruthel. She had to put the demon general back in his body and that would bring about the war, but demons were tangible. Ghosts were not. They could all end up like Deruthel, with ghosts inhabiting their bodies until every living thing died. This was Hakim’s plan all along. Everyone had fallen for his lies. Even the king. The Bokor wanted revenge, but not just on the shadows or his village. He wanted everyone to pay, and he planned to rule the dead.

“We were all duped. You. Me. The shadows. Hakim is going to kill us all,” she whispered.

“Tell me my son’s plans,” Ashkara said.

She shook her head. “There is no point. We are all dead anyway.”

CHAPTER 15



Riley swallowed the bile in her mouth as Ashkara moved his hand, and the surrounding bubble cleared. It was obvious that the reapers and demon surrounding them couldn't see her or the king, but they both observed the demon horde as they spoke and fought with one another. "That's quite a talent. It's like one-way glass."

"It is nothing. One of hundreds of abilities that I possess, but I want you to look closely."

Riley's eyes moved over the demons. "At what? I know you control the demons."

He pointed to Breck who stood on the dirt track with another reaper with similar mutations. "You know what those are?"

"Mutant reapers. Because they didn't suck enough as they were," she said sarcastically.

"Those are my new children. I have done many experiments in the past, but I was forced to put down those children. This world gives me an opportunity I was forced to abandon in the past," Ashkara said.

Her heart stuttered in her chest. "Forced to abandon? Deruthel said you had him assassinate your former experiments. That none of them worked. They all mutated into something you could not control and their hunger was insatiable."

The king chuckled. "That is what I wanted my son to believe. I couldn't tell my children that I planned to replace

them. They would revolt and rise up against me, but creating a permanent home was always inevitable. I have access to Deruthel's plans. He however, did not have access to mine. I will utilize the benefits of both to create our new world."

"That doesn't leave room for the shadows and humans though, does it?" she asked.

"On the contrary. Many shadows possess abilities that will make our new society more effective. Those shadows will be offered my blood and incorporated into the new regime. The humans are our cattle. They will be bred as such. Farming facilities will be created for the sole purpose of monitoring our stock."

Riley huffed. "You don't know anything about human beings do you?"

"Other than their blood is delicious and circumvents my hunger, what is it you would have me know?" he asked.

"Just that human beings won't thrive under the conditions you describe. We will lose the will to live, which includes the desire to procreate," she said.

"One of my son's blueprints included a world where the humans were left unaware of our presence. He planned to hunt them, leaving them in their paltry existence until their death. He believed this would make hunting more enjoyable for our people. Perhaps I should take a closer look at that forecast."

"The fact that you didn't when you had access to that information, means there is no hope for you," she said.

Ashkara ran a clawed finger over her lips and it took all her willpower not to pull away. "I see why my son was enamored with you. There is a certain appeal to rebellion. Despite what my brethren think, there can be only one pure blood. Me. You will be my slave and see to my sexual needs, but I will not breed you."

Riley fought the urge to hurl. "Deruthel came to the same conclusion. About being the only purebred, that is. Seems you and your son are more alike than I realized."

“It is true that this body will lead this planet one way or another, but you will help me. You will ensure I am the only leader of this world. Tell me what my son has planned.”

Riley shook her head. “No. There is nothing you can do to me to make me help you. I won’t perform the ritual that solidifies leadership.”

Ashkara’s eyes narrowed. “A ritual? What kind of ritual?”

“I won’t do it.”

Ashkara growled. “Really? Not even for the life of your sister? You love her, do you not?”

“She is safe and I will die before I put her in harm’s way,” Riley hissed.

Her stomach rolled as the king smiled. “I appreciate your honesty in this manner.” He moved his arm and the one-way bubble dropped. The demons and reapers turn toward them. “Bring the queen.”

Riley searched the dirt track hoping that the king was bluffing, but two demons dragged Dannika between them. Her face was bruised as she struggled weakly between her captors, but she appeared to have no open wounds. “No!”

Ashkara moved, so he stood beside her. “As you can see, I have taken precautions to ensure the shadows are amendable to my terms. I admit I wasn’t expecting to have you as my guest, but it will make my victory that much sweeter. You will tell me about my son’s plans and the ritual needed to ensure he remains trapped in our former realm.”

Riley spit on the king. “You bastard.”

Dannika called out. “Don’t help him, Riley. No matter what he offers you, don’t give in. I’d rather die than let humanity fall.”

Their eyes met, and Riley saw the truth in her sister’s eyes. She was prepared to die, knowing that her sister and the clans would live on, but how could she make this choice? How could she sacrifice the twin she had barely gotten to know? Take the chance that her actions would kill her.

“Tell me what my son’s plans are or I will start removing your sister’s limbs until you do.”

Riley pursed her lips. “I’m not sure how this artifact works exactly. Deruthel explained the ritual, but if I do it before he is ready, then he will be locked out of his body forever.”

“What is this artifact? How can it create a bond between my son and his body?” Ashkara asked with burning eyes.

Riley shook her head. “I’m not sure exactly how it works. It’s demon brain or something.”

Ashkara frowned. “A brain of a dead demon would not have...” his eyes widened. “What is the name of this artifact?”

“Deruthel called it the temporal artifact,” she said.

Power pulsed around the king and she was sure he was well aware of the artifact and what it could do. “That artifact was destroyed six hundred years ago. Deruthel is lying to you.”

She narrowed her eyes on the king. “I don’t think so. He found that artifact. Tell me, who told you it was destroyed?”

Ashkara turned away, obviously lost in thought. “He did. My traitorous son was able to hide the artifact from me after reporting it destroyed. Clever.”

“Do you know how this artifact works?”

“You do not?” King asked.

“Deruthel explained the ritual to open access to your body, and close it, but I don’t understand how an old brain can do that.”

Ashkara looked at her in disgust. “Of course, you don’t. You are a lower being. The fact that you are even aware of its existence is a travesty. My son has sunken to a new low to enlist the aid of a woman to do his bidding.”

“I doubt he wanted to, but apparently, I’m the only one who can perform the ritual. For some reason, he needs my blood,” she said.

“That part is true. You severed the realms. Your blood could create a temporary thread. I admit I am impressed by my son’s ingenuity. He has hidden that artifact here for hundreds of years. I wondered how he had kept close tabs on the original priestess. He always knew what she was doing. I wonder where she hid it for all these years.”

“I have no idea. Does it truly work as Deruthel described?”

Ashkara nodded. “The temporal artifact is the calcified brain of the very first demon king. Like me he had ascended and was capable of controlling every one of his children at once. That kind of power does come at a price and he paid it with his life.”

Riley pursed her lips. “If he was the powerful, and control everyone of you, how did a demon defeat him? What killed him?”

Ashkara glanced at two demons who had broken into a fight at the far side of the dirt track. They growled and clawed at one another before grappling on the ground. “He was the first demon king to be deposed. The first king’s demise was the inspiration for me to dethrone my father.”

“How did they do it? How did you do it?” she asked in a low voice.

“Like my son, I once traveled to the next world, prepping it for my father’s invasion. I prepared a world and brought over the first-generation then I severed the connection, trapping him in a dead world. He rots there to this day. It is a fitting end for him.”

“You hated him,” she said.

“Of course. He was more powerful than me, and that was unacceptable. In the end, I became far more powerful than he ever was and I plan to stay that way.”

“How are you going to stop Deruthel from reclaiming his body?” she asked.

“Tell me about this ritual? You said something about timing?”

She nodded, pretending to remember. “The timing has to be right. He will strike at midnight tonight. He has my blood and will use it to access the temporal artifact.”

“The conduit is here. How does he plan to activate it?”

“He already did?”

“When?” Ashkara hissed.

“An hour ago. Before Layton brought me to you.”

Ashkara growled. “He has started this ritual. It has already begun?”

“Yes. Why don’t you know about this artifact and how it works?” she asked.

“This artifact was locked in a sealed container, belonging to the first king. It has been passed down to every leader, but none have been able to open it. I charged my son with finding the means to break the seal upon it. He searched for centuries until he found the information required.”

“How did he acquire that information if you jump from world to world?”

Ashkara huffed. “Do you believe your veil is the only one? Every realm has their version. A purgatory for the undead. Deruthel threatened the wife of a man with similar talents to your Bokor. He prevailed on the dead of a former world to get the answers he required.”

“And he told you he failed?”

“My son said he performed the ritual, but the artifact was destroyed when he opened the seal. He said the brain had already turned to dust over the centuries. It was a believable outcome for something so old and untreated with magic. I should have investigated further.”

“I’m not going to lie. Trusting your son is a bad idea,” she said.

Ashkara glanced at Dannika. “You will help me with this ritual.”

Riley rolled through her options, but none of them were good. All pose a certain amount of risk to both her and Dannika. “There are supplies I need that I don’t have.”

“Tell me what you require,” Ashkara said.

“You understand that I’m guessing here. I’m going to try to reverse what Deruthel has done. This isn’t an exact science,” she said.

“Tell me!” he roared. His patience with her had reached its end. Not that he had much to begin with.

“I think I need the chalice, but I don’t have it.”

“We are in possession of the demon caller now. What else do you need?” Ashkara asked.

“This is really gross, but I will need your blood. I need mine as well, but I can do that myself,” she said.

Ashkara smiled. “I will be quite amendable to you taking my blood. What else.”

She frowned. “I think that’s it.”

“When can you perform this ritual?” he asked.

She swallowed hard, not wanting to take the next steps in her uncertain plan. “I’m not sure if we should wait to...”

Ashkara cupped her chin in his clawed hand. “Would you like to perform the ritual now, or should I start removing Dannika’s limbs?”

She winced as his claw cut her cheek. “I will do it now. Get me the chalice.”

CHAPTER 16



Riley kept her face blank as the king's eyes narrowed on her. She had a pretty good idea what he was thinking. What good would the chalice do? The simple answer was nothing, but she needed him focused on something else so she had time to retrieve the temporal artifact. The sweat beading on her brow wasn't nervousness. The effort of holding the ancient artifact within the shadows while moving around and concentrating on the conversation with the king had begun to wear on her.

Shifting her clothes to the shadows was her only practice and Colton had done it most of the time. Even then she could only do it with natural fibers. She was learning to travel with Colton with her at the helm but even then, those rides were bumpy at best. The first demon king's brain was made to travel to shadows, but it was dead and inanimate. It had taken her several tries to shift it and create the container to hold it near her, but she was running out of time.

Ashkara glanced at Dannika. "If you betray me, then your sister dies."

"I don't need your warning to know what is at stake," she said.

The king motioned to Camar who nodded and disappeared into a pathway. This was a key part of her plan and if the traitorous reaper failed, it was over and Ashkara would win. "He will retrieve the chalice. I believed it was useless. What do you need it for?"

Ashkara had said Deruthel had discovered the temporal artifact and reported it destroyed. Did that mean the king had no idea how it worked? She hoped so because she was betting her sister's life on it. "You have access to Deruthel's memories. You should know I have to perform a blood rite."

"What is entailed in this rite? Can you guarantee it will sever the thread my son is attempting to create?" he asked.

"I can't guarantee anything. I've told you what Deruthel told me. It's not like I've ever done this before."

"My son's ingenuity is remarkable. He has moved this artifact between our worlds without my knowledge. He was putting his plans in place to usurp my throne long before I suspected him of it. His death will be sweeter than I expected."

Riley focused on the reaper as he coalesced with the chalice in his hand. Dannika had taken the chalice for safekeeping, but apparently, they took that when they abducted her. Ashkara wasn't taking any chances, but he had no knowledge of the temporal artifact. She took the demon caller when the reaper handed it to her. She moved the chalice, covering the top with her hands and nodding. The supplies vital to her plan were inside the chalice. The items she could not shift to the shadows. "Where do you want me to perform this ritual?"

Ashkara motioned to a group of demons. They ran inside the decapitated building beside the dirt track that had once been used to place bets on the upcoming race. The cylindrical white structure was faded with cracked paint and brown streaks.

She almost smiled when they carried a table with a dusty white tablecloth and placed it in front of the pedestal the king was using to support his throne. She straightened the linen tablecloth so it hung to the ground and placed the chalice on top of it, breathing a sigh of relief when she shifted the temporal artifact beneath the table, effectively hiding it from the king. But having the artifact available was only part of the plan.

The next part was tricky and could have catastrophic long-term effects. “I am ready.”

Ashkara pointed to the chalice. “Proceed.”

She knew the portal ritual would have no effect, but she needed time and positioning. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin.” She waited a few seconds before repeating it. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin.”

Ashkara hissed. “Nothing is happening,”

“Deruthel could be blocking me. I am sure he suspects I will betray him. He has erected some kind of barrier. I need your blood,” she said.

Ashkara’s eyes twinkled. “By all means. Take it.”

“I need a syringe. I hope you have one,” she said.

“I thought you intended to drink my blood.”

“Not yet. I need to put some in the chalice. Two needles would suffice,” she said, trying to keep the nervousness from her voice.

Ashkara glanced at Dannika and the reaper holding her shoved her to the ground.

“Stop it! I am doing what you asked. Leave Dannika alone,” she snapped.

Ashkara motioned to one of the demons who had brought the table. “Grab us two empty syringes.”

The demon jogged towards the building and disappeared through the door.

“Do not make any mistakes, Riley. If I die, I will be taking your sister and you with me,” the king warned.

Riley moved her boot till it touched the edge of a temporal artifact behind the linen cloth. “I won’t fail.” She had every intention of keeping her word and the king knew it. He just didn’t know that keeping her word wasn’t meant for him.

The demon returned and passed her two empty syringes. She motioned the king to approach her. "Would you prefer to sit while I draw your blood? It will sting a little."

Ashkara approached her and leaned down. "Draw the blood you require."

"I will do one at a time." She showed him the empty syringe and stuck it in his neck. He didn't flinch as she slowly filled it with black blood. She placed it on the table and palmed the syringe containing the blood she prepared with Layton. The same mixture used to make a connection with Deruthel.

She was careful to keep her hand over the syringe, so the king didn't see that it was already full. When she injected it into his neck he didn't flinch, completely unaware she was injecting blood rather than moving it. When she was done, she removed the syringe and pretended to inject both syringes into the chalice. When in fact it was only one.

Deruthel had been right. Ashkara's weakness was not believing a female had the intelligence to outsmart him. To pull a switch in front of him and a hundred of his horde. All of them watched and not one of them had noticed her subterfuge. Unfortunately, this wasn't the hard part. Or the part of her plan that would get her and her sister killed.

She motioned Ashkara to stand on the opposite side of the table. "I will start the ritual. Please stand in front of me so you can watch for any signs it is working."

Ashkara moved to stand opposite of her with the table and chalice between them. His black blood glistened in the center of the bowl. "Proceed."

She went to place the empty syringe on the table, purposely dropping one on the ground. She bent down to pick it up and quickly palmed the vial hidden beneath her sleeve and poured it over the demon brain hidden under the linen cloth.

"Leave it!" Ashkara snapped.

She stood up and waited for the blood to be absorbed by the temporal artifact. She had no idea how long it would take Deruthel to prepare his attack. This wasn't like conversing. It was a mental war. Still, she needed to get the king's attention on her, so she started her ritual. "Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin."

"I feel nothing," the king said.

Riley raised her voice. "It's time for the final thread to be severed. What was captured must be reclaimed. Let humanity make its final stand. Once and for all. I ask for the end."

The king roared, but as he reached for her a pinprick of light formed on his forehead. He grabbed his ears, thrashing back and forth as he stumbled to the side. Halak approached, his eyes wary and accusing. "What have you done?"

"Exactly as he asked. I enacted the ritual that will create the final thread and sever it."

"He is fighting an internal battle. How is that possible?" Halak asked.

There was no point in hiding the temporal artifact. She shoved the chalice to the ground and flipped back the linen cloth. Halak's eyes widened. "The temporal artifact. I knew the general hid it in this world, but I assumed it lost when he was."

She had to give the demon credit. He had effectively played both sides. "Now we wait to see who wins."

The king roared and fell to the ground. His long claws clutched at the grass as his body began to shake. He flipped to his back and arched his thick torso in the air. The strange action made him look like a demonic crab with his thin legs.

The demons and reapers inched forward, growling their displeasure at the attack on their king. Still, they were wary of what was happening and obviously concerned it could be transmitted. None except for Halak, came within six feet of the thrashing king.

Ashkara clutched his head and then put his hands out, grabbing at insubstantial air. His eyes flickered between red

and orange fire as the battle inside his mind raged on. His piercing scream sent every reaper and demon to their knees with their hands over their ears before the king's body went slack.

Halak approached the unconscious king. "My king? Are you whole?"

The thin arms of the king moved slowly as he flipped to his stomach and propelled himself to his feet. "I am." He turned to Riley. "You did well."

Halak's red eyes widened. "Deruthel?"

He turned to his second in command. "Yes. My father is vanquished. His mind will not make it back to his body. His consciousness is lost in the broken thread between worlds."

Halak glanced at Riley. "How did you accomplish this? I believed the connection was severed."

Deruthel went to the table and grabbed the temple artifact from beneath. "You kept my confidence about this artifact and I appreciate your loyalty. It has the ability to strengthen telepathic communication, but only with a blood tie."

Halak put his hand over the calcified brain. No traces of the blood Riley had poured on it remained. As if it had absorbed every drop into its hardened tissue. "How can a calcified brain have such power?"

Deruthel smiled. "It's not just any brain. It's the fossilized remains of the first demon king."

Halak stepped back from the table. "Lashnama?"

Deruthel nodded. "His brain was sealed in a unique box. I tried for years to discover the means to unlock it. The first priestess was able to use her talents and her blood to accomplish this task, and in return, her family was protected. There was a side effect though, but I was able to overcome it."

"What side effect?" Halak asked.

Deruthel touched the fossilized brain. "She used her own blood to activate the artifact. To ensure it didn't decompose. That created a blood tie between her and the first demon king's

brain. Only her blood could be used to make the connection between me and my father.”

Halak stared at the brain for a long time. “Your father is powerful. If he finds a way to return to the old realm, he will seek an alternate solution. Don’t be so quick to dismiss his power.”

“I never underestimate my father. In the unfortunate circumstance he is able to reconnect with his body, he will find himself without the energy required to fight me.”

“How did you accomplish this feat?” Halak asked.

“I consumed every food source, no matter how insignificant. Not a single plant or insect has survived in our previous realm.”

“You are a superior strategist. I am honored to call you king,” Halak said with a bow. The other demons and reapers glanced at one another, then went to their knees.

Riley remained motionless, hoping that the king would honor their agreement. She glanced at her sister, who stood between the two demons who had been holding her. They now bowed before their new king reverently. She planned for everything except her escape. She was too close to the new king to reach a pathway without him grabbing her, but she hoped Dannika would seize this chance to get away.

Deruthel turned to Riley. “That leaves me with just one problem.”

“What is it?” Halak asked.

“Her. Riley has completed her mission, but unfortunately, I can’t take the chance she can create another thread,” Deruthel said.

Riley sucked in a breath. “I thought that was the last?”

The new king nodded. “It will be.”

“How?” Riley asked.

Deruthel’s smile was slow in coming. “When I kill you.”

CHAPTER 17



Riley stepped back as the two demons on either side of Dannika stood and grabbed her again. She was prepared to die so her sister could live, but she needed a distraction. Something that would give Dannika time to make it to a pathway. Even then, judging by the way Dannika's injuries were not healing, she wasn't sure her sister was strong enough to travel. The bruises looked worse than they had when she had arrived. "Why am I not surprised you aren't keeping your word?"

"I will allow your sister to return. That should appease our deal. I had planned to kill her as well but her blood is corrupt. It cannot be used to activate the artifact."

Riley glanced at the temporal artifact. "Why not just destroy it?"

Deruthel laughed. "Why do you think Lashnama's brain was in a box, sealed with blood magic from another world?"

"Some kind of shrine to the first king?" she said.

"Hardly. He used the last of his power to calcify his brain. It cannot be destroyed, or so the story goes. The former king who usurped Lashnama's throne tried everything to destroy this remnant of his former foe. When nothing worked, he sealed the brain away, and it remained in that box until the first priestess opened it. I used it to create a bond with her, but she in turn made it unusable for anyone but her bloodline."

"Layton was able to use it," Riley said.

Deruthel nodded. “Yes, his telepathic gifts are extraordinary. So similar to the first priestess that I believe he is a relation.”

“Does he know what you plan to do?” she asked.

Deruthel called out. “Layton, come here please, and bring your brother.”

Layton and Camar approached the table that held the temporal artifact. His eyes gleamed in victory as he stared at Riley. “I told you Deruthel would be victorious. His father was blinded by his power and couldn’t see what was right in front of him.”

Riley met the smug gaze of the reaper. “Not unlike you then.”

Camar was leery of the new king and moved to stand beside Halak. There was no warning and no verbal communication but Deruthel extended his claws and severed Layton’s head in one swipe while Halak did the same to Camar. The brother’s bodies fell to the ground in unison as Riley wiped the black blood spray from her cheek.

Halak stared at the fallen body of Camar. “It is a shame we had to kill this one. His talent was useful.”

Deruthel smiled at Riley. “There is another in the cougar clan. He is young and goes by the name of Jace. He also has the ability to restructure anatomy while in the pathway. I’ve never seen anything like it. We will ensure he joins our cause.”

“You aren’t going anywhere near Jace,” Riley snapped before wondering how he knew about Jace’s ability to restructure items. Layton had seen the dog, but not Jace’s other abilities.

“You’re wondering how I knew about the young shadows ability,” Deruthel said.

“Yes.”

“You shared your mind with me Riley. I took the opportunity while I was in possession of my father’s power to comb through your memories. If it’s any consolation, when I

am done killing you, I will be removing the weapons master in the wolf clan.”

“You’re not getting near him!” Dannika shouted.

Deruthel turned to the queen. “So feisty. I can see why your mate is enamored with you. Perhaps I will keep you.”

The pathway began to vibrate, but the sound was not that of a single demon. It roared as it contained a tsunami of dark molecules. The demons stood glancing around as the first shadow coalesced amongst them.

Ferguson roared as his alpha emerged, severing the head of the demon closest to him. He was larger than either Colton or Raine’s alpha and she realized he’d been holding back. Tempering his power so he would appear less threatening. It hadn’t worked. Everyone suspected he was more than he let on, but he wasn’t holding back now. He killed three more demons before a dozen shadows exit that the pathway.

Ferguson was focused on one thing. Dannika. He cut a path of carnage between him and the queen. The reapers holding her fled, and the queen sighed as she approached her reaper leader. Just before she could reach him, Halak dissolved and reformed behind her. Yanking Dannika to his side.

Roars and growls echoed around the dirt track. Deruthel was so focused on organizing his demons for a counterattack, he didn’t notice Riley sneak to the side and run toward her sister. Dannika whirled with her arms in the air when Riley touched her shoulder.

Halak retained his grip on the queen’s arm as Riley held the other.

“Let her go, you prick!” Riley shouted at the demon lieutenant.

Riley turned as Deruthel narrowed his gaze on Riley and Dannika. He advanced toward them, ripping demon, reaper and shadow out of his way as if they were rag dolls while making his way toward the sisters. Her heart thumped in her chest but Dannika smiled as Ferguson grabbed Halak and started slashing the demon lieutenant’s chest.

Raine materialized beside Dannika and Riley realized that Ferguson had been a distraction. Raine had never entered the fight. His sole purpose to make his way to his mate. Dannika winked as Raine's shadow enveloped both of them. She felt her sister begin to dissolve, but her own shadow would not obey the wolf clan leader's commands. His form solidified along with Dannika's. "Your shadow is tied to the human plane. It cannot dematerialize. I don't know what is wrong."

Deruthel was ten feet away when he called out. "You can't leave Riley. I have tied you to me. You will only be released in death."

Riley focused on Raine. "Get her out of here. Promise me you will protect her, no matter what."

Dannika was shaking her head as Raine's face hardened in pain. A tear made of shadow and smoke rolled from his eyes as he forced his alpha to overcome his mate's objections. Dannika was the queen, but she was not a strong enough shadow to stop that of her mate. She screamed and reached for Riley as she was forced into the pathway by Raine.

Riley prayed her sister would forgive her stricken mate as she turned on Deruthel. "You are starting to be a pain in my ass."

Deruthel chuckled, but his eyes flared with power. It rippled off him in waves but was different from that of the former king. "I aim to please."

Her gaze narrowed on him. "You're different than you were before. What happened to you in the other realm?"

His eyes danced with merriment. "I was hoping you would ask. It's a shame I have to kill you. I've come to enjoy our discussions, but I'm not the fool my father was."

"Stop gloating and answer the question," she said.

"You are right. I am much different than I was. More evolved, if you will. My father's body had ascended. You have no concept of what that means."

"Since I'm going to die, why don't you explain it to me?" She kicked a severed head as it rolled over her feet, glancing

as Ferguson decimated two more demons nearby.

Deruthel seemed unconcerned about the carnage surrounding him. Then she remembered that he wanted his demon brethren culled. The shadows were doing his bidding, whether they realized it or not. “When a demon king reaches a certain level of experience, his power becomes exponential. Unlimited in its expanse. But the power comes with a price. The larger a body is, the more energy that is required to sustain it.”

“Which is why they all end up as rotting vegetables on a dead world,” she said.

His lips twitched. “Correct.”

“So, you know what will happen to you when you reach that level of power, but you will do it, anyway.”

Deruthel held up a single clawed finger. “I will not make the mistake of ascending. I have felt it. Experienced it. There is a loneliness and an ending hunger associated with ascension. It is not the mistake I will make.”

“You say that now, but when your body is the size of a woolly mammoth, you’ll change your mind.”

Deruthel shrugged. “Unfortunately, you will not live long enough for me to prove you wrong.”

“You didn’t answer my question. You’re different. How did you bring back more power? I assumed it was simply a telepathic connection. That you reclaimed what you once had.”

His lip curled over his serrated teeth. “Originally, I believe that as well. But when we connected, I understood the power of the temporal artifact. It allowed me to bring a portion of my father’s intelligence. Ways to boost my own abilities.”

“How lovely for you,” she snapped.

“It is.” He circled around her as she backed away slowly, looking for an opening. She noticed Colton, thirty feet away, fighting with three demons. Ferguson was similarly engaged with five more.

“What about the veil? Has the barrier been restored?” she asked.

Deruthel paused. “It has. My father created that rip and when his mind was banished from this world, those tears in the veil were repaired. Hakim is screaming in rage as we speak at the loss of this realm. Only those in the Haitian village can reach him now, and I doubt they will be calling on him anytime soon.”

Riley was sure the new king of the demons was right about that. The Bokor had almost ensured the death of every living thing in the human realm. What kind of person enacted that kind of revenge? “How did you tie me to you?”

“We made a blood pact when you poured yours on the temporal artifact. My blood had already been used on it years ago with the first priestess. With Layton no longer connected to me, our bond is stronger.”

“This is why you need me to die? Because we have a blood connection?” she asked.

“Yes. Though I doubt you to be so foolish as to attempt to connect with my father again, considering his foolishness almost destroyed every living thing, it’s not a chance I can take. It’s nothing personal. I simply don’t trust you.”

She held up her hand. “None taken. I don’t trust you worth a shit, either.”

She glanced at Colton as he removed a mutant reaper’s head and flung a smaller demon into the railing that surrounded the track. The demon general was getting exactly what he wanted from the shadows as they decimated his demon horde. Those left wouldn’t blame him for the destruction of their army and he could slowly pick them off until only a small force remained. “What would your Demon brethren think if they knew you plan to push your entire species into extinction?”

“It no longer matters. There is not enough of them left to oppose me,” he said.

A demon standing behind Deruthel heard the king's comment and dissolved, fleeing the war. Riley noticed him dematerialize to the edge of the track and whisper to another demon before moving to another.

"You are an idiot. You just told your men that you plan to kill them. Do you actually think they will stay loyal to you?" she asked.

"Do you think I care? My survival is paramount, not theirs. This world cannot be maintained with them in it."

Riley shrugged. "Fair enough, but they may have something to say about that."

Deruthel nodded as if contemplating her words. "You think you have turned them against me? I plan to kill them myself. There's only one way to ensure that I don't ascend, and that is to break the telepathic bond my blood has with my brethren. When their numbers diminish, I will simply enter their minds and crush them all."

"You are a real peach."

Deruthel smiled before his arm swung out, and his claw extended.

Riley jumped back, but she was in no way fast enough to avoid the powerful new king. Heat burned across her chest, and she clutched the long gash in her flesh. She staggered as her blood ran between her fingers.

CHAPTER 18



Riley stumbled over the body of a dead demon as she made her way to the railing that surrounded the track. Colton was growling and fighting multiple attackers as he attempted to move towards her. Ferguson was swarmed with demons and reapers and she could barely make out his body beneath them.

Multiple shadows from the cougar clan were fighting demons and mutant reapers along the dirt track. She clutched her chest willing the wound to heal as the melding tissue burned like acid in her blood. She made her way to one of the striped poles then held onto it for support as Deruthel continued to advance on her. Running wasn't much of an exit strategy but she would take it if there was an opportunity. She glanced at the doors that led to the building.

“You won't be getting away, Riley,” Deruthel said.

“Overconfidence got your father killed. I recommend you don't make the same mistake,” she snapped, though her strength was waning under the pain.

He sneered. “I have been very careful not to follow in my father's footsteps. I never underestimated you, Riley. In fact, if I had the means to destroy the temporal artifact, I would. Simply so I can keep you as my servant. I would have enjoyed having you see to my needs.”

Riley gagged as much from the pain as his words. “Kill me, but don't make me puke.”

Deruthel flicked his hand in her direction again. She evaded the direct blow, but his fingernail caught her shoulder and she cried out as the venom infected her once more. “So much fight. You would’ve made an excellent breeder. Sadly, I no longer need such a thing.”

Riley dry heaved then swallowed her own spit. “I should have chosen your father.”

Deruthel growled. Despite winning and turning his demon father into a drooling vegetable, he was still insecure. Maybe that was part of demon DNA. “Your realm would have collapsed under my father’s reign. I will create a world. A new species loyal to me alone.”

Riley forced yourself to laugh through the pain. “You are worse than he is.”

Deruthel shrugged. “I was honest with you in this regard. You foolishly believed that Ashkara would be harder to kill than me. That I was the lesser of two foes. You were as misguided as my father.”

“You’re different now. Worse than you were before you were banished,” she said.

Deruthel arched an eyebrow. “I am not worse. I am better. Having had access to my father’s power, gave me unlimited knowledge I had never experienced. He could’ve used that knowledge to outsmart me, but he lacked depth in his planning. I did not waste the gift I was given. I was careful to retain the knowledge, but not the power of my father’s body.”

She swallowed hard as she considered his words. “All his knowledge?”

“Now you are beginning to understand. Ashkara focused on growing his power instead of his knowledge. I did the opposite. I retain everything he ever learned. While he lost touch with his demonic origins, I embraced it. I will never ascend, but I will have unlimited power.”

She noticed more and more demons fleeing the dirt track. If she could hold out long enough, the shadow warriors would begin to outnumber the demons and mutant reapers. Time was

the only commodity she could use. She feigned interest but her fear was real. “If he had all that knowledge, how did you defeat him?”

Deruthel straightened his shoulders as if he were a prizefighter. The son was just as vain as his father. “I didn’t win in this world. I won six hundred years ago when I began to encourage my father to expand his ever-growing power. To consume more and more of our previous world. It wasn’t difficult. Like offering a lion an endless supply of meat.”

“But a lion hunts. It burns off that food,” she said.

He smiled. “So intelligent. Yes, but my father stopped hunting. He became bloated with power accepted his meals as they were brought to him. He lost interest in procreation, anything except the absorption of more power. The larger his body got the less he moved around. It was very easy to put my pieces in place.”

“The temporal artifact,” she said.

“Yes. I would have taken control sooner, but it took me many years to find a way to open the box. Your world provided me with the priestess. My key to leadership.”

She huffed. “Who are you going to lead? You’re going to kill all the demons. Half of them are already dead.”

Deruthel glanced around at the dead littering the track. “It’s all part of my plan. There will be a new hierarchy. I will balance this world as one would any farm. The humans will be the lesser animals. Not even sheep really. More like chickens or rabbits.”

“And how do you expect to keep them in line? Are you going to house them in tiny crates and expect them to breed on command?” she snapped.

“I am well aware of my father’s plans, but that is not how humans procreate. While they will never actually be free, they will have the illusion that they are. The shadows were smart to keep their society hidden. I will do the same. Your people will never know that they are cattle. They will go about their business procreating and providing for me and my children.”

“You weren’t exactly covert with your killings in the past. How do you expect to cover these murders? Raine won’t help you.”

“On the contrary. As soon as I reacquire the queen, he will do anything I ask. I told you I plan to keep the queen alive, and I do. She is the means to keep the influencer in line,” he said.

A reaper scream pierced the air. There had been several, but this one was particularly high-pitched and felt like nails on a chalkboard. She shivered as she stepped back, putting more distance between her and Colton. “What is this new hierarchy? I mean, if you truly intend to keep the humans unaware of your presence.”

Deruthel shrugged. “It’s simple, really. I am the king and my children will be my lieutenant’s. The humans will be our cattle. Those that we feed on at my discretion.”

“Your children? The mutant reapers?” she asked.

Deruthel growled. “My father’s mutant creations will be purged. The shadows will be given my blood. I do not carry the mutation my father does, as this body is not ascended.”

“What will your blood do to the shadows?”

“They will remain physically as they are now, but they will have a blood tie to me. I will have the only telepathic link in this realm. I will keep the number of my shadow children small so I can maintain supremacy at all times.”

She swallowed hard as her hand slid along the rail. “You’re going to control them.”

“Precisely. They remain physically as they are now so there is no variation in your realm. No reason for the barriers between the veil and this realm to fall.”

“That’s monstrous,” she whispered.

Deruthel smiled. “Yes, quite. Unfortunately, you can no longer be a part of it.” She fell back as he slashed her forearm and her hand fell against a fallen reaper blade, discarded on

the soil. She clutched it as she got to her feet, holding it in front of her.

“Stay away from me.”

Deruthel laughed. “You think that paltry weapon can kill me?”

“I don’t need it to kill you. I just needed it to sting like a bitch,” she said.

“I see. The only problem with your plan is that I like pain. To give it and to receive it,” he said as he lunged toward her again.

She moved the blade to slash his hand, but he moved and caught her wrist with his claw. She hissed as her blood dripped down her hand and onto the blade. “Shit!”

“Now you are beginning to understand. While I look as I did before I entered the previous demon home world, I am virtually a god. My knowledge is beyond that of any being alive. Beyond that of any that will live. The rest of humanity are nothing but ants in my personal hive.”

He grabbed at her but she angled the blade down and cut his hand. He hissed as she heard a small sizzle. His wound smoked for a second before it closed over. She noticed the look of concern and hatred as he focused on her. Had the reaper blade done that? It looked like his flesh had been burned. A small cut shouldn’t have been that severe, should it? “Enough foolishness.”

She moved the blade in an arc between them. “I couldn’t agree more.”

He looked as if he were about to attack, and he straightened and smiled. “I guess I wasn’t completely honest with you.”

She kept the blade between her and Deruthel as her spine bumped the railing. “That’s not a surprise. What did you lie about this time?”

“I told you I plan to assassinate all my brethren. There is one exception to that rule. I plan to keep one lieutenant. A

demon who has proved his loyalty to me,” Deruthel said.

She huffed. “Well, you are stupid as your father, then. There is no demon who can be trusted.” Despite what she said to the new king, she tried to think of a demon Deruthel would trust. Only Layton had helped him return. His words replayed in her mind. There was one demon who had helped him hide the temporal artifact. Kept his confidence despite working for the king. “Halak.”

Deruthel smiled as Halak grabbed her by the shoulders. He was on the other side of the railing. Deruthel had kept her attention on him while the demon lieutenant snuck up behind her. “Yes. He has been instrumental in guiding my father into actions that would inevitably end in his demise. Every king needs one trusted follower. Halak will be the only purebred to help rule this world.”

She struggled, but Halak’s hold was unbreakable. “He will follow your orders right until he conspires to kill you and usurp your throne. Sound familiar?”

Deruthel laughed. “Of course, he will. It is in our nature to rule. But Halak lacks a powerful bloodline. He will never evolve enough to oppose me.”

She sneered at the new king. “I am sure your father said the same thing about you.”

Deruthel growled. “Enough of this foolishness. I have many preparations to make. It is time for you to die.” His claws extended from his fingers like long, curved knives. She blinked as they rushed toward her face.

CHAPTER 19



Riley took in everything at once as her shadow relayed information at blurring speed. Ferguson roared as he dislodged two demons from his back and stabbed one on the neck before removing the head of another. Colton's reaper blade whirled in the air, making a seething sound as it cut through a mutated reaper. Deruthel's claw's flashed before her face as the reaper blade she had acquired from the dead shadow thrust upward.

She was knocked to the ground by the blow. The four cuts across her face were deep and burned like acid, but the blade had deflected the majority of the blow as it pierced the new king's hand. His roar echoed around her as she fell to the ground and rolled to her back.

Deruthel hissed and swung his sizzling, clawed hand through the dirty white railing that lined the race track. The wood exploded under his powerful thrust and splinters burst into the air in multiple directions. With one landing in Riley's eye.

She backed up, scrambling on her hands and feet backwards, when Deruthel turned toward her with glowing red eyes. He wasn't mad. He was furious and held retribution in his eyes. His hand continued to smoke and sizzle, sending the smell of seared flesh into the surrounding air. She tried to remember Dannika's experience with Deruthel, but pain and chaos made focusing hard. She knew it was something about her blood and judging by the fact it had burned the new king. Either it was something to do with her and Dannika's blood or

the artifact had changed something between her and Deruthel. Either way, she was now his weakness.

As he growled down at her, she realized he had known that all along. There was no version of this new world if the new king lived that she would be a part of it. He couldn't afford to let her live. She may not understand the logistics as to why her blood was toxic to him, but it really didn't matter. One way or another, Deruthel had to die.

So far, the blood that had been transferred to Deruthel had been superficial. Drops of her leaking wounds that had come in contact with the skin. What would happen if she stabbed him? Infused his body with her obviously toxic blood.

There was a moment of fear she thought whatever had happened to her was not reversible. That she would stay in this leprous state and not be able to be a mate or part of the shadow clans in the future. But what was done was done. She was as she would be, but as long as this ended in a scenario, her sister and family were safe, she could live with that.

Riley put the reaper blade against her cheek, allowing the blood to coat the blade. She backed against a faded striped pole and used it to pull herself to her feet. She held the slick blade in front of her, careful to step over the body of a dead mutant as she moved to the center of the dirt track, giving herself more room to maneuver. "You may want to stay back. Looks like my blood is a little acidic."

Deruthel snarled. "It is the downside to powered blood. The priestess was strong and her connection to the temporal artifact had an adverse effect."

"It will kill you," she said hopefully.

Deruthel grunted. "Hardly. It burns for a moment. It is some type of cleansing, but I have an admiration for pain. I was not aware of this side effect until after Dannika's transition, but it is irrelevant now."

"It only affects you in shadow form. Not when we were human," she said.

“I drank several of the priestess’ descendants. As humans, their blood was delicious.”

“I hope you rot in hell. Dannika was right. You aren’t a king; you are a demon pig. Rooting around in the shit, oblivious to your impending death.”

Deruthel roared as the pathway that connected the racetrack to the shadow hummed like a tuning fork. She had heard the sound earlier when the cougar clan arrived. This was more like a sandstorm about to obliterate everything in its wake.

Black mist swarmed the track. It was so thick it became difficult to see the demon king. His arms waved in the air, but the molecules were too small to be affected by his futile attack.

She didn’t understand why the shadow warriors weren’t forming until the surrounding air thickened. They wanted her away from the king, but there was no way they could beat him without her help. She circled the king as he swatted the black mist around him. She was careful to stay behind him, moving so she remained in his blind spot.

She thrust forward as the new king turned and her blade puncture his sternum. Unfortunately, she was much shorter than the demon king and her blade entered a centimeter below his heart. He backhanded her, sending her through the air and skidding across the dirt to a rolling stop.

The king howled, before pulling the blade from his torso and casting it to the ground. His eyes blazed with red and yellow fire before his body distorted slightly, and he lost six inches of height. “No!”

Riley hadn’t realized that Ashkara had increased the size of Deruthel’s body until it shrunk. The yellow in his eyes dissipated, leaving only the glowing red. While the wound had already healed, he’d lost some of his power and he knew exactly who had robbed him. He ran toward her, ignoring the black swarm around him.

She searched the ground for another reaper blade, but noticed a black demon sword. While she had never held or

used one before, she was well aware they could kill both demon or shadow. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt and she held it before her as she stood.

Deruthel snarled when he saw the sword and paused in his advance, stopping only a few feet from her. “That weapon will sting, but it will not kill me. You have taken something valuable from me, and it will take centuries to get it back. You will pay for your interference.”

“Since, you have been so honest about killing me, I will try not to feel bad about it,” she said.

The king’s lip curled over his teeth. “Since you won’t be around for me to take my revenge, I will take it out on your sister, your father and your clan. Except for the young shadow, Jace, the cougar clan will perish.”

Her face paled. “You can’t enter the sanctuary.”

Deruthel laughed. “Is that what you think? Reapers cannot enter, but I can and will. Every child within its walls will curse your name as they writhe in pain. I will be sure to tell them who enacted this curse upon them,” he said.

Her hands tightened on the grip of the sword. “You’re despicable. Your temper tantrums are no different from a toddler. You, on the other hand, should know better. Thousands of years of knowledge and all you can come up with is world domination? How pathetic and predictable.”

Her shadow surfaced beneath her skin. She acknowledged her ability to shift to the pathway if needed, but she was curious to the shift in her abilities. She felt stronger. When she glanced down at her chest, the wound was completely healed. She gripped the sword with one hand as she ran a hand over her cheek. The skin was perfectly smooth. Power thrummed through her blood and she couldn’t figure out the source.

Deruthel roared and lunged at her, but she whirled away effortlessly and brought the demon blade across his back. He screamed as he stumbled forward, then turned back to face her. He wasn’t lying about the demon blade, however. The cut ran

in a clean diagonal slice, dripping black blood for a few seconds before it healed over completely.

She held the sword in two hands as she circled him. Was her connection to Deruthel making her stronger? Or was it the connection to her sister? Dannika had given her blood to enable her to shift back to her shadow form. Was it a combination of both? “You are getting slower in your old age Deruthel.”

She noticed the black swarm dissipate and clan members formed all over the Racetrack. They were engaged instantly with the remaining demons and mutant reapers, but now the numbers were even. So many had fled after overhearing the king’s plans to let them die. Still, most were unaware of their treacherous king’s plan to sacrifice them for his new world order.

Deruthel chuckled. “Is that what you think? You robbed me of knowledge, not power. I will kill you, then feast on your blood.”

“Not likely, since my blood will erode your esophagus. Although a mesh looking demon sounds appropriate right now.” She cocked her neck to the side. “How about I give you a little taste?”

Deruthel’s eyes seized with anger. They pulsed like red LED lights at Christmas. Taunting the king was never a good idea, but his ego was his only weakness. If you could call it that. “You are an insignificant little girl. You are nothing to me! A female that I will crush beneath my feet.”

Riley moved her hand in a talking motion. Pinching her thumb and fingers together like a hand puppet. “Blah, blah, blah. You weren’t lying about losing that extra intelligence. I think a farm pig is smarter than you now. Maybe you should scurry off with your tail between your legs. Oh wait, you don’t have a tail. You couldn’t even get that right.”

Deruthel roared and his fangs lengthened into thick ebony spikes as she rushed him. She was prepared for his outburst and dove sideways and rolled back to her feet. Every move seemed to energize her, but Deruthel appeared slower. Despite

his superior intelligence, he was allowing his anger to affect him. He turned slowly and took a calming breath. “I admire this strategy. I have used it many times in the past. You would have made an excellent lieutenant despite the disadvantage of being born female. We must conclude this battle. Come to me, Riley.”

She was about to laugh at his audacity when her mind squeezed like a vise. He hadn't lied about the connection between them. She had been siphoning his power. Deruthel knew this would happen and had protected the one gift he planned to unleash on her. He had always had the ability to control his horde at least a couple at a time, but his ability was stronger now.

She saw his memories as he imposed his will and she fell to her knees, attempting to dislodge him from her brain. Aqua blue skies turned to a brown, savage wastelands as the image of a world wasting away burned in her vision.

She heard Colton calling her. The roar of shadow warriors around her attempting to approach. She realized Deruthel was still controlling many of the demons and they fought with everything in their power to block any chance of aid.

She had no idea what effect a demon blade soaked in her blood would do to the demon. Maybe nothing. She focused on making her hands cooperate and slid the blade across her wrist, coating it in her blood as the demon king approached.

Deruthel's mind was like an invading force and sacrifices were a part of war. She compartmentalized her mind. A tactic she learned from Deruthel himself. He had hidden certain facts from his father by allowing access to everything and hiding the smallest amount of information. She made a mental picture of a honeycomb and placed the information she wanted in one section of the hive.

She hid in the tiny module as Deruthel invaded the rest. Her body went slack and the sword laying on her limp hand. She was sitting on her knees, but there was no life behind her eyes.

Deruthel stopped in front of her, admiring his work. His claw cut across her cheek, but she didn't flinch, as she felt no pain. "It always ends this way. I must hand it to you, few opponents force me to such an action. It is a testament to your strength, and strategy. I almost admire you. Goodbye, Riley."

When he lifted his hand, extending his claws to remove her head, she burst from the small module in her mind and performed the one command she had hidden. Her face remained blank as she moved.

Her hand clutched the sword and thrust upward, piercing the demon king's heart. He screeched and though she heard his piercing screech that caused her eardrums to bleed, her body remained frozen. There was no command left. No more secret modules to save her.

Deruthel stumbled back with his claws around the demon sword embedded in his heart. His long black fingers twitched as they tried to remove the blade, but tiny sparks formed at the edges of the sword, spreading over his flesh as he roared in outrage.

His arms stretched to the heavens before he roared and exploded into a thousand specks of fire.

Riley fell forward, released from the vise, crushing her mind. She would have a headache for weeks, but at least she was alive. She attempted to get up, but her body had lost the connection to Deruthel and she lacked the energy to stand, let alone fight.

Demons and mutants dematerialized one by one until only the shadows were left. Colton was at her side, pulling her to her feet and supporting her weight with his arm when he realized she couldn't do it herself.

"You killed Deruthel? How?" Colton asked.

"He connected me to him with the temporal artifact. Dannika's blood gave me a boost, but I think the artifact did something while we were connected. I coated a reaper blade in my blood and it hurt him, but when I coated a demon blade in

my blood, it acted like a super-conductor and set his blood on fire when I stabbed him in the heart.”

She ran a finger over the gouges in his face. She knew the demon venom burned, but he looked more concerned for her and she glanced around as the shadows began to disappear. “Where are they going?”

“Ferguson ordered them to kill the remaining demons and mutant reapers. He is on a high after killing Breck and wants the remnants of the demon army eliminated.”

Riley laughed. “I’m glad he is enjoying himself.”

Colton kissed her forehead. “In this case, so am I. Let’s get you home.”

She sighed as his shadow enveloped hers, and her molecules separated.

CHAPTER 20



Riley woke to an empty bed. She pulled back the covers and grabbed a cotton t-shirt from Colton's closet. She loved wearing his shirts around the house and noticed he liked them as well. He was standing in the living room when she entered. "Hey"

He turned with a smile. "Hello, beautiful."

She walked over and wrapped her hands around his neck. "Hey, yourself. You look good as new. Sorry I passed out after we got home. That mind game Deruthel played, really took it out of me."

"I still can't believe you fought him. That you were able to withstand his control," Colton said.

"I couldn't. I mean, I didn't. Deruthel made the mistake of telling me he hid small pieces of information from his father. He compartmentalized his mind like a beehive. His father could see so much of the hive he missed one small dark module. I did the same. I hid one action and instructed my body to perform that one move once activated."

"That's why you looked like a zombie before and after," he said.

"Yes. I am glad you kept the other demons off me because I was a sitting duck until Deruthel exploded."

"I will always protect you," he said.

Her eyes sparkled as she stared at her mate. "I love you."

Colton kissed her cheek and moved her to the couch. Their clothes disappeared. Her mate took responsibility for everything around her. His clan was wary of her, but he had accepted her the moment he saw her. His faith in her was a gift she would always be thankful for. “God, I love you. How did I get so lucky?”

Riley’s lips twitched. “I am pretty sure I am the lucky one. Have you spoken to Dannika?”

“I messaged Raine. She is good. They will be here tomorrow for our bonding ceremony. Ferguson and the others are searching for the stray demons, but they think they have found all the mutant reapers. Steele will be here in an hour or so to make some final arrangements for our ceremony.”

Her eyes twinkled with merriment. “A whole hour? What should we do with all the time?”

Riley’s smile was reflected in his eyes. “I have some ideas.”

His fingers whispered over her skin, a marauding wind that would reveal the beauty of the oasis before him. He caressed her body with expertise, weaving a spell of desire and beauty. Her breathy moans fell from her lips as his hands roamed from her breasts, down her stomach, and between her thighs.

Riley sucked in an unsteady breath. It hitched as his fingers traveled higher up her legs, caressing over heated flesh. She didn’t try to turn away, to pry her eyes from the intensity of his gaze. Her mate was a warrior, and he had trapped her in a web of hunger and need. A hold he would never relinquish. One she didn’t want him to.

He lay her down on the couch, placing his hands on her upper thighs as he wedged his shoulders between them.

“Don’t move. I need to taste you,” he growled.

Her legs moved restlessly as he kissed her inner thighs, the caress and a promise of seduction and pleasure. She cried out when he ran a finger through her slick heat, then resumed kissing her skin.

“Do something,” she hissed.

His smile was all male amusement. “So, demanding.”

“Hurry,” she said with stunted breath.

He swept his tongue through her folds. She arched up, her muscles tensing like steel bands. He pressed his hand against her stomach, holding her in place as his tongue continued its sensual massage. Her breath hitched as her nipples peaked, begging for his touch. He didn't lick her; he consumed her like a starving animal. Warm honey rushed between her legs, but he growled for more. Craved it. Needed it.

Her body was aflame with lust. Her shadow connected with his, combining their essence, reading each other's desire. She didn't want to escape. She wanted to lock herself with him, consuming one another in endless desire.

Her orgasm ripped through her in a tsunami of pleasure, rippling waves of ecstasy that washed through their connection. She scratched his back, shredding his skin beneath her fingernails. He loved it when she marked him, and this was no exception.

His shadow reached for hers, accepting her, embracing who and what they were together. Its presence was unmistakable as it darkened the room, reassuring her they were one.

He didn't wait. He couldn't. His thick cock nudged her entrance. “I will never give you up. You are my everything. My one treasure in this life.”

The craving escalated to the point of pain. She didn't fight him, or the connection they shared. Their desires were united by their senses. His lust was hers, his love a fine wine she would drink till her last breath. At that moment, she would have agreed to anything to get him inside her. To ease the burning between her legs.

He thrust into her, allowing his long, hard shaft to slip through her heated flesh. Her tight channel clamped onto him like a vise. Every moment with him felt like she had won a monumental prize. He made her feel alive, accepted. Free. Lava cascaded through her blood. Lightning electrified her

skin, burning everything in its wake. He held her hips, angling them so he could go deeper with each stroke, building the heat into a raging inferno. They burned together in a fiery oasis of their own making. An inferno of paradise.

He didn't slow his pace. Her lips parted, perched on the edge of a mindless scream. Time stopped as pleasure swamped her, and his hard cock battered into her, growing thicker with each deliciously torturous thrust. When the pleasure seemed too much, he pumped harder, over and over, into her slick, soft flesh, an erotic fury fueled by need, love, and acceptance. Each stroke branded her, screaming to the heavens she was his.

Tension and lust burned between them, a tsunami of desire and need. His bunched beneath his skin. His cock swelled, as did the urgency of his thrusts. She screamed his name as he erupted inside her.

They lay together for a few minutes before Colton tapped her back. "Steele is coming."

His shirt reappeared over her as she sat up on the couch.

Steele entered as they cuddled his eyes afire with merriment. "Dannika is making all the arrangements for your bonding ceremony. It will take place on the field below. They still have all the tables and chairs from Dannika's, so you can simply get ready up here and come down when you are ready.

Riley laughed. "I'm not sure who is more excited. You or me."

Steele smiled. "I was not the best father-in-law to you. I plan to do much better. You and your sister are a treasure, and I am looking forward to you being a permanent part of my family."

Riley reached over and covered his hand. "I can't wait either. Have you spoken to my dad?"

Steele laughed. "He is even more excited than I am. He has chosen his replacement to walk you down the isle."

Riley arched an eyebrow. "He is still keeping it a secret?"

“He wants to surprise you.”

She laughed. “Okay. Dannika is going to help me get ready. I guess I will be ready in the morning.”

Steele cleared his throat. “I guess I forgot to tell you Dannika is even more eager than your dad. Your ceremony is in two hours. The chairs and tables are already arriving.”

CHAPTER 21



Dannika pointed to the mirror in the corner. “What do you think?”

Riley’s heart stopped when she saw her reflection.

The white silk hung in thin drapes from her waist. The bodice was fitted, a full corset with criss-crossing stings down her back. Crystals accented the neckline, bringing attention to the sapphire necklace set in white gold. Some of her hair was pinned up with a simple silver pin, leaving the majority to cascade down her back.

She touched her face, to inspect the soft but beautiful makeup. “Where did you get this dress? It is unbelievable.”

Dannika smiled. “Darren has the ability to create what he envisions. It’s similar to my dress with a few minor differences. It’s my gift to you.”

Riley hugged her twin as a tear slipped down her cheek. “This is the most beautiful dress I have ever seen.” She released her. “Do you know who is walking me down the aisle?”

Dannika winked. “I am. Your father wanted it to be a family thing.”

“Thank you. That’s amazing. Dad is right, it means a lot to me,” she said.

Jace materialized in the living room, where the sisters were getting ready. “If you are ready, I will take you both down.”

Dannika held out her arm to her twin. “You ready?”

Riley wrapped her arm around Dannika's before Jace took them to the clearing outside.

She sucked in a breath when she saw what her sister had created for her wedding day. The tables with white linens and flower centerpieces were all tastefully arranged. All seating was taken, forcing the members of the other clans to stand around the tables. Hundreds of shadow warriors stood in suits, their eyes filled with adoration and hope as she and Dannika walked towards the white arch.

The clearing fell away as her eyes locked with Colton's. His black tuxedo and white shirt were the sexiest things she had ever seen. This Adonis, this incredible combination of human and demon, was hers. Her shadow growled in satisfaction as she approached.

Dannika guided her to Colton, then kissed her cheek before taking her position as the maid of honor before Daniel. When Colton took her hand, his eyes roamed over her body. The desire in his soul erupted in black shadows, rippling over his shoulder. This wasn't his anger. It was lust. A monstrous desire he couldn't contain.

The next hour blurred between spoken words and cheers from the crowd. Her eyes remained locked with his throughout the ceremony. An endearment that would last till she took her last breath. This man was hers for all time.

Colton kissed her hand, turning them toward the crowd. "I present my wife. My mate."

The crowd roared and applauded.

She leaned towards him and whispered, "I can't wait to get our tattoos."

They danced and laughed until Dannika went to the front of the clearing with Raine at her side. "I want to wish Riley and Colton a bright and fruitful future."

The shadows clapped and Ferguson winked at her when she glanced his way. The ancient reaper seemed almost happy and Riley liked the look on him.

Dannika motioned to Ferguson. “Will you bring her wedding gift, please?”

Ferguson grabbed a box from the table of gifts and brought it to Dannika as Riley approached the front of the clearing by the arch. “Are we opening gifts now?”

Dannika smiled. “The rest can wait, but I thought this was as good a time as any to clear up some misconceptions.”

Riley took the box with a silver bow from her sister. “What misconceptions?”

“Many members of the clan have doubted my ability to lead because I was unwilling to fight the demons personally. They questioned my choice in sending you to fight my war.”

Riley glanced around, expecting to see only reapers embarrassed by Dannika’s words, but there were many sheepish looks alerting Riley the derision had been more widespread than she thought. “The war is over now. What is this about?”

Dannika smiled. “The war is over, thanks to you. Only you could have removed the threat Deruthel posed, and I was not able to help you.”

“You are the queen; you are needed to...”

Dannika held up her hand. “It wasn’t that. Not even my mate could have kept me out of the war, but circumstances prevented my involvement in a physical sense.”

Riley recalled her sister’s pale looks and weakness. “You were sick, weren’t you?”

Dannika glanced at her mate. “Yes, but not in the way you think.”

“What happened?”

Dannika motioned to the box. “Open your gift, Riley”

Riley pulled the silver ribbon and removed the card attached to the silver booties. “Dear Auntie, Riley. I can’t wait to meet you.”

She glanced at Raine's smiling face and Colton's stunned one. "You're pregnant?"

Dannika nodded. "I didn't leave you to fight alone because I wanted to. I just don't think morning sickness is a viable defense against demons."

Riley hugged her sister as shouts erupted around the clearing. "This is the best wedding present ever."

Ryder yelled. "All Hail the Queen!"

The chant took on a mind of its own as Colton pulled her to his side. "And the princess."



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