



# MORTAL DEMON

SHADOW  SHIFTERS

TIA DIDMON

MORTAL DEMON  
A SHADOW SHIFTERS NOVEL



TIA DIDMON

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## Mortal Demon

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## CHAPTER 1



Riley woke to fingers moving over her bare skin. Where was her long T-shirt? She remembered being so tired, she took off her jeans and crawled into bed. They'd been tracking a demon who abducted a woman near the shelter. After four jumps in and out of the pathway, she was too tired to continue. She took a deep breath as Colton drew a pattern on her back. "That feels nice."

"I love touching you," Colton whispered in her ear.

Her head thrashed on the pillow as his lips moved to her breast. He flicked her nipple with his tongue before sucking it into his mouth, taking long, deep pulls, as he sent sparks sizzling beneath her skin. Her fingers curled in his hair as he moved to her other breast.

He was equally attentive to the erect nipple. Her fingers tightened in the silky strands, holding him to her, using him as an anchor amidst the swirl of sensation threatening to pull her under. Stark need built within her. The surrounding air was electrified as her shadow reached for his. Rolling clouds of dark mist swirled together like a vicious tornado. Her fingers clutched the bedsheets when he moved lower, out of her reach.

His tongue was magic as it flicked and nipped her skin, working his way down her stomach to her belly button. He continued his erotic foray over her midsection until she was panting with need. She held her breath as he moved lower, kneeling between her legs. He nipped the inside of her thigh, only to lick the sting away before his tongue slipped between her slick lips. Every flick of his tongue sent a current of electricity beneath her skin, racing in her veins.

Sometimes he would build the fire in her slowly, stoking it ever so gently, but this was not one of those times. He was relentless in his hunger. Ferocious in his need to milk her body. She moaned as she crested the apex, and he was rewarded with the cream he so desperately desired. She was still rolling the wave of her orgasm when he knelt between her legs.

The broad head of his cock lodged at her entrance, feeling like a velvet spike as he pressed into her. The muscles tightened beneath his skin as he controlled the penetration. He was large, and her body still struggled to accommodate his size. Her breath caught in her lungs as he filled her. Her eyes locked with his, acknowledging the feral need exuded by their shadows. Both man and beast were ensnared by the beauty of their mate.

His lips covered hers as he began to move inside her. The craving was unlike anything she'd experienced, and she wanted more. Her body and soul reacted to the beauty of her man. He would never think so, but to her, he was the most beautiful creature to walk the earth. His raw sex appeal only added to the allure of the alpha shadow shifter.



He lifted her hips, angling his body so he could penetrate deeper. Each thick jolt caused her breasts to sway and his gaze to fall upon them. When she didn't think making love to him could be any more erotic, his thumb moved to her clit and a few well-timed strokes sent her hurtling over the apex once more.

She clamped down on him, expecting to take him with her, but he pumped through her orgasm, unrelenting as he thrust harder. Faster. His fingers bit into her hips as he met every thrust with a frenzy of need. His eyes were glittering dark diamonds. Possessive. Intimate. Unrelenting. The growing sensations had her pumping with him. Meeting each thrust with one of her own.

His cock swelled to almost double its size, stretching her tender flesh. A volcano of hot lava, waiting to explode. The slick tissue was stretched so tight she swore between clenched teeth before the rolling orgasm ripped through her body. She clamped down violently, making him groan as she took him with her over the edge.

It took them a minute to get their breathing under control before he slipped out of her, and moved to the side, pulling her head to his shoulder. Their legs entwined as his hand began to caress her side. "We should start every morning this way."

She smiled against his chest. "We already do."

He kissed her forehead. "That's true." He looked up as black script formed in the air. "Dannika and Raine will be here in a half hour. We need to get dressed."

Riley raised her head from his chest. “I didn’t know they were coming. What’s going on?”

“Nothing serious. Dannika wants to help plan our mating ceremony,” he said.

Riley put her head back down. “Everyone’s talking about the ceremony, but I’m still not clear about the tradition. Dannika said it’s similar to a wedding.”

Colton nodded. “Dannika and Raine’s was, but the actual ceremony can be whatever you want it to be. The important thing for me and the clan is just that you’re a part of it now and forever.” He winked. “Raine admits he enjoyed getting presents. Since there hasn’t been a bonding ceremony in hundreds of years, no one was really sure what to get them.”

Riley laughed. “I can imagine. What do you get somebody for a bonding present?”

“Raine and Dannika got everything from tools to weapons. Her favorite present came from Ezra. He is the weapons master, but he made her a locket out of blessed steel. It’s able to travel the pathways with her.”

“What a thoughtful present,” she said.

“Ezra is a blessing. Our weapons master was killed in a reaper attack a few years ago and we have no replacement. Ezra’s apprentice was also killed, but he has promised to stay with us until he trains another.”

“Promised to stay?”

“Ezra is one of the oldest amongst us. He had a son, but Danson died almost fifty years ago. He is tired, but he won’t

leave us until we have a suitable replacement. With all the clans working together now, it no longer matters which clan the next weapons master is born to.”

“I hope we find his new apprentice soon. I think training someone will give him life and purpose in the coming years.”

“As do I. Are you ready to get dressed?” he asked.

“Yes.” She rolled out of bed, looking on the floor for her shirt. Colton manifested it in his hands. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

She took it from him. “I have to admit, shifting your clothes to the shadows is pretty convenient.”

He smiled like a schoolboy. “I admit to having a newfound appreciation for it.”

She laughed and got dressed. They went to the living room and sat on the couch before the slight humming noise alerted them that Raine and Dannika were about to exit the pathway.

They coalesced in the front room, but Riley’s smile faded when she noticed the dark circles under Dannika’s eyes. Her skin was pale and though her smile was as bright and welcoming as always, her eyes and hair lacked the luster and shine that normally accompanied the queen.

“Dannika, are you alright?” she asked.

Dannika waved her hand in the air. “I’m a little run down. Ferguson and Raine are trying to shoulder some of the burdens of being queen, but it’s difficult with the reapers. I’m worried if I don’t keep a more active role, they will defect with Breck

and the demons. The adjustment in their eating habits has been more difficult for some than others.”

Colton huffed. “It’s more difficult for the reapers that chose to turn versus those who were forced into it. Ferguson has acclimatized quite well, and appears to be just as powerful as he was when he consumed human blood.”

Dannika nodded. “He admits that there are some challenges even for him, but it is more difficult for those who choose to turn.”

Steele coalesced on the porch before entering Colton’s home. He nodded to Dannika and Raine before kneeling on the floor by Riley. “I brought you something.”

Riley glanced between the others. Colton and Dannika looked perplexed. So whatever the cougar clan leader was up to, they weren’t in on it. “A present? I thought it was customary to wait until the ceremony.”

Steele smiled. “It’s a present of sorts, but not because you are bonding with my son.” He pulled out a crimson silk sash. It was long and beautifully embroidered with white flowers. “This was made by my human wife. I never got a chance to pass it down to a daughter-in-law. I never thought I would, but I’m hoping you would like to wear it for your ceremony.”

Riley took the sash from his hand. “It’s beautiful. I’m honored, thank you.”

Steele stood. “Are there any new developments with the demons?”

Dannika held up one finger. “Fergie will be here with a report in five seconds.”

They heard the hum before Ferguson coalesced into the room. His eyes fell on Dannika, and his irritation was more than evident. “You should be resting.”

Dannika rolled her eyes. “Okay, Mom.”

Colton and Riley pursed their lips. Everyone feared Ferguson. His power rolled off him like a tidal wave. He was the oldest living shadow, and she was sure not even Dannika was aware of his true power. That being said, he was unwavering in his loyalty to the queen. And her eyes held a fondness for the ancient reaper that nobody fully understood.

“Fergie, did someone pee in your cornflakes?” Riley had taken to teasing the reaper. While he was loyal to Dannika, he also had a fondness for her. Riley always felt safe in his presence when he made everyone else uneasy.

Ferguson raised one eyebrow. “Cornflakes? I have not eaten breakfast in seven hundred years.”

Riley plastered an innocent look on her face. “Maybe if you started, you wouldn’t be so grumpy.”

Dannika laughed, then covered her mouth when Ferguson shot her a dirty look. “Riley is right. You are pissed, and it’s not because I’m a little tired. What happened?”

Ferguson sighed. “The demons continue to protect Breck.”

Dannika raised an eyebrow. “You’re pissed because you weren’t able to kill the traitor today?”

“I thought the demons would have disposed of him by now. I don’t understand why they are protecting the reapers,” he said.

Dannika rubbed her temple. “I’m sure we will find out soon enough, and I doubt we will like it.”

Darwin coalesced into the room. “Steele, you must come to the main cabin. A cougar was murdered not fifty feet from Daniel’s home.”

Riley stood as Ferguson growled. “Was it the traitor?”

Darwin shook his head. “We have no idea if it was Breck or one of the other reapers, but Aaron was beheaded.”

They all followed Darwin into the pathway. Riley and Colton went last, so they exited near Dannika and Raine. Steele was barking orders at several clan members to search the surrounding woods.

Riley glanced at Darwin before he shifted to his cougar form and bounded into the forest. “Why are they searching in cougar form? Reapers will have taken the pathway?”

Dannika turned to her. “There is only one pathway in and out of this area. There are several clan members with Daniel at all times. This pathway wasn’t used this morning.”

Riley glanced into the woods. “The killer crept in here on foot? Completely undetected?”

Dannika looked down at the young man. “It looks that way.”

Riley found it hard to look at the fallen cougar clan member. His blond hair was matted to his neck where it had been severed from his body. Dark blood pooled between his neck, and torso. It had a crimson sticky consistency, alerting her to the fact that the murder had occurred less than two hours ago. “Is there a specific reason he was targeted?”

Steel shook his head. “Aaron is only thirty. He is barely past his fledgling years. He was a receiver, but we have dozens of those. I believe this was a crime of opportunity. Aaron enjoyed Daniel’s company. His father died five years ago, and I believe he took comfort in Daniel’s presence. As many of us do.”

Riley was thankful the clan had accepted her father with open arms. In some ways, they were more accepting of him than her. “If they hiked in here, then they may have taken a pathway once they were farther away.”

Colton nodded. “I agree. I would like to track the pathways surrounding our territory. Riley and I will look for the perpetrator.”

Steele growled. “Riley is not going near this killer. We know the demons want her. This could be a ploy to expose her. Do not fall into their trap.”

Black smoke rolled off Colton’s shoulders while he warred with his alpha. “I would never let any harm come to Riley. I take offense at you suggesting I cannot protect my mate.”

Steele shook his head. “That was not my intention. We need to discern what killed Aaron.”

Dannika's eyes narrowed on Steele. "What? Not who?"

Steele's eyes flickered with black smoke. "I want to know if this was a reaper or a demon. Or worse, a clan member."

Dannika's eyes widened. "You think a clan member could've done this?"

Steele glanced toward the forest. "I have no idea, but the priestess is the only one who can identify the species of the perpetrator. She probably can't tell us who did it, but she can read the energy. She should be able to tell us if it was a reaper or a demon."

Colton glanced at the cougar clan members gathering around them. "The clan doesn't trust the Haitians. I hope you are not suggesting we bring her here."

Steele growled. "I am still the leader of this clan, and it is my decision. The priestess has proved invaluable. If we expect to utilize her talents, we need to show them the respect they deserve. She will be invited to our territory."

Dannika stepped closer to the fallen clan member. "I agree with Steele. Anaisa has shown us nothing but respect. If we wish to utilize her talents and seek her counsel, then she must be treated as an equal." She turned to Ferguson. "Would you invite her to investigate Aaron's murder?"

Ferguson's eyes roamed the gathering crowd. "Of course, my queen. If anyone disagrees with your decision, please inform me so I may have a private discussion with them. I will not tolerate dissension."

His eyes flickered with red before he dissolved.



## CHAPTER 2



Riley moved closer to Colton as the crowd around Aaron's body continued to grow. Streams of black smoke rolled off several of the clan members' shoulders, alerting her to their internal struggle. The breeze filtered through the surrounding trees, causing the branches to creak and rub against one another. The eerie sound added to the dreary scene playing out below them. A brown leaf blew along the ground, only to rest on the young man's dead hand.

With almost thirty clan members circling the kill site, their low mumbling as they spoke to one another was inaudible. While Riley couldn't hear the words, she didn't need to. Anger and retribution had a distinct odor, and the clan was out for blood. She touched Colton's arm. "You seem tense."

His eyes rolled over the crowd. "Despite our positive interactions with the Haitian village. That was on their property. Tensions are running high, and I want to make sure there're no repercussions for Anaisa's visit."

Riley was about to respond, but Anaisa's old truck parked in the distance. Ferguson exited the passenger side of the

vehicle and waited for the Haitian priestess to join him before approaching the collective of clan members.

Anaisa was just as beautiful in her black jeans and fitted tan leather jacket as in her white Haitian dress. Her boots were the same color as her jacket, but were more of a hiking style. It was obvious she was no stranger to being in the forest, as she seemed to float over the uneven ground. Her grace was accented by her mocha skin and long black hair. The colored braids bounced with the silky strands as she walked.

Ferguson's eyes moved over the crowd, daring anyone to challenge her presence. The clan was aware Steele had requested her counsel, but even if they weren't, no one would challenge Ferguson. He was an alpha and sent a shiver of fear through the crowd. He was open about his loyalty, but not his background. Only her father seemed to know what that was, but he trusted the ancient reaper, and that was enough for Riley.

The crowd split in the middle, allowing Ferguson and Anaisa to pass. Her face softened to one of pain when she saw Aaron's body. She saw what everyone else did. A young man who was robbed of his life by unforeseen circumstances. Worse, in a place where he felt safe. The clan sanctuary had been violently violated.

She knelt down beside his body, placing her fingers on his chest. Her eyes closed, and all discussion stopped. It was like the entire forest held its breath, waiting for her to speak. She inhaled deeply before she stood up.

“This was a demon kill, but the energy is strange. It’s not something I recognize or have come in contact with. It reminds me of demonic possession.”

The crowd behind Anaisa all spoke at once. With them all talking over one another, only certain words were clear. “Demon. Reaper. Retribution. War.”

Steele held up his hand. “Silence. We must investigate Aaron’s death. I understand your anger. He was young and not a warrior. This atrocity will not go unanswered, but I need you to disperse so we can make preparations.”

The crowd slowly dissipated as Riley approached Anaisa.

“Anaisa, you said this reminded you of demonic possession. Has that actually happened?” Riley asked.

Anaisa nodded. “Yes, but you will have to find those answers from your human church. We have ways of protecting ourselves from such an intrusion. This malady does not plague us.”

Riley turned to Colton. “We need to talk to dad. He was investigating the demons because of my mom’s death. If there are records of demon possession within the church, then he will know about them.”

Anaisa turned to Ferguson. “I would like to hear what Riley’s father has to say about demonic possession. May I go with them?”

Riley’s eyes narrowed on the priestess. “Of course, you can come with us. Why would you ask for permission?”

Anaisa smiled at Riley sadly. “No Bokor or Priestess has been on shadow-owned land for hundreds of years.”

Ferguson nodded. “While that is true, you are welcome here. You and your community have done nothing but help the shadow clans.”

Anaisa nodded. “I have my truck. Can we drive to the clan house, Ferguson? I will leave after speaking with Daniel.”

Ferguson nodded and led Anaisa toward her vehicle.

Colton took Riley’s hand. “We are close to the clan house. We will cut through Oliver’s land and meet them there.”

They had only walked twenty feet when a clearing opened up and a home similar to Colton’s sat in the trees above them. The branches swayed around it, camouflaging its existence. If it weren’t for her cougar eyesight, she would never have noticed the tree house.

She pointed to the tree. “I’m guessing that’s Oliver’s house?”

Colton smiled. “He’s a good man. He and I were fledglings together, but he had the urge to mate twenty years ago and has spent most of his time in the sanctuary with his son. Lucan is nineteen now, and has started to train as a warrior.”

The shadow coalesced in front of them, making Riley’s heart race until she saw the smile on Colton’s face.

The man had a similar build to Colton, but with black hair and light blue eyes.

Colton shook his hand. “Oliver, it’s good to see you. Are you training today?”

Oliver smiled sadly. “I was, but the fledglings were sent back to the sanctuary while we investigate Aaron’s death. Lucan was not happy about having his privileges revoked, but he is too young to take up this fight.”

Riley frowned. “Why would Lucan have his privileges revoked? What did he do wrong?”

Colton turned to her. “Lucan is a fledgling. He has just left the confines of the sanctuary. He lives with his father now while he trains to become a warrior, but when the clan goes into lockdown, he must return to the sanctuary. It’s a trying time for a fledgling.”

Oliver’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “That’s one way to put it.” He winked at Riley. “I’m sure Colton hasn’t told you about the multiple violations he incurred as a fledgling.”

Colton crossed his arms. “If I remember correctly, you were with me on every one of those excursions.”

Riley laughed. “Now I know this is a story I want to hear.”

Oliver winked. “I will tell you all about our wily youth, but I must complete the task Steele has set before me.”

Colton dropped his arms. “What area has Steele sent you out to patrol?”

Oliver glanced at the mountain. “I’m going to check the upper ridge. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Colton shook Oliver's hand before his shadow dissolved, and he was off to patrol.

Riley bumped Colton's shoulder playfully. "I like him. I can't wait to hear the stories about a young Colton breaking the rules. It's hard to imagine that now."

Colton sighed. "You'd be surprised."

"Why?"

He shook his head, but there was a distance in his eyes. Something she couldn't explain and made her uneasy. "I'm just being nostalgic, I guess."

They walked for a few minutes before Riley stopped him. "Before we get to dad's, can you tell me why you were upset about Anaisa coming to our territory?"

"It's like she said. We are nervous about their power. It's unclear what they could do to us if there was a war between the Haitians and the shadows."

Riley stepped back. "Why would you think such a thing? She has been nothing but kind and accommodating to us."

"Anaisa is, but she was not always the priestess, and it was a Bokor that cursed us. Even if relations with the Haitians are good while Anaisa is their leader, she is mortal. There are no guarantees that the next generation will hold true to her values."

Riley allowed Colton to pull her to his side as they continued walking. "It doesn't seem fair. We go to her all the time."

“Yes. It’s become a habit, and one, quite honestly, we should break.”

“Why?” Riley asked.

“Despite our positive interactions with the priestess. The clan members are nervous. In light of what happened today, we cannot afford clan dissension. Our only chance of surviving the upcoming war is if we remain united. That will not happen if we openly align with the Haitians.”

Riley pursed her lips. “I understand what happened in the past, but it’s just that. You can’t live your life judging people by the actions of their ancestors. If that were true, I would have nothing to do with you.”

Colton stopped her. “What?”

“Your ancestors went into the human world and had a child with the women they chose. They then faked their death and stole the child from the woman they loved. If that practice were true today, you and I would not be standing here.”

Colton blew out a breath. “Fair enough.”

They walked for five more minutes before Daniel’s cabin came into view. A clan member nodded to Colton as they ascended the steps. He stood looking over the forest and surveying the surrounding land. “Is he protecting the cabin?”

“Yes. This cabin was built as a human front. If human authorities wish to inspect our property, this is where we have them meet. As a result, this home is not as well protected as our personal dwellings. The clan is adamant about keeping Daniel safe. One shadow is always posted near the cabin.”

“Does he know that?”

Colton winked. “Probably not, but let’s keep it that way.”

Daniel was sleeping in his chair when she and Colton arrived. Ferguson stood by the mantel and Anaisa was putting a flannel blanket over Daniel’s legs.

Riley smiled at her thoughtfulness. “Thank you. He doesn’t feed unless... he doesn’t feed enough.”

Anaisa finished arranging the blanket over his legs. “It’s an affliction you and Dannika also share. I have something that will help. An herb that will enhance the effects of feeding. It won’t replace it, though. He must feed, but he will keep his strength longer.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “That’s amazing. Would it work for Dannika and me?”

“Dannika cannot take the herb at this time, but I will make some up for you as well,” Anaisa said as she sat on the couch.

Riley wanted to ask the priestess about Dannika’s health, but Daniel took a deep breath before opening his eyes. “Riley.”

She went to him, kneeling beside his chair. “Hey, Dad. Are you up to answering a couple of questions for us?”

He ran a weathered hand over her cheek. “Anything for you, sweetheart.”

Her heart squeezed at the love in his eyes. He lost the love of his life and every action since that moment had been for



Riley. Her protection. “We need to know about demonic possession. Is it real?”

Daniel nodded. “There are multiple reports in the church library. I have never exorcised a demon myself, but there are hundreds of documented cases. They are similar in nature and span over the centuries. There’s no way it’s a coincidence.”

Riley glanced at the priestess. “This is Anaisa. She is the priestess of the Haitian village.”

Daniel nodded to her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Your power is remarkable, as is the faith your people have in you.”

Anaisa’s eyes narrowed on Daniel. “Your words are kind, priest. You are not what I expected.”

Daniel laughed. “I’m just an old man who loves his daughter.”

“Age is but a number. Some live longer than others, but we both know it’s because they have certain tasks to accomplish on this earth before they may move to the next.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes, priestess. I thought my work was done, but it seems I was mistaken.”

Riley found their conversation strange, but decided it was something only a spiritual leader could understand. “Dad, do you think the possessions had anything to do with these demons? Have they been possessing people to spy on us, or for some other nefarious reason?”

Daniel ran his fingers over the Bible in his lap. “It’s entirely possible. There are many aspects to the supernatural world and they are all subject to interpretation.”

Riley stood. “If that’s true, they’ve been watching us for years and years. How do we fight back? They know everything about us. We know next to nothing about them.”

Anaisa stood. “Let me look into this. I will gather those herbs and call Ferguson to retrieve them.” She turned to Daniel. “It was my honor to meet you, priest.”

Daniel put his hand to his heart. “The honor was mine.”

Ferguson led Anaisa outside. They heard the truck engine roar before gravel crunched beneath her tires and she drove off.

Riley was about to ask another question, but Daniel had fallen asleep. “He can barely keep his eyes open. I hope Anaisa’s herbs help him.”

Colton grabbed her hand. “Me too.” He led her outside.

“The demons have been spying on us since the first priestess. We have to find a way to catch up,” she said.

Colton’s voice had a tinny quality. As if his thoughts were miles away. “I wish no disrespect to your father, but I do not believe demons are responsible for biblical possession.”

“Why?”

“Because they’ve shown no signs of possessing humans since they have been here. If they had acquired that skill, why not use it now?”

Riley didn’t have an answer, but she wasn’t ready to disregard her father’s words. She didn’t get a chance to question him further because Ferguson coalesced beside her.

## CHAPTER 3



Riley slapped her hand to her chest. “Jesus Ferguson! You are going to give me a heart attack one of these days.”

Ferguson’s lip twitched. “Unlikely, but I apologize.”

Riley glanced toward the dust cloud Anaisa’s truck had left in its wake. “I thought you would escort her past cougar clan territory.”

Ferguson frowned. “I have made it known that if anyone touches her that they will deal with me. Besides, I did not wish to offend her further.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “You offended her? What did you say?”

“It was not intentional. That contraption she uses to traverse human roads is cumbersome and frightfully unattractive. The ride was incredibly uncomfortable.”

“It’s a four-wheel drive. Those kinds of vehicles are made to traverse rocky terrain, not for comfort. You do realize we are in the mountains. A luxury car wouldn’t make it up here.”

“There is a difference between this contraption and those that travel in the city?”

Riley frowned. “Seriously? When was the last time you drove a vehicle? How can you not know the answer to that?”

His eyes flickered with red. “I have never driven, as I transitioned before vehicles were invented. I’ve taken little interest in their evolution.”

Riley rubbed her forehead. “That makes sense. Did you come back to scare the shit out of me, or is there another reason?”

His lip twitched again. “Since you no longer possess human bodily functions, it is the latter.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“We have been monitoring human police channels. There have been a string of abductions.”

Riley’s shoulders sagged. “Women.”

“Yes. We assumed these attacks were random, but another one occurred in the same location. I believe it requires an investigation.”

Colton ran his hand through his hair. “Where is it?”

Ferguson’s eyes flicked to Colton’s. “A clinic two blocks from the homeless shelter.”

Riley nodded. “Graydon County Clinic. It’s privately funded and designated for low-income families who can’t afford the expenses of the medical system.”

Colton leaned on the porch railing, looking out at the forest. “What would a clinic have to do with demon

abductions? I doubt they're concerned about human healthcare.”

Ferguson moved closer to Colton. “The demons are looking for breeders. I doubt the locations make a difference, but several abductions have occurred near the shelter and this clinic. It could simply be a coincidence. Or that they are taking people less likely to be missed, but I doubt the latter is a concern.”

Riley descended the steps from the porch. A Monarch butterfly was landing on a blue flower that grew between the shrubs that lined the cabin. “They need descendants of the priestess. Have the Haitians reported any missing persons?”

Ferguson shook his head. “They have strengthened their wards around the village and encouraged its members to stay within the protected area. Anaisa has agreed to a shadow escort if she needs to leave their territory.”

Riley ran her hand over the blue flower after the butterfly lifted from its petals. “But you just let her leave our property unescorted.”

“She was not alone. Darwin traveled the pathways while she drove. If he encounters any trouble, most of the queen’s reapers will descend on the assailant,” Ferguson said.

“I hope you’re not suggesting you used her as bait?”

Ferguson shrugged. “It was her idea.”

“I should have seen that coming,” she said.

“The priestess is aware of the gravity of our situation. If the shadows fall, all of humanity will follow,” Ferguson said.

“No pressure,” Riley said.

Ferguson pointed to the cabin. “There is an office inside. I was hoping you would look into the clinic for me. I am not used to the human way of using computers.”

She approached the stairs. “Is that your way of saying you want me to do an internet search?”

Ferguson nodded. “Yes. The internet. Darren takes care of such things in the wolf clan. None of the reapers are proficient with this resource yet.”

Her jaw dropped. “How can you find anything without the web? That’s inconceivable.”

Ferguson’s face hardened. “The previous reaper leaders, would never utilize human means. They believed them inferior to the shadow clans.”

Riley ascended the stairs. “Even though many of them were born human?”

“Yes,” Ferguson said.

Colton opened the door to the cabin, allowing her to enter first before the men followed her. They hadn’t been in the cabin office, but knew where it was located. She glanced at the wildlife pictures on the walls in the hallway as she made her way to the last room.

The interior of the office seemed out of place with the log walls. The rustic exterior at odds with the large oak computer desk with electrical cords running off the edge. The metal wastebasket was empty and the black leather rolling desk chair looked like it had never been used. While the desk was

outfitted with the usual supplies, stapler, scissors, a holder full of pens and highlighters, the empty notepad and lack of personal pictures alerted her to the staged nature of the office.

She made a mental note to add some knickknacks and a coffee mug to the office for appearance's sake. Maybe a few bunched-up pieces of paper in the trash. Even the binders in the holder above the file cabinet appeared unused. She sat down in the chair and rolled closer to the keyboard, before powering up the computer.

She waited for the search engine to load on her screen before she typed in the clinic name. "The clinic has mostly five-star reviews. Any care facility subsidizing patients is going to be favorable in the public eye."

Ferguson leaned over her shoulder while Colton took a seat in a chair opposite Riley's. "I'm not looking for information on the clinic's services. Look up attacks in the area. Missing persons. Specifically, women between the age of sixteen and thirty-five."

Riley turned to him. "Sixteen?"

"The demons are looking for breeders. Their only requirement is simply that the female be mature enough to reproduce."

"That's despicable." She typed in search parameters on the computer. "I think news reports for this will be our best bet. How far back do you want me to look?"

"Let's check the last four months."

Riley's fingers flew over the keyboard. "You're right. There have been dozens of abductions between the shelter and the mall. The clinic is in the middle."

"Is there any way to discern if the abducted women were patients of the clinic?" Ferguson asked.

"You would need to hack the patient files. I'm good with the computer, but I'm not a hacker."

"Do you know anybody who could accomplish this... hack?"

"Yes, but you're not going to like it," she said.

Ferguson's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Colton rubbed his chin. "Riley and I visited Leah's sister. Her twin sister. She didn't take her sister's or brother's death well. We've been checking up on her, and she is investigating the deaths in this area."

"She was told her siblings died as part of a lone gunman who opened fire on the winery. Why would she be investigating? She was told the gunman was apprehended, was she not?" Ferguson asked.

Riley grabbed a pen from the holder. "She was, but obviously she didn't believe the story. We've watched her from the shadows. She is an accomplished hacker, and she's already investigating the incidents in Graydon. There's a good chance she already has the information on the clinic. I'm just not sure about asking her for it."

Ferguson glanced at the picture of the clinic on the computer screen. "We need that information. You contacted



her about Leah. You should have a conversation with her in person. Take Raine with you. He can wipe her memory of the interaction. I will ask him to alter her perception of the attack. I'm sure he can persuade her to drop this investigation."

"He can try," she said, though she was unconvinced.

Ferguson moved his fingers in the air and black script formed for a few seconds before disappearing. "I have asked Raine to join us."

Colton sat forward in his seat. "You're a receiver? I thought your talents were related to speed. I have never seen anyone traverse the pathway as quickly as you."

Ferguson read the script that formed before him. "Raine will be here shortly. My speed is a result of practice. As a fledgling, I was no faster than the rest of you. I've had centuries to hone my skills."

Colton sat back. "Everyone's been wondering what your talent was. Ironic that it's something so commonplace."

Ferguson shrugged. "It is also the most useful. As we do not possess the ability to take electronics into the pathway, we can't use a human cell phone. With all our talents, the humans appear to be ingenious in their ability to invent tools that overshadow ours."

Colton nodded. "We sat back and focused on territorial wars and our preconceptions of what a shadow shifter should be. Meanwhile, the humans were evolving beyond our capability. Now we are using their methods to track our enemies. How ironic."

The air hummed with an electric charge before they heard the front door open. Raine's footsteps thudded in the hallway before he entered the office. "I hear we are taking a road trip," he said, as he winked at Riley.

Riley stood. "We're going to see Lexi. That's Leah's sister."

Raine nodded. "Ferguson has filled me in. We will go see her. You'll talk to her since you're the one who approached her as Leah's friend. Use your connection to her sister to get the information. When you're done, I will wipe her memory of the events and hopefully curb her enthusiasm for the investigation she's running." He turned to Ferguson. "I have Darwin staying with Dannika, but I would prefer it if you stayed with her until I return."

Ferguson nodded and left without a word.

Colton stood. "Riley, I want to check in with Steele. Since you need Raine's abilities for this venture, I will do that while you chat with Lexi. Meet me at home when you are done." He glanced at Raine. "You will not leave her side."

"We will return to your home in a while," Raine agreed.

Riley rolled her eyes. "I'm gonna pretend you didn't just treat me like a toddler, insinuating I need a babysitter."

Raine touched her arm gently. "Colton is protective of you because you're his mate. Do not hold these instincts against him. I never leave Dannika unattended, either. Even then, it's only with those that I have complete trust in."

"Dannika is the queen. I understand that she is..."

“You are just as important as Dannika. Her worth is not because she is the queen. She is my mate. My life. My existence is futile unless she is part of it,” Raine said.

There was nothing she could say. His words were heartfelt, and they were true. “I guess I should be thankful he trusts you enough to let me go with you.”

“Honestly, I am surprised by his trust, and am thankful for the honor.” Raine winked. “Of course, it helps that I am an alpha. Don’t be misguided by this outing. This will not be a usual occurrence.”

She thought about the times she had been without Colton. There were very few times he wasn’t by her side. She thought about Raine and Dannika and realized he only left Dannika if a clan responsibility was too dangerous to include her. He was the only shadow with the power of perception, and all three clans were now utilizing his ability. “Understood.”

Raine glanced between Colton and Riley. “You mentioned before that Lexi lives in Whistler. It will take us some time to get there.”

Riley pursed her lips. “That’s where she was when I went to see her. Since she launched her investigation into Leah’s death, she has been staying at the Haitian village with her grandmother.”

Raine’s eyes widened. “She has connections to the Haitian village?”

Riley nodded. “You didn’t know? She has quit her job to run this investigation. Swaying her will not be easy.”

Raine rubbed his chin. “We need to get Anaisa’s permission before I wipe her memory.”

“Do you think Lexi knows about the shadows? She didn’t grow up in the Haitian village, but she is connected to it.”

Raine shook his head. “While most members of the Haitian village know we are... unique, they believe us human. Only the Elders know our history and what we truly are.”

Riley grabbed the phone. “Might as well call Anaisa now and find out.”

Anaisa picked up after the second ring. “Hello, Riley.”

Riley smiled. “I’m not going to comment on how creepy it is that you knew it was me calling.”

Anaisa chuckled. “I would love to tell you it’s some grand power, but Ferguson gave me this number. Since Daniel is so weak, I assumed you were calling for the herbs. I am preparing them for you now.”

“I understand why your village has so much faith in you. I wish I was calling about the herbs and I’m hoping you will allow us to come to pick them up, but we need some information from one of your people. Lexi.”

Anaisa sighed. “She is not taking her sister’s death well. While she didn’t grow up here, she has heard the legends of the shadow walkers. She believes in demons, though she thinks of them as something other than they are. She does not believe her sister’s death was natural despite multiple attempts to persuade her.”

“She’s a hacker. We watched her in Whistler, but not since she returned to the village. She has some information we need on Graydon County Clinic. Raine would like to wipe her memory after we talk to her.”

Anaisa was silent for some time. “The power of perception is a rare gift. While my village is aware of the stories, they are not aware of the shadow’s individual abilities. I would like to keep that between us for now. With our mutual understanding, I don’t want any of the other elders to abuse this accord.”

“You think someone there would ask a shadow to use their ability?” Riley asked.

“Many humans seek power. The origin of their faith does not temper this need. I preferred the out of sight, out of mind approach to this particular subject.”

If Riley didn’t respect the priestess before, she would have now. Anaisa was openly suggesting that not all people in her village could be trusted. And Riley had to admit that the same was true for the shadow clans. While most appreciated the Haitian priestess’ help, there were those that would sever the connection permanently. “Can we talk to Lexi? More importantly, can we erase her memory of the discussion?”

“You can try. But tell Raine that some Haitians are immune to shadow powers. You may ask your questions, but I cannot guarantee his power will work on her. Though mostly retired, her grandmother is a powerful elder,” Anaisa said.

Riley placed the pen in the holder. “Do you need to talk to the grandmother before we talk to Lexi?”

“No. My power in the village is absolute. We have several elders, but I am the only seer,” she said.

“Raine and I will be there shortly. Please let Lexi know we are coming.”

“I will,” Anaisa said before she hung up.

Riley put the phone on its handset. “We are on.”

Raine’s shadow enveloped hers. She thought it would be like traveling with Colton, but while the power felt the same, the closeness and familiarity didn’t. Even her molecules knew the difference between the leader of the wolf clan and her mate. Raine made her feel safe and protected, even cared for, but it was that of a family member. A sister.

They coalesced at the tree line. The only pathway that approached the village. There is always a moment of nausea, like the village was trying to repel them, before it dissipated. She meant to ask Anaisa if it was natural or something they had done to discourage the shadows or reapers from approaching.

They were met by a young man as they reached the gate. “Ana said to take you to Lexi.”

Riley smiled at the young dark-haired boy with an orange and blue striped T-shirt. “Thank you. I appreciate your help.”

His eyes narrowed like he wasn’t sure what to make of her. “Follow me.”

He led them to a cluster of houses in the opposite direction of Anaisa’s. The purple home had an array of flowers bursting from the baskets that hung on the porch. The white trim and

black door gave the home an unusual effect. He knocked before the door opened.

He pointed. "Go on in. She is waiting for you."

They entered the living room. The orange and brown couches had a floral pattern from many years ago, but were in excellent condition. Unlike the priestess' home, this one was well organized. The dining table held a single bowl with fruit in the middle, and the open kitchen had avocado-colored cupboards with white doors. The wooden counter had a knife block and an empty drying rack, as if the owner had just finished putting away the dishes.

Riley's heart stuttered when Lexi exited the hallway. She had watched her many times since meeting her that first time and telling her about Leah. But every time she looked into Lexi's eyes, she saw Leah. Their tone, their looks, and their drive were all identical. "Hi, Lexi."

"Hi, Riley. Anaisa said you were coming, but she didn't say why. Did you have something of Leah's you forgot to give me?" Lexi asked.

Riley had told Leah's twin that she and Leah were friends. She had returned Leah's necklace to Lexi, saying she knew her sister would want her to have it. "This may be difficult to hear, but we are investigating your sister's death. There has been a rash of abductions and we want to rule out Leah as a victim."

Lexi sucked in a breath. "I knew it. I have been looking into it too." Her eyes narrowed as she looked between Raine and Riley. "Is this your new boyfriend?"

Tact obviously wasn't Lexi's strong suit, and Riley almost laughed. "No, this is Raine. He is my sister's husband. He is helping me look into the deaths."

Lexi flinched. "Sorry. I know you were Leah's friend. I am really glad you came to talk to me about this. The police think I'm nuts and the village has all but told me to drop it. Even my grandmother won't listen to me."

Riley felt terrible for Lexi. The Haitians couldn't come out and say "sorry but your sister was killed by demons." It put them in a precarious position. "Yes, everything points to a lone gunman, so I understand their point of view, but we have some information about the Graydon County clinic. It may be nothing but..."

"It's not nothing. I hacked the clinic files and twelve of the women that have gone missing over the last four months were patients of the clinic."

"Was Leah one of them?"

Lexi shook her head. "That's the connection I can't confirm. I don't know what Leah has in common with these other women."

Riley already knew the answer. Leah had a direct connection to the Haitian village. The demons already knew she had the right bloodline. They would also know Lexi had the same. Riley was no longer sure that Lexi should be kept in the dark. If she didn't know the truth, she wouldn't stay within the village confines where it was safe. She flicked a glance at Raine and knew he was thinking the same thing.



“Did you find any other connections between the women?” Riley asked.

“There’s a report of a woman who evaded an... attacker. She describes the man as the darkness. I’m sure she was hysterical and in shock, but that same location has had two other abductions,” Lexi said.

Riley nodded. “Where’s this location?”

“A park just off of Main Street. It’s right beside the soccer field.”

Riley nodded. She was aware of the massacre that had happened on the field. And it was located between the shelter and the clinic. The demons were targeting a very specific area. “Thank you for your help, Lexi. I’ll let you know if anything turns up.”

Lexi grabbed her arm. “I want to go with you. I need to understand why this happened.”

Raine stepped forward. “Lexi, I think it would be best if you left this investigation to us.” He looked her directly in the eyes and Riley could feel the power roll off of him.

Lexi huffed. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

Riley stepped between Raine and Lexi. “We don’t know if there’s anything to this yet, but I promise to keep you informed.”

Lexi shrugged. “Sure.” Riley knew there was no way she was dropping it, but it gave them an excuse to leave.

“I will call you soon, Lexi,” Riley said as she escorted Raine outside.

Raine stopped her as soon as they exited the village gates. “She has a shield around her mind. I didn’t want to push, as such an intrusion could be painful. Your words were well chosen. She believes we are human and looking into Leah’s death.”

“We got the information we needed, but we just gave Lexi the incentive she needed to take her investigation to the next level.”

Raine nodded. “I’m aware.”

They walked toward the tree line as Riley spoke, “Colton and I need to check out the park.”

## CHAPTER 4



Riley had met Colton at their home. After she recalled her meeting with Lexi, she warned that they had to tread carefully. Leah's sister had just been given the spark she needed for a full-out investigation. One that would lead her straight to the shadow shifter world.

They decided to keep an eye on Lexi, and Anaisa had agreed to step in if things went too far. Lexi wasn't a permanent member of the Haitian village, so she wouldn't be brought in on the relationship with the shadows unless completely necessary. Colton had agreed with Riley's assessment to check out the park and the clinic.

They traveled the pathway in silence. Their molecules fused together as they navigated the streams within the shadows. There was peace in the darkness. A beauty that could only be experienced when in non-corporeal form. They coalesced beneath an evergreen tree close to the park, surveying their surroundings before they stepped from the shadows.

They had chosen to travel late in the day. So the park would be less inhabited and the clinic would be close to

closing. Riley's gaze ran over the playground with two children currently talking to their mother, who was seated at a nearby bench.

The play area was a mixture of pea gravel and wood chips beneath an assortment of playground equipment. The metal swing set moved in the breeze with the slides of various lengths next to it. The monkey bars and climbing wall close to the sandbox full of half-buried toys and digging tools. Discarded juice boxes and empty baggies littered the ground, waiting for the park attendant to clean up for the night.

A crow was busy pecking at a discarded bag of potato chips, and a group of teenagers sat at a picnic bench opposite her and Colton. Their laughter echoed in the wind before the children left their mother's side to resume their play on the jungle gym.

"This looks peaceful," Riley said.

Colton's eyes moved past the play park to the soccer field in the distance. "Are you sure the abductions were from the park and not the field? Or even the apartment building next door?"

"Not at all. Two women were taken from the park, but they both had young children. Since this is the best playground in Graydon County, this location could simply be opportunity."

Colton sighed. "Maybe."

"We need more information on the victims, before we can make any assumptions about this area," Riley said.

"Agreed. Let's head to the clinic."

Colton's shadow enveloped hers as he took the quick stream to a building across from the clinic. With its location only a few blocks away from the park, the trip was made in a matter of seconds.

The clinic was located on the busiest street in Graydon County. The only one with multilane traffic and several stoplights. Pedestrians still walked down either side, most leaving work or rushing to meet friends. While the clinic was the last building on the block storefronts, the next had security shutters and dented trash cans in the front.

It was like the small medical center sat on the border of the industrial section and the downtown area. Like the rest of the block, the clinic was made of brick, with a fire escape on the side and a large sign in the front.

“What do you think?” Riley asked.

Colton's eyes focused on the signs that listed the clinic services. “They offer free care for women and children. There is no way that this is a government-run facility. Who is subsidizing this clinic?”

Riley swore under her breath. “I didn't ask Lexi that. I'm hesitant to call her, since Raine can't alter her memories.”

“I agree. We should wait and see if we can get the information we need without involving Lexi.”

Riley felt the familiar hum in the air. Someone had used the pathway close to them. “Did you feel that?”

“Yes. It came from the alley beside the clinic.”

“Can you see who it is?”

Colton shook his head. “They will have to exit the alley to enter the clinic or the stores beside it. We will have to wait and see who it is.”

Riley didn’t recognize the man who exited the alley. “Do you know who that is?”

“His name is Erwin. He is one of the reapers that defected with Breck.”

Riley sucked in a breath. “Why would there be reaper henchman at a free clinic? Do you think he’s tracking someone?”

“I don’t want to infiltrate the building until we see what happens. The Bay Street window is large enough to see the waiting room. Let’s see if he goes in the back or talks to one of the people waiting to see a doctor.”

“Your eyesight is better than mine. I can see a couple of people inside, but I can’t really tell what anybody is doing.”

Colton smiled. “You are a fledgling still; your abilities will be honed over time.” He motioned to the window. “Erwin just sat down and grabbed a magazine.”

Riley arched her eyebrows. “I think it’s safe to say that he doesn’t need the clinic’s services. Why would he hang out in the waiting room?”

“No idea, but... he’s talking to the woman next to him.”

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” Riley asked.

“I’m afraid I don’t possess the skills to hear a conversation that far away,” Colton said.

“Can you tell what they are doing?” Riley asked.

“The woman is uncomfortable. Humans see us as human, but instinct warns them that we are predators.”

“You give off a bad vibe?” she asked.

“Yes. Regardless of what that woman came here for, she will leave soon.”

Riley watched as the woman moved to the opposite side of the waiting room. When the reaper moved closer to her, she got up and exited the clinic. She stood outside beside the garbage can and took out her cell phone.

A man exited the alley, but stopped several feet from the woman.

Colton hissed. “That’s Edgar. He is Erwin’s brother. They turned at the same time.”

Edgar put his hands on either side of his mouth. “Miss, can I help you? Janice said you left before your appointment. If the man in the waiting room is bothering you, I can help. We have a side entrance if you wish. Janice will meet you inside and take you to an exam room.”

The woman smiled. “Thank you, for noticing. The man didn’t do anything wrong, but I was so uncomfortable.”

Edgar motioned for her to follow him, and ducked down the alley.

Colton grabbed Riley’s hand and walked toward the crosswalk. “He is keeping his distance from her so he doesn’t

spook her. We need to follow them. I want to see this side entrance.”

Riley jogged to keep up with Colton’s pace, as he walked across the sidewalk. An older lady clutched her purse close to her body as they passed each other on the street. They reached the other side, and Colton pushed her behind him before they entered the alley.

Colton held up his hand. They couldn’t see the woman or Edgar, but they heard him speak.

“Just in there, Miss. Janice will take good care of you.”

There was a rustle and a clanking sound before the only sounds were that of the vehicles on Main Street and the beep of a horn.

Colton slowly entered the alley, looking for signs of Edgar and the woman. They passed a blue garbage bin with an oversized rat feeding on scraps beneath it before making their way to the back of the building.

Except for three full parking stalls, there was nothing there. Riley noticed the stairs to the rear entrance of the clinic. As she approached, she saw the black purse with a gold metal chain lying on one of the steps.

She rushed over and picked it up. Unfastening the magnetic clip before removing the leather wallet inside. “There is fifty dollars in the wallet, so this wasn’t a mugging.”

“Check the driver’s license,” Colton said.

Riley flipped through the credit cards before the license showed a picture of the woman they had seen in the clinic.



“It’s hers. The woman we saw go into the alley.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Edgar doesn’t possess the ability to take a human into the pathway.”

“Are you sure?”

Colton nodded. “He and his brother were cougar clan members. He and his brother are receivers.”

“Could he have developed another skill since he left the cougar clan?”

Colton shrugged. “Maybe.”

Riley glanced at the rear entrance to the clinic. “They took her from outside the clinic. How do we find out if this location is random or if they are targeting women who frequent the clinic?”

Colton sighed. “We have to investigate the clinic.”

Riley huffed. “That’s easier said than done, considering we repel people like bug spray.”

“We will figure it out. It may be best if we investigate after closing,” Colton said.

Riley glanced at the license. “Her name is Darla.”

“Was Darla. It’s already too late for her.”

Riley nodded sadly. “Do we have any clues as to where the demons have gone?”

“No, but I want to find out. The clinic closes in five minutes. We will wait till everyone leaves, then go inside. Let’s see what they are hiding.”

## CHAPTER 5



Riley took a deep breath as they coalesced inside the reception area of the clinic. The smell of antiseptic was still thick in the air. They had been forced to wait outside until the janitor finished his nightly duties and moved onto another location.

It was times like these when she appreciated the abilities of being a shadow. While the emergency light in the hallway that led to the room cast a light glow, the rest of the clinic was encased in darkness. She took in every detail as she scanned the room.

The front desk was tidy and had a cash register and candy bowl filled with suckers of every color. It reminded her of the time her mother had taken her to see the doctor when she had sprained her ankle. While x-rays had confirmed it wasn't broken, a kind nurse had given her a sucker after the ordeal.

The white tile floor still glistened in spots from the janitor's mop and the red exit sign flickered, warning a bulb needed replacing. There were dozens of magazines scattered on the coffee table in front of the row of seats facing the desk.

Colton pointed to the hall. "Let's check out the exam rooms first."

They went down the hallway to the first door. "I doubt they would leave any evidence for the janitor to find."

Colton opened the door. "I want to rule it out, but cats have highly developed senses. I may smell something or see something a human would not."

Riley followed him into the room. "Fair enough."

The medical room was like any other she had seen with an exam table, a sink, and a small counter with a variety of supplies. If they were looking for cotton swabs or bandages, they would have hit the jackpot. The room appeared well equipped to deal with minor injuries and nothing screamed nefarious demon plot.

Riley picked up a pamphlet from the tiny side table beside the chair. She waved it in front of Colton. "Unless you are looking for information on planned parenting, I don't think there is anything here."

"Let's try the next room," Colton said.

The next room was larger and while it held all the amenities of the first, it also had a desk with a computer. Riley sat down on the swivel chair. "Let's see if I can get anything off the computer."

She was pleased the doctor had left the browser open. She checked the patient file of the last woman to be accessed, but paused when she saw the birth date. "I'm guessing the demons aren't interested in a seventy-four-year-old."

Colton smiled. “No, but if they are affiliated with this clinic in any way, they can’t put up a sign saying they only accept fertile women.”

“True.”

Riley searched some more files before checking the computer’s trash bin. Several files had been deleted. “I found some deleted patient files and I can’t seem to recover them.” She typed in a few more commands. “I’m not a hacker, but I can usually recover a file. We are going to have to check the hard files.”

Colton turned. “They still keep paper records?”

She stood. “Every clinic I ever went to did. Let’s check the file room.”

They passed two more exam rooms and a supply closet before they found the room full of filing cabinets and wall-mounted shelving.

Her gaze roamed over thousands of files. “Holy shit. Talk about a needle in a haystack. These are all alphabetized. We don’t have a name to look up.”

Colton rubbed his chin. “The winery was outside the demon’s usual hunting ground. Look and see if Leah was a patient here.”

Riley looked through the files. “I’m not sure she would have used this clinic. She was only visiting Graydon.” Her fingers flipped to Leah’s name. “She has a file.”

She pulled it down and read the patient report. “Leah came here the day before we met her. She listed her grandmother in

the village as a contact.”

“That would put her on the demons’ radar, but isn’t a clinic a little sophisticated for the demons? What was Leah here for?”

Riley’s face paled. “A pregnancy test, but it came out negative.”

Colton pulled down a patient file. “Well, I think I figured out the connection. Hakim was funding the clinic. He has paid for this year so, they are likely looking for alternate subsidizing now that he is gone.”

Riley scrunched her face. “Why would he fund the clinic?”

“To help the demons find viable breeders,” Colton said.

“But how would he access the women? What are the criteria?”

Colton skimmed over Hakim’s file. “There is nothing here that indicates his search parameters. Is there anything in Leah’s file?”

She flipped through the pages. “There isn’t much here. It does mention her brother worked at the winery, so I’m guessing that’s how they found her there.” She closed the file and noticed a red sticker by the tab. “Does your file have a sticker?”

Colton closed his file. “No.”

Riley went to the wall shelf packed with files. She flipped through dozens of them before she found another file with a sticker. After pulling the file and opening it, she skimmed over

the contents. “This woman is named Sarita. There is nothing except personal info in here, but let’s check the computer.”

She darted back to the room with the computer before pulling up Sarita’s file. “Dammit.”

Colton put his hand on the back of her chair. “What is it?”

“I didn’t see the search parameters because the last file was deleted. Sarita’s file is active. She had a baby two months ago. They’re watching her, but I’m not sure why they’re waiting.”

“If she just had a baby, then they may be waiting for her hormones to return to normal. Most human women cannot get pregnant while breastfeeding so they’ll likely wait till she has stopped to ensure her fertility.”

Whiffs of black smoke rolled off Riley’s shoulders until she got her emotions under control. “That’s despicable.”

Colton pointed at the screen. “What are the search parameters?”

“They are looking for women who have a connection to the Haitian village. Sarita’s mother grew up there. I’m guessing that Hakim knew the townspeople needed this clinic and took control of it. I have no idea how he got that kind of funding, but he was well aware of bloodlines and who to target.”

“He likely got the money from Maddock. While the shadows own businesses, routed from offshore accounts, the reapers simply stole what they needed.”

Riley’s fingers flew over the keys. “Hakim started this list with over a hundred last names. All inhabitants of the Haitian

village, over the last hundred years. We have to warn Anaisa.”

Colton moved his fingers in the air, creating the black script. The response was instantaneous before she heard the hum of the pathway opening. “I want to talk to Dannika. I will have Ferguson stay with you, so you can finish the investigation.”

Ferguson entered the room. “Dannika is waiting for you.”

Colton kissed Riley on the cheek, then left.

Riley informed Ferguson of what they had found and the scope of Hakim’s treachery.

Ferguson growled. “If the Bokor was not already dead, I would spend days torturing him.”

Riley arched an eyebrow. “You can’t touch a member of the Haitian village.”

His eyes went completely black. “I can with permission. Anaisa would have ordered his execution had we known the extent of his plans.”

Riley couldn’t disagree with his assumption. As powerful and kind as Anaisa was, she was still their leader. Hakim had willfully helped bring about the end of humanity. “Probably.”

She clutched her head before the room began to blur. She heard Ferguson call her name, But she was being sucked into the vision. She glanced down at the pressure on her right hand before realizing she wasn’t alone. Dannika was facing the orange light cracking along the wall.

Dannika turned to her. “Looks like we’re doing this again.”

“The smaller breaches didn’t summon us, so I’m guessing this is big,” Riley said.

Demons began rushing through the portal as soon as it opened. Riley surveyed the cavern but she couldn’t see who had opened it. “Where is Deruthel?”

“I have no idea. It may have been Halak, but I didn’t see who created the breach.”

They watched more than a hundred demons rush through. “Why isn’t the portal closing?”

“I don’t know. It appears to be stable.” She turned to her sister. “The only thing they need is stable breeders. Deruthel will not wait long to bring the king over.”

“Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin. Anum secrata.” The voice was unearthly and they couldn’t see who spoke the words. The portal began to close as the demons shrieked.

“They closed the portal themselves,” Riley said.

“That wasn’t Deruthel’s voice. That was the king,” Dannika said.

Her world blurred and the office walls returned. Her fingers were clamped onto the computer desk as Ferguson gently shook her.

“Riley, what happened?” Ferguson asked.

“Dannika and I were pulled into a vision. The demons have a stable portal. We heard the king’s voice but we couldn’t



see him. It's strange because I could've sworn the voice came from our side of the portal."

"The king has not traversed worlds. We will feel his presence when he comes here," Ferguson said.

"I know. He is still in the other realm but he is the one to close the portal. Why would he stop his demons from traversing the portal?"

Ferguson sighed. "We know that he only wants the first generation and possibly some foot soldiers. The majority of the demons are sterile and they won't bring over too many mouths to feed. I'm guessing the demons that were just released, are their pawns. They will be sacrificed first. If it wasn't for the shadows, I doubt they would've bothered."

"We're in deep shit, aren't we?" Riley asked.

"If the king traverses the portal, I doubt we can vanquish him," Ferguson said honestly.

"Why didn't he come over now?"

"That's the question, isn't it? While they stabilize the portal for the demons, it appears the king is unable to travel... yet."

Riley stood. "We have to find a way to close the portal."

They both turned as the hum of the pathway opening vibrated around them. "Colton's back," she said. They went to the reception area to meet him.

Black smoke rolled off his shoulders. "There was another breach."

Riley nodded. "I was with Dannika when it happened."

Colton turned to Ferguson. "Riley and I will investigate the site. Raine needs you to stay with Dannika while he attends to some clan business. Then he wants you to warn the priestess they are being targeted. She needs to keep her family within the Haitian village. Their wards are the only thing that can protect them."

Ferguson nodded then dissolved in a split second.

Riley shook her head. "I'll never get used to how fast he is."

"His speed is uncanny." He took her hand. "Are you ready to go to the portal site?"

Riley nodded, but when she took Colton's hand and their bodies began to dissolve, ice slithered against her skin. The uncomfortable feeling became a blaring alarm as they coalesced in the cave.

## CHAPTER 6



Riley inhaled the smell of damp earth as her body reformed in a cramped tunnel. Water dripped from the ceiling, creating small puddles of water on the dirt floor covered with loose gravel. It wasn't the location she had seen with Dannika. "Where are we?"

"The portal makes the surrounding area unstable. Even if the demons didn't collapse the pathway, it's unsafe to travel. We are only a quarter mile from the site," Colton said.

She held his hand as he led her through a series of tunnels before coming to one that was collapsed. "Did they do this on purpose?"

Colton released her hand to put his on the rock. "Yes, this wasn't a natural cave-in. They will have left one physical tunnel."

"How do you know that? They could just take the pathway."

Colton shook his head. "Ferguson has been studying the demons. Younger demons seem to struggle with the pathways and the vorla don't enter them at all."

She sucked in a breath. “I didn’t see any vorla come through the portal this time.”

Colton nodded. “We know they rely on the vorla when their food source dries up. Since the vorla are similar to our rats, they eat anything. They will feed on the animal and plant life. The demons will leave those to them so they can feed on the vorla when they have exhausted their human food source.”

She wasn’t sure if it was the content of their conversation, or the matter-of-fact way Colton described the process of their world’s annihilation that set her on edge, but she shivered despite her ability to maintain her core temperature regardless of the surroundings. “I don’t know how you can be so calm.”

Colton sighed. “Training. I have had to do some questionable things over the years. I guess I’ve learned to bottle my emotions when necessary.”

“That makes sense. I was feeling a little disconnected from you, but if you are trying to focus on the task at hand and not let it affect you, I understand. I wish I could do the same.”

Colton pulled her against his body. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention to shut you out.”

His warmth infused her, and the sense of loneliness dissipated. “Thank you. I’m sure it’s just this place. For some reason, it gives me the creeps.”

“Considering a hundred demons just ran through here, I’m not surprised.” He took her hand and led her to another tunnel. This one was dry, and in minutes they reached the cavern that had held the portal.

Riley noticed the smear of blood on the cave wall. It was easy to tell where a portal had closed as the rock surface became smooth, with the occasional crack. “This is the blood they used. It’s cougar, isn’t it?”

Colton nodded. “It’s Aaron’s blood, but there is something mixed with it.”

Riley shook her head. “This portal appeared stable, but they did close it quickly, so I can’t guarantee it wouldn’t have collapsed, given time.”

Colton ran his fingers over the smooth rock. “If they could have kept it open, I think they would have.” He glanced up at the low ceiling. “I’m not sure this location would work for the king’s transport.”

Riley turned to him. “Why?”

“We know we are screwed if the king makes it here. If they could have brought him over, they would have. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the demons bring over their army and alternate food source before bringing their king. I think that portal will have to be far larger and completely stable. It’s a theory, but that’s what I think.”

“So they have everything they need. Their army, the vorla and soon they will have the means to make breeders. It’s only a matter of time before they bring over the king.”

They heard the crunch of boots on the loose gravel and turned when Steele entered the cavern. “Let’s hope the king is waiting for the breeders to be viable. Considering their lack of success so far, it will give us some time,” Steele said.

Riley knelt down to investigate a splatter of blood. “Let’s hope so.”

Steele sniffed the air. “That is a lot of blood. Not just cougar.”

Colton nodded. “The palm print is Aaron’s blood. There is something else...”

Steele growled. “That something else is Riley’s blood.”

Colton turned toward Riley. “I smelled her blood, but I assumed it was her.”

Steele marched to the corner of the cavern. He moved a rock that covered a pool of discarded blood. “They dumped out the chalice blood here.”

Riley and Colton joined Steele. She put her hand to her chest. “That is a lot of blood. I didn’t realize Hakim took so much.”

Steele’s eyes flashed. “This blood is yours, but it is also shadow blood. This was taken after your transition.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “That’s impossible. I only gave a small amount of my blood to Dannika, and that’s it.”

Steele’s eyes roamed over her, and she didn’t like the look in his eyes. “And yet your blood opened a relatively stable portal. Tell me how that happened.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

Steele moved to the smooth wall, running his hand over the stone.

Riley put her hand on Colton's arm. "I have no idea what is going on. They took my blood when I was abducted, but they used it on that girl and to open a portal. Maybe they got more than I realized."

Colton put his hand on her cheek. "Hey, it's okay. We will figure this out."

Steele stood after picking something up after he overturned another rock. Riley's heart stuttered when he held her clan sash in his hands. There was no mistaking it. The pattern for every member was different. The sash had been on her dresser when she left that morning.

Steele's eyes were black when he looked at her. "Tell me how your sash got here."

Her chest squeezed. "I don't know."

Steele's growl echoed in the cavern. "You lie. You are demon turned and you are helping them."

"I'm not. I would never," she said.

Colton stepped up to his leader. "She was with Ferguson or me today. She would never help the demons, nor did she have the opportunity to."

Steele waved the sash in Colton's face. "She could have given the blood at any time. She told us the demons took her blood but used it. Perhaps that was the lie. She knew they had enough for a stable portal. She just chose not to tell us."

Riley shook her head. "I thought they used my blood, but it's possible they took more than I realized. I did pass out for a bit."

Steele huffed. “How convenient. Tell me how the sash got here.”

“I don’t know. It was in my room this morning,” Riley said.

Steele’s eyes narrowed on her. “There is only one pathway to your home. Only a clan member could use it without raising suspicion.”

Riley’s mind raced. Steele wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t already know. She didn’t want to say the clan had a traitor. Who would help the demons? Steele didn’t trust Dannika’s reaper clan except for Ferguson. They would never have gotten near Colton’s home without a clan member reporting it. “I understand. I just don’t have an answer for you.”

“I think you do. You just won’t admit it,” Steele said.

Colton’s alpha emerged. “If you insult my mate again, I will challenge for leadership. I was cured of the demon venom. The clan will back my ascension,” Colton growled with the undertone of his alpha.

Steele’s alpha emerged, growling. “You are too pussy whipped to see the truth. Aaron is dead because of her. We are a hair’s breadth from the king’s arrival. She is ensuring our destruction from within,” Steele hissed.

Riley stepped between the alphas as smoke rose from their shoulders and there was no sign that either would back down. She understood Steele’s point. It looked like she was a traitor. Colton would never stop defending her. “There has to be some



way to confirm I am not a traitor. Why can't you hear the truth in my voice?"

Steele looked at her with contempt. "There have been a few shadows with the ability to lie. It's rare, but it would stand to reason that you possess this gift."

Riley shook her head. "I will do anything you ask to prove my innocence."

Steele glanced between Riley and Colton. "There is one way that will satisfy the clan and me."

"What?"

Ferguson emerged from the tunnel. "What is going on?"

Riley quickly recapped the events. As soon as she finished, Ferguson's alpha emerged. His was unlike Colton or Steele's. It was power rolling in dark smoke. His voice boomed when he spoke. "If you challenge Riley, then you challenge me. The queen sent me to ensure Riley's safety. You touch her. You die."

Colton returned to his human form. "Riley is not only my mate, she is the queen's twin. Be careful of your next move, Steele."

Riley could feel the need for vengeance rolling off Ferguson in waves. He wouldn't just kill Steele; he would obliterate him. "Please stop. I don't want anyone to get hurt. Whoever did this is getting what they want. Setting me up was done to create dissension. Deruthel is a bastard, but he is incredibly intelligent and he has been playing this game for eons. Don't fall for his tactics."

Steele's alpha backed off, and he returned to his human form. "You said you would do anything to prove your innocence, Riley."

"Yes, whatever puts your mind at ease."

Steel nodded cordially. "The priestess has the ability to test for the taint within our blood. Just as she did for Colton when Deruthel infected him."

Riley nodded. "I'm aware of her skills. I am happy to have Anaisa test me if it puts your mind at ease."

Steele glanced toward Ferguson. "I will have the entire cougar clan tested. I respectfully request that the other clans do the same."

Ferguson allowed his alpha to recede. "It will be done, but I will be present when you test Riley."

Steele nodded. "Those terms are acceptable. Anaisa will not allow a demon to gain purchase in any of the clans."

Ferguson turned to Riley. His eyes softened immediately. The black receding to a dark blue. They were such an unusual color and seemed to change with his mood. "I will go to Anaisa and make the arrangements. Return to the cougar clan and we will meet you there soon."

She nodded, trying to figure out why Ferguson was so different with her and Dannika. Did he have a connection to the Haitian village? Even Dannika didn't know Ferguson's origins, but when he looked at her and Dannika, it was with something close to pride. The reaper had been alive for hundreds of years. Some said six hundred. He had said seven

hundred, but Riley suspected it was more. He was such an enigma, and despite his cold nature, he made her feel safe. “Thank you. We will head back now.”

Ferguson turned to Steele. “I want no misconceptions. If anyone touches Riley, they die.”

He disappeared in a split second, shaking the ground as he entered the pathway. No one spoke as death hung in the air.

## CHAPTER 7



Riley and Colton coalesced in the forest close to the cabin where her father lived. As usual, several clan members stood talking outside. The conversation hushed abruptly as she approached and wary eyes roamed over her. They wouldn't say anything, but it wasn't because they trusted her. Irony was a fickle mistress.

She'd wanted her father in her life more than anything and she had gotten that wish. Now, the cougar clan saw him as a blessing. A savior. That didn't stop them from looking at her like she was a pariah. They were both demon turned, but he was a man of God. She was a pawn the demons would use to bring over the king. To ensure humanity's destruction. She couldn't blame them.

When she stood in the cave as Steele blatantly accused her of being a traitor, there was a part of her that wondered if it was true. Was there some way the demons could control her due to her transition? Anaisa had warned there could be side effects and she may not know those true ramifications for weeks. She prayed it was anything but that.

A soft breeze rustled through the trees like a whispering caress. Sometimes it felt like mother nature was trying to comfort her. The open spaces. The wild. These things called to her like never before and she would do anything to ensure that balance was maintained.

Colton ascended the steps to the cabin first then opened the door for her. She entered to find Anaisa sitting on the couch watching Daniel sleep. She had a satchel in her hand and Riley hoped it was the herbs that would help strengthen him.

“Thank you, for coming Anaisa,” Riley said.

Anaisa wore black jeans and a simple leather jacket with her hiking boots. Her long dark hair was tied back with the braid so the colored beads rested against her back. She placed the satchel on the coffee table. “This will help strengthen him so he can feed less often.”

Riley sat down on the couch beside her. “I appreciate your help.”

Anaisa’s eyes remained on Daniel’s sleeping form. He had a blanket over his knees and his hand rested on his leather Bible. The worn red ribbon held his place within the sacred book. “I admit to some surprise that a man of your faith transitioned successfully.”

“Shadows aren’t evil, Anaisa,” Riley said, regretting the outburst instantly.

Anaisa smiled. “I know that, Riley. You forget it was my ancestors that created the first shadows. These shifters gave up their lives. Ultimately their mates to save the world. Our part

in that decision haunts us to this day. Learning that the first priestess was manipulated by the demons only makes our actions that much worse. We allowed these shifters to sacrifice themselves. If anyone deserves to be cursed, it is us.”

Riley shook her head. “Do you really think the priestess took a stand against the demon king?”

Anaisa sighed. “No mortal could withstand that kind of power. Once he arrives, this world is as doomed as the hundreds before it.”

“You think it’s been that many?”

“Yes. They had to change their tactics when their females died out, but that simply added another step to their technique.”

The women turned as Steele entered the cabin. “Anaisa, are you ready to perform the tests?”

Anaisa stood. Her diminutive size was more noticeable as she stood up to Steele. “Are you sure you want me to do this? Testing your own people. All but accusing them of being a traitor. This could do more harm than good.”

Steele glanced at Riley. “They will understand my need to protect them. If anyone has a trace of demon blood. A taint within their heart. You will detect it.”

Anaisa nodded. “As you wish.”

Colton stepped up to Anaisa. “I will go first. We will let the clan know that Steele is testing everyone including his chosen son. Then no member will feel that they were singled out or suspected of wrongdoing.”

Steele's eyes softened. "Thank you."

Anaisa put her hands on Colton's forehead. "The demon venom has been purged from your system. There is no taint within you."

Steele nodded. "Now test Riley."

Anaisa touched Riley's forehead. She felt Anaisa's power move through her. It wasn't uncomfortable. More like a soothing balm or a hot summer day warming your skin. "Riley is clean."

Steele stepped forward. "Are you sure?"

Anaisa's eyes flared. "If it is your intention to look for a traitor, then I will help you. If I'm here to help you convict an innocent woman, then I will be on my way. I will send my report to Dannika as requested by Ferguson."

Steele shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. It must be someone else." He glanced at Riley and she wasn't sure if he meant what he said.

She sucked in a breath. "I was supposed to wait for Ferguson to do the test."

Anaisa shook her head. "I told him I would take care of it." She glanced at Steele. "He knows I would never give an inaccurate account. If anyone is tainted, like Colton, it is not their fault. We won't condemn this traitor; we will help them purge the demon blood."

Steele's eyes widened. "Is it possible this clan member isn't aware they have been infected?"

“Very possible,” Anaisa said.

“Then they will walk in here without a concern they may fail your test,” Steele said.

Anaisa nodded. “Since I have already tested Colton and Riley, I recommend you arrange to have the rest of your clan visit me.”

Riley nibbled her lip. “I hate to suggest this, but what if someone is helping the demons on purpose? If they’re not infected, will this test work?”

Anaisa glanced at Riley. “She raises an excellent point. I’m looking for demon blood. The reapers that follow the demons are not tainted. They have chosen to embrace the demons’ cause.”

Steele’s hands fisted at his sides. “So there’s no way to find the traitor if they have chosen to work against us.”

They turned as Ferguson entered the cabin. “I trust Riley has been exonerated.”

Riley smiled at Ferguson. “I’m not tainted by demon blood, but we are just discussing a traitor that chooses to join the demons. Breck and his followers would not fail this test.”

Ferguson’s jaw ticked. “You’re right. Though I’m loathed to admit it, a reaper could still be working for Breck.”

Anaisa walked to the fireplace before taking a candle down from the mantel. “I can perform a truth ritual. It won’t last long on a shadow, but I can ask a question or two.”

Steele looked leery. “That wasn’t what I had in mind.”



Colton's eyes narrowed on his leader. "You had no problem accusing Riley. She will go first and then you and I before we subject the clan to this interrogation."

Steele held up his hand. "It wasn't an interrogation."

Anaisa sat down, placing the candle on the table in front of her. "That is exactly what this is Steele. Make no mistake. If I ask a question, the person I hold will tell the truth."

Steele shook his head. "How do I know it works?"

Anaisa glanced at Ferguson. "He is the most powerful shadow. If he had chosen to become a king, none of you could have stopped him. If he agrees to sit with me. I will ask a question he would not normally answer."

Steele glanced at Ferguson. Smoke rolled off the ancient reaper's shoulders, and it was obvious he didn't like Anaisa's suggestion. "If you can compel Ferguson, then I trust you can compel the rest of us. We all know he is far more powerful than he lets on."

Anaisa took a matchbook from her pocket. She lit the candle before her. "Sit beside me, Ferguson."

He sat down and she took his hands in hers. "Open your mind and speak the truth. A lie will produce a black flame. I compel thee to answer my question."

Ferguson flinched as power vibrated in the room. "Speak," he said through clenched teeth.

Anaisa's eyes flared. "Do you possess the power to destroy the queen and usurp her position?"

Ferguson's eyes turned black. Smoke rose from his shoulders as veins popped from his neck. "Yes."

Anaisa pulled him closer to her. "Would you ever cause harm to the queen or the clans?"

He growled in her face. "I would die before I let anything happen to Dannika or Riley."

Anaisa released him and turned to Steele. "I compelled him to answer the first question. He volunteered to answer the second. Both were the truth."

Steel rubbed his chin. "You can guarantee one question?"

Anaisa nodded. "Ferguson's power is immense. I may be able to get two from an alpha such as yourself. The clan members can be compelled for a longer period. If you wish me to interrogate your clan, I suggest you come up with the question I ask every one of them. I will ask no more than two."

Steele shook his head. "You will ask one. What you did to Ferguson was wrong, and it's my fault. No one questions his loyalty to Dannika. And I think we all knew he was powerful enough to lead the reapers to victory if he chose."

"What question would you have me ask your clan? I will be able to sense demon blood in them when I hold their hand, so they will be subjected to one test only."

"Ask them if they are loyal to Dannika and the clan or the demons."

Anaisa performed the ritual on Steele then Colton and Riley. They passed before they began to test other members.

Riley went to her father's side when he woke up. "Hey, Dad."

He motioned to the clan member sitting beside Anaisa. "What is she doing?"

"We have a traitor. Someone was likely infected with demon blood, but she is asking them a question while under a truth spell."

"Why would anyone betray the clan on purpose?" Daniel asked.

Riley shook her head. "Someone set me up. They are trying to make me look like a traitor. Colton and Ferguson are ensuring I'm not wrongly accused."

Daniel ran a finger over her cheek. "You are the purest soul I have ever met. How could anyone suspect you?"

Her father's faith in her was exactly what she needed. Love. Acceptance. She hugged him because she needed to. "What would I do without you?"

He winked at her. "Hopefully you won't have to find out for a while."

She pointed at the satchel on the coffee table. "Speaking of that. Anaisa brought you some herbs to help strengthen you. It will help you to feed less often."

"That was very kind of her," Daniel said as he watched her finish with a clan member.

Anaisa took several hours to finish with the rest of the clan. When she was finished, she turned to Daniel. "It looks

like it's your turn."

Daniel was about to push himself from the chair when Anaisa stopped him. "Please don't get up. I will come to you." She moved to his chair and knelt in front of him. She took his hands. She asked him the same question she had asked every other clan member.

"I would never betray my daughter or our new family," Daniel said with a slight smile.

Anaisa squeezed his hands. "I know. I didn't need to do the test on you. Your faith shines through your eyes like a beacon of light, but I promised to perform it on all members of the clan."

"I understand priestess. You are as wise as you are beautiful."

Anaisa stood, winking at Daniel. "If I didn't know better, I would think you were flirting with me," she teased.

Daniel laughed. "I am too old to flirt, but not too old to tell a young woman she is beautiful."

Anaisa smiled. "I am older than you think. But not too old not to accept a compliment."

Riley loved the camaraderie between Anaisa and her father. It was built on mutual respect despite such a difference in culture. She wondered why the clans couldn't find common ground as easily as Anaisa and Daniel had. "It's nice to see you smile, Dad."

"His faith brings him joy. It's a bond we share."

“How so?” Riley asked.

“Believing in something. No matter what that is. Family. Love. Faith. Is a powerful emotion. It results in something no demon can alter. Remember that in the days ahead.”

Riley was quiet for some time. “Do you know the future, Anaisa?”

“Not yours, Riley. The shadows walk a path I cannot see, but dark days are ahead.”

Colton read the script that formed before him. “Anaisa, Dannika would like to bring the wolf clan members here so you can test them. She wants to know if you would be comfortable staying at the cabin until we can arrange for everyone to see you?”

Anaisa nodded. “If you don’t mind setting a bed up in a spare room, I am happy to stay with Daniel. I will prepare the herbs for him this evening.”

Ferguson pointed to the hallway. “There is already a bedroom here. The children nap here often after visiting Daniel.”

Ferguson led her to the room as Daniel drifted off to sleep.

Steele looked her over, but there was no warmth in his gaze. “I will make arrangements for the wolf clan.” He left without another word.

Colton touched her arm. “Let’s go home.”

She should feel relief. Secure, now that Anaisa had cleared her of any wrongdoing, but the feeling of dread suffocated her.

## CHAPTER 8



*R*iley coalesced in their front room with her hands around Colton's neck. It took only a split second to realize he was naked.

He kissed her. His lips were gentle and insistent, replacing fear and uncertainty with desire and need. She knew what he was doing, trying to distract her from the insidious accusations and the sense of betrayal. She allowed him to scoop her into his arms and take her to the bedroom, releasing her to her feet when they reached the end of the bed. Her back pressed against the cold bedrail. She gave into his hunger, matching it with her own. Allowing him to shift her clothes to the shadows as his hands slipped down her ribcage to rest on her hips.

The howl of the wind created a creaking sound as the branches rubbed against one another. The rustle of leaves echoed around them as he pulled her hard against his body. His caress on her skin was insistent as if she were a dessert, he couldn't get enough of, and had her growling in anticipation. She needed this. She needed him. To forget the distrust that had plagued her life.

Riley clutched his shoulders as their shadows reached for one another. Emotions collided, as hunger, lust and love combined to heighten every sensation. His hair tickled her cheek, a whispering caress as he kissed her neck. The erotic fire built in her blood as his hands slid to her breasts, rolling an erect nipple between his fingers before his lips moved to her collarbone.

She reveled in the sensations his erotic touch produced. Every stroke produced an unending hunger that needed to be sated. A primal instinct that only Colton could sate. She almost begged for relief, but the air caught in her throat when his hands slipped down her sides, and moved to her thighs. He garnered her with soft caresses ever so close to where she needed him, but denying her the satisfaction she craved.

She allowed her hands to trace the defined muscles on his chest, making featherlight caresses of her own until he growled in her mouth. Her fingers moved to his thick cock, tracing the velvet shaft until his demands became more urgent. Riley moaned when his fingers slipped between her slick, heated flesh, parting her tender lips and pressing inside her. Her head fell back at his erotic invasion.

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. The rustling sound of the trees accentuated the sensations rocking

her body. Her hand moved to the bed railing behind her. Anchoring her as he worked her body.

Colton's eyes blazed with fire. Air rushed from her lungs when he cupped her ass, holding her in place as he impaled her over and over. There was no coherent thought. Only hard, unmitigated bliss, fueled by erotic fire and unending hunger.

She clutched his shoulders as if they were the only haven in the tsunami of emotion cascading over her body.

"Don't stop." She loved his wild side. Unfettered and out of control. A raging animal bent on her consumption. Devouring her with insatiable need.

He pumped harder, anchoring her hips with his hands. She gripped the rail harder to combat the building pressure. His nails dug into her flesh, and a trickle of blood welled on her hip. The sting of pain spurred her aggressive nature. Her shadow whirled in a ripple of black smoke as if seeking the release, she so desperately sought.

Rippling waves of pleasure washed over her body, causing her to grip him in a velvet vise. She screamed his name as she went over the apex, holding her to him like he would never let her go.

She let her body relax as he slipped from her and lay her down on the bed, nestling beside her.

While she required far less sleep than when she was human, her eyes drooped, drifting in a sated bliss. She hadn't slept more than an hour when a shout echoed from their living room.



“Colton! Get out here and bring the demon with you,” Steele shouted.

Riley and Colton scrambled out of bed, shifting their clothes from the shadows before they rose.

Steele paced the living room as they exited the bedroom. Colton’s muscles tensed as he strode into the room.

“How dare you refer to my mate as a demon? She was tested only hours ago.”

Steele’s eyes landed on Riley. “Did she leave your side in the last two hours?”

Colton growled. “No. She hasn’t left our home since we returned from the cabin. Why are you interrogating her again? Do you believe Anaisa is lying to you? Do you wish to start a war with the Haitians?”

Steele’s eyes widened. “I am not calling Anaisa into question.”

“Then what are you accusing her of?” Colton asked.

Steele’s anger turned to sadness. He glanced between them. “I’m sorry, Colton. Oliver was found dead in the forest.”

Black smoke rolled from Colton’s shoulders before he got his alpha under control. “When did this happen?”

“In the last hour,” Steele said.

Colton’s hands fisted at his sides. “Where is he?”

“Just inside the tree line. Close to his home. He was running in cougar form. He was beheaded and has no defensive wounds. He knew his attacker.”

Colton glanced at Riley. “And you believe Riley procured a reaper blade and was able to kill a shadow in his prime with little battle experience?”

Steele sighed. “I have lost two clan members today. Honestly, I have no idea what to believe. I am going to call the priestess to the site. She is still at the cabin with Daniel. Perhaps she can shed some light on this catastrophe.”

Colton nodded. “Riley and I will head over to the scene. Get Anaisa and meet us there.”

Steele walked to the deck before he shifted to the shadows and disappeared.

Riley put her hand on Colton’s arm. “I am so sorry. I know you and Oliver were close.” Her hand slipped away. “Who is doing this?” she asked, not expecting an answer.

Colton huffed. “I don’t know, but if he accuses you of being a traitor one more time, I’m going to kill him.”

Her heartbeat spiked because he wasn’t lying. “He is upset. And understandably so. Give him some time to process what’s going on. Hopefully, Anaisa can shed some light on the situation.”

Colton didn’t wait. His shadow enveloped hers and in seconds they coalesced near Oliver’s home. They saw the clan members huddled together in the distance and walked toward them.

Ferguson turned as they approached the kill site. “Dannika wants this traitor found. Since Anaisa has tested the cougar clan, we are assuming it’s a reaper.”

Riley shook her head. “Don’t jump to conclusions. The demons have abilities we are yet to understand. Maybe one of them can travel the pathway silently.”

Ferguson arched an eyebrow. “That’s an interesting possibility. If it’s true, we will need to increase patrols at all clans and ensure they work in pairs.”

Colton nodded. “That’s an excellent idea. At the very least it will ensure Steele thinks twice before accusing my mate a third time.”

Ferguson growled. “He blamed Riley for this?”

Riley sighed. “He is upset. He...”

Ferguson’s eyes glowed red. “That is no excuse. Colton wouldn’t have left your side since the attack on Aaron. Steele would know this. Anaisa cleared you two hours ago, yet he thinks you acquired a reaper blade and assaulted a senior member of the clan. A battle-hardened soldier.”

Riley squinted. “You’re the second person to say it was a reaper blade. How can you be sure?”

Colton pointed at the throat of the severed head. “The cut is too clean to be anything but blessed steel.”

Riley put her hand over her mouth and looked away. It was difficult to equate Oliver’s smiling face with the open mouth scream that hung on the severed head.

The priestess approached with Steele and knelt by Oliver’s body. Her flashlight was in her hand as she was the only one in the clearing that couldn’t see in the dark. The stars glittered through the trees as an owl hooted in the distance.

She touched Oliver's chest, her head turning to the side as if she were listening to something only she could hear. "There is a taint of demon. A powerful demon."

Steele glanced at Riley. "Are you saying this was Deruthel?"

Her lips pursed. "Maybe." She patted the body. "I sense something else." She pulled a satchel from Oliver's pocket.

Steele leaned closer. "What is that?"

"A hex bag," she said and disgust.

Ferguson's eyes widened. "That is Haitian is it not?"

Anaisa nodded. "I can't explain why it is here. I can tell you that my people cannot travel to your lands undetected. Either the demons left it or Oliver was in contact with a Bokor."

Riley knelt down beside Anaisa. "How can you be sure it was a Bokor and not a priestess?"

She smiled. "Because I am currently the only priestess and someone of power made this."

"Can you tell when it was made?" Riley asked.

"No."

"Is it possible that Hakim made it?"

Anaisa rolled the bag between her fingers. "Yes, but that would suggest Oliver was in contact with him."

Steele crossed his arms. "If it was not you, then someone from your village is either working with the demons or had

business with Oliver.”

Anaisa stood. “I assure you that no one from the village would create a hex bag.”

Riley stood beside Anaisa. “What is it used for?”

Anaisa sniffed the bag. “They have a variety of uses. This one was used to induce sleep.”

Colton rubbed his eyes. “Oliver was knocked out. He wasn’t awake when he was murdered?”

The priestess nodded. “Since this hex is considered fairly benign, it is possible someone prepared it thinking it would be used in a passive manner.”

Steele’s eyes hardened. “How can knocking someone out be considered passive?”

“Humans suffer from insomnia often. This has a short-term effect. It isn’t unheard of for my people to utilize this method in dire circumstances,” Anaisa said.

Riley glanced at the uneasy clan members surrounding them. “What kind of circumstances would require the use of a hex bag to sleep?”

Anaisa glanced toward the forest. “I used one myself when Emmanuelle died. Some trauma is too painful to deal with and sleep can be evasive.”

Steele huffed. “How convenient. Are you to tell me that Oliver went to one of your people because he couldn’t sleep?”

“Not at all. Few shadows have entered the Haitian community, and he was not one of them.”

“Your people are allowed to leave the property, priestess. He could have the Bokor at an alternate location,” Steele said.

Anaisa’s eyes narrowed. “That’s true and I guarantee I will check with my people when I return, but I do not appreciate your underlying accusations. You forget why I’m here. If we fail, then all of humanity will fall. Shadow and human alike. It’s in our best interest to keep honesty between us.”

Steele glanced at Riley. “I have to wonder if you’re in league with Riley. You admit the hex bag induces sleep. It could have been used on Colton and on Oliver. Neither would have been aware they were dosed.”

Anaisa hissed. “You think I would protect a demon? That I am swayed by her being female? I assure you I am not.”

Steele huffed. “You are swayed by Dannika and she cannot see past her blood connection to Riley. She wants a family so bad she is blind to the truth.”

Colton’s alpha emerged with a snarl. “I have had enough. I challenge for leadership.”

## CHAPTER 9



Colton's alpha snarled in his head as his body bulked out and his claws extended. His anger was a little living flame of rage that surged through his blood. Each accusation directed toward his mate eroded his confidence in his clan leader and infuriated his beast.

While he acknowledged he should have more control, he was traveling a lone road he had wanted to avoid. This fight was inevitable. Steele's alpha emerged in a rage that matched his own.

"You would challenge me, when every indication points to a demon within our clan?" Steele growled.

"Riley is not a traitor, and if it takes your head rolling across the ground to prove it, so be it."

Riley held up both hands. "Stop this. This is exactly what the demons want."

Riley turned to the priestess for help, but she was looking toward darkness. "Anaisa?"

The priestess turned around slowly. "We are being watched."

Ferguson followed Anaisa's gaze. "By who?"

"I don't know, but I feel their hatred."

Ferguson disappeared in less than a heartbeat. Colton growled at his leader, but turned in the direction the priestess was looking. "Have the demons found a way to trespass on our land without detection?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't know. Maybe."

The alphas remained ready to fight as the clan held its breath. Part of Colton knew he should back down and accept that Steele was in pain from the loss of two members of the clan, but his anger, the feeling of betrayal, blistered in his blood. He glanced at the faces of the clan surrounding them, and knew none wanted this fight. They weren't ready to lose Steele, and part of him didn't want to lose his chosen father. The other part. The part that acknowledged Riley was his mate, refused to allow the lies and betrayal to remain unanswered.

Ferguson returned in a flash of dark smoke. "The priestess was right."

Colton allowed his human form to resurface. "What happened? Who was out there?"

Ferguson's gaze met Steele's. "Demons. I killed one, but Breck got away thanks to the three others with him. I have no idea how they arrived in your clan undetected, but they were watching us."

Anaisa shook her head. "Not us. Riley."



Steele's alpha receded. "Why do you think they were watching her?"

"They need her for something. Something more than we realize. There is more going on here. We are missing something," she said.

Colton's eyes flickered. "I hope you're not suggesting she is in league with them."

She shook her head. "Not at all. I believe they were concerned these events would put her in danger. They were well aware of the murder."

Colton ran his hand through his hair. "We need to find their new hideout."

Steele nodded. "I agree. What do you suggest?"

His anger hadn't abated, but he would postpone this fight until his mate was no longer under suspicion. "I think we should return to the clinic. We know they are abducting women from there. If we watch them, we will be able to figure out where they go."

Anaisa turned to Colton. "The clinic?"

Ferguson shot Colton a hard glance. "I have not had the opportunity to explain the clinic to the priestess."

Riley touched Anaisa's forearm. "I'm sorry, but Hakim funded the clinic for background tests on the women of Graydon County. Specifically, those with ties to the Haitian village. Leah visited the clinic before she was attacked at the winery. Her file listed her grandmother at the village."

Anaisa wrapped her temple with two fingers. “The Bokor’s treachery knows no bounds. Just when I think his duplicitous nature has finally come to an end, I find another level of his depravity. His name is the stain upon my culture. My family. We will not rest until his actions have been accounted for.”

Colton frowned. “You are not responsible for what he did. He let his pain turn him into a monster. His choices, were his alone.”

She dropped her hand. “I wish that were true, but his betrayal could bring about the destruction of our entire world. Like it or not, we must atone for his deception.”

Ferguson looked over at the priestess. “What gave Hakim the idea to use the clinic? Is there some way he could trace bloodlines? Are there any Haitian rituals that would aid him in this?”

Anaisa’s forehead creased. “You are talking about dark magic. Dark spells. It is possible if he had the original bloodline to trace.”

Colton swore under his breath. “Deruthel drank from the original priestess. Could Hakim have used her blood to trace her descendants?”

Anaisa took a deep breath. “While it pains me to admit it, Hakim’s power was considerable. His choice to use the dark side of our culture to his advantage is an abomination. That being said, if anybody could have re-created the spell, it’s him.”

Steele's eyes narrowed on the priestess. "The Bokor is dead, yet we keep blaming him for current atrocities committed against us. At what point do we accept that there is a traitor among us?"

Anaisa turned to him. "There is a traitor among you, but I can't tell you who it is. It could be a reaper who is working for the demons or a club member that is enthralled and has no memory of any wrongdoing."

Riley sucked in a breath. "That's possible?"

Colton nodded. "The previous reaper leader took control of a child in the wolf clan. The fledgling was unaware he was committing crimes against the clan."

"Is there any way to tell if someone is being influenced?" Riley asked.

Anaisa sighed. "With a shadow child, it would be quite easy since his demon wouldn't have emerged. With an adult, especially one with demon blood, I could not make that determination."

Riley's face sagged. "I could be influenced and not know it?"

Anaisa nodded. "It's possible, but Colton said you were with him when Oliver died."

Riley took a deep breath. "But if I used the hex bag on him and then Oliver, neither would have realized."

Anaisa shook her head. "The hex bag is single use. It could only have been used on one or the other."

Ferguson's eyes narrowed on the priestess. "Is there any way to tell what was used on Oliver?"

"No. I can tell the Hex bag has been used, but not on who," she said.

Colton slipped his hand around Riley's waist. Her fear permeated the air making him feel like a failure. "Let's go to the clinic and see if we can track a reaper to their new hideout."

A tear slipped from her eye as his shadow enveloped hers.

## CHAPTER 10



*R*iley traveled the pathway like a bullet cutting through the air. Colton had chosen a particularly fast stream, and they ricocheted through the streams at lightning speed. The fissures of light within the dark tunnels blurred as if warping an entire galaxy.

The wrenching feeling as her bones reformed, solidifying into her human shape was a welcome reprieve from the emotional pain of being accused of being a traitor. Steele hadn't imprisoned her, but it was obvious he wanted to. She understood his reservations. She was an anomaly. For the first time since his transition, she was glad her father was so weak. He couldn't travel the pathways in his condition and rarely fed. He would never be accused because he lacked both the ability and the strength to track a shadow let alone kill one.

Daniel rarely left the cabin, and he was never alone. It had become an unspoken oath to keep a clan member with him at all times. Not that it was a problem. The clan seemed to enjoy being with him. He gave them hope and acceptance that they didn't realize they needed until he was with them. That had always been her father's gift. Unconditional love for those

around him. She understood why her mother fell in love with him.

She blinked as her eyelids formed and they were standing in the alley outside the clinic building. The shadows cast from the building beside the clinic created the perfect cover and they remained in the mouth of the pathway where they were hidden from the world. The same darkness that used to frighten her as a child now brought safety and reassurance.

They turned when they heard Breck's voice. He was standing at the end of the alley beside the street. They couldn't see who he was talking to, but he pointed toward them.

"It's down here, miss. You can use the side entrance and you won't have to deal with the man in the lobby. Janice will take you to a private room."

Riley leaned toward Colton. "That's the same pitch they used on the last woman."

Colton nodded. "Reapers are not very imaginative. If something works, they won't deviate."

Riley kept her eyes on Breck, waiting to see who he was talking to. "Ferguson is quite imaginative."

"Ferguson and the reapers like him are different from those who chose to turn. I don't know why they have retained their humanity when they have lost their animal."

"I'm guessing it's because they didn't have a choice and took a more humane path under the circumstances."

Colton moved to the crest of the shadow. "If the woman Breck is talking to accepts his invitation, we will have to

intervene.”

“Send a message to Ferguson. If there are more of them, we need help and he is the fastest at tracking the pathway.”

Colton glanced at her. He hesitated before he created the black script in the air.

She wanted to reassure him she had every faith in him, but Breck nodded and started toward them. The woman peeked down the alley, waiting for Breck to be halfway down before she followed.

Riley grabbed Colton’s arm. “That’s Sarita. Her picture was in her file.”

They watched as Sarita approached. They had chosen a shadow at the end of the alley so they didn’t alert anyone of their presence. Breck pointed to the door behind the clinic but stood back, close to the pathway entrance. Riley could reach out and touch him if she chose. She wondered why Colton didn’t remove the traitor right there but decided he probably needed Sarita safe first.

When Sarita neared the door, Breck moved. He was faster than Riley expected. One moment he was nodding to Sarita with a welcoming smile, and the next he evaporated in a puff of smoke and reformed behind her, with his arm around her waist and his hand over her mouth.

Colton pulled him off the startled woman. Breck released her to turn on his assailant. Sarita screamed and bolted toward the street as Breck and Colton squared off.

“You had no right to interfere,” Breck said.

Colton's eyes flared as smoke rolled off his shoulders in waves. "This little operation of yours is about to come to an end. When the demons realize what a spineless puke you are, they will discard you like the garbage you are."

Breck laughed then looked at Riley. "Your mate will be a demon breeder by the end of the week."

"Never going to happen, asshole."

Breck's shadow warrior merged. He growled as his claws extended and lunged at Colton.

Colton's alpha emerged as he turned to the side, but Breck's claws caught him in the shoulder as he spun away. "You have gotten faster since you were a member of the reaper clan."

Breck smiled slyly. "You have no idea." He lunged again but Colton whirled away from the attack. The claw marks on his shoulder had already healed, and he circled the wary reaper as Ferguson emerged from the shadows.

His alpha was large and intimidating as he entered the alley. "Breck, I have been looking for you. How about we have that chat you keep avoiding."

Breck hissed as the cocky grin was replaced by fear. "I can't beat you in a fight, but I will spit on your body when Deruthel removes your head."

"Why wait? If you are prepared to discuss your traitorous behavior, then it's my duty to relieve you of your life," Ferguson said.



Breck backed away before he dissolved and raced into an adjacent pathway. Ferguson took up the chase, entering the same stream less than a second behind him.

Riley approached Colton as his alpha receded. "I wouldn't want to be Breck right now."

Colton resumed his human form. "Me either, but he needs to be wary. Breck is faster, stronger than he was before."

"How is that possible?" Riley asked.

"I don't know. I'm hoping Ferguson will ask him before he kills him."

She glanced at the clinic door. "Since Ferguson is chasing Breck, are we going to investigate the clinic further?"

"The clinic is still open so we can't go into the exam rooms, but the file room is empty. If we close the door, we can see if there's more information on Hakim's involvement."

"We need to get a list of women they are targeting. Perhaps I can find the program on the computer and print it off," she said.

Colton nodded. "That's a good idea. If we get the list, then we can have the shadows watch them. We know the soldiers are expendable. If we can kill off the first generation and prevent the king from entering our realm, we have a chance of avoiding our destruction."

"Are we going to take a pathway into the clinic?"

"I'm not sure if the other reaper is still in the waiting room. It would be best to enter through the rear door. The file room

is close to this exit.”

They opened the back door, ducked into the file room, and quickly closed the door behind them. Riley sat down at the computer, searching for the files on women related to the Haitian village. She was sure she had found the correct program, but frowned when she opened it.

Colton leaned over the computer. “What is that?”

She read the name on the file. “I don’t know. This is part of the search parameters but I don’t recognize the name and this is in the list.”

“What is it?” Colton asked.

“It’s a DNA profile, but there is... I think this is a recipe.”

Colton’s eyebrows arched. “For what?”

“A serum.”

“The one they injected into Leah?”

Riley typed in several commands. “Maybe. My name is listed. My blood was part of that serum.”

“We knew Hakim stole your blood for the demons. I’m not surprised they are using it in the serum,” Colton said.

“That’s the thing. It isn’t just my blood. There’s something else. Hakim’s maybe?” she said.

“There is a results link. They injected this subject with this serum a week ago.”

“What happened to her?”

Riley clicked the link. “As of yesterday, she is still alive.”

Colton swore under his breath. “Is there any other information in the file?”

Riley swallowed hard. “The final note says, possible breeder.”

## CHAPTER 11



Riley turned in her chair when they heard voices in the hallway. “Are they coming in here?”

Colton’s gaze focused on the people outside the door. “No. The nurse is escorting the patient to the exam room beside us.”

She turned back to the computer screen. “This is an ongoing experiment. The file number is sixty-seven.”

“Are you saying they have done sixty-seven experiments?” Colton asked.

Her fingers flew over the keys. “Yes, but this is the only one that is active.”

Colton rubbed his eyes. “What happened to the other sixty-six?”

“I think I can search by file number. Let’s try the first experiment.” She typed in the number one.

Colton pointed to the date. “That experiment was done months before the demons breached our world.”

“It looks like Hakim started without them.”

“Dammit. What was he doing prior to Dannika’s transition?”

“He was trying to create a successful breeder. He injected women with shadow shifter blood. With my human blood.” She typed in the number two. “The second experiment used Maddock’s blood and his blood.”

Colton put his hands on his hips. “Hakim was trying to create a female shadow before Dannika transitioned. Can you skip ahead to an experiment done after the demons entered our world?”

Riley entered the number thirty-two. “This experiment was done three weeks after the demons arrived. They introduced demon blood. Again, they are using different combinations of blood, but haven’t started using the new serum at this point.”

“Are there any common denominators in all the experiments?”

Riley typed in several numbers, flipping through experiment after experiment. She swallowed hard before she answered. “The only component that is the same in every experiment is my blood. Though the last two experiments list me as having shadow blood, but how could they have gotten it?”

Colton rubbed his chin. “We gave a sample of your blood to Dannika and to Karam. We need to check and see if those samples went missing.” He wrote black script in the air and waited only a few seconds before the response returned. “Raine says the wolf clan is still in possession of your blood sample. I will check with Karam when we return.”

Riley continued to type before a file opened and hundreds of names scrolled on the screen. “I found the list. There are hundreds of names they suspect of having priestess blood.”

“Can you print that list off?”

Riley hit print and prayed the sound didn’t alert the doctor in the next room. “I’ve got it.” She glanced at the list. “Hold on.”

Colton leaned in. “What did you find?”

“The original experiments were not done at this clinic.”

“What? Was Hakim running them from his shop?” Colton asked.

Riley shook her head. “There is another clinic location. It’s on the outskirts of town. It was originally owned by Hakim, but is now owned by a subsidiary company.”

“Pull up information on the clinic.”

Riley’s fingers flew over the keys. “It’s listed as the clinic here, but the city has it designated as a research facility.”

“Who owns it?”

“It appears to be a shell company. If I had to guess, I’d say that Hakim planned his death. He must have had someone named in his will for his properties.”

“Can you access his will?”

“Only if it’s been filed with... We should have known.”

Colton’s eyes hardened. “Known what?”

“Hakim named Breck as his son-in-law. He inherited everything.”

Black smoke rolled off Colton’s shoulders. “We couldn’t understand why Deruthel was so intent on keeping Breck alive. He couldn’t care less about the reaper, but he needs Hakim’s research. He won’t let Breck die until he has his breeders in place and the war is all but over.”

Riley shook her head. “I really hope Ferguson gets to him first.”

“Breck will probably lead him to the demons, but even Ferguson can’t fight the entire horde on his own. He won’t get access to Breck until Deruthel allows it.”

Riley closed the file she had opened. “Well, that’s disappointing.”

Colton smiled. “It is. Grab the list. Let’s go see if that research facility is still operational.”

Riley grabbed the paper from the printer and passed it to Colton. He tucked it into his pocket before grabbing her hand. He opened the door slightly, glancing down the hallway before they dashed to the door and exited into the alley.

Colton glanced at the roar of vehicles passing on the street before he led her to the opposite building and the shadow pathway within.

In seconds they were traversing the streams, zipping from one to the other as they worked their way to the outskirts of town. To the warehouse that was designated as a clinic and research facility.

They coalesced across the street, looking for activity.

The exterior was similar to the other warehouses on the street in that district. Though this was the only one with security cameras equipped with infrared lighting.

Riley pointed at the cameras. “The security system is too hardcore not to be in use, but there’s no way this is a clinic.”

Colton’s eyes roamed over the building. “I agree. It’s still in use. The question is, for what?”

“Can we take a pathway inside?” she asked.

“Yes, but if there are any reapers inside, then they will hear us.”

Riley searched the building for any sign of activity. “There are no patrols, so I say we chance it.”

Colton glanced down the street. “This is the only building with overt security measures. I agree. Let’s head in.”

His shadow enveloped hers as they made the quick jump to a hallway within the facility.

The dim lighting illuminated a row of doors. The construction was simple with four rooms on either side and a single hallway down the middle. The doors all had locks and glass windows with metal bars over them.

Riley’s stomach flipped. “Why do I have the feeling I’m going to hate this?”

Colton took her hand. “I have the feeling we both will.”

They approached the first door.



## CHAPTER 12



Riley breathed a sigh of relief when the first door turned out to be an office. The emergency lighting in the hallway and rooms were dim, giving the impression the facility hadn't been used for a while. Dust floated in the air as they walked, making it obvious that a cleaning crew had not been retained. That more than anything revealed the nefarious nature of the research facility. "The clinic listed this site. Let's boot up the computer and see if it's connected to the clinic."

They entered the small office that contained a single desk, a computer and a few filing cabinets. Unlike the computer at the clinic, this one was older. Riley hit the power button and waited over a minute for the password command to appear. "This computer hasn't been used in a while. I didn't have to log into the other one. I have no idea what the password is."

Colton opened the top drawer of one of the gray metal filing cabinets. He flipped through several files before turning back to Riley. "Hakim's name is at the bottom of every file."

"We know he set this facility up, but that doesn't tell us what the password is."

Colton stared at the screen. "Try revenge."

Riley typed it in quickly. “Nope.”

Colton sighed. “The route of this madness lies with Hakim’s daughter and the Haitian people’s choice not to save her. Try Lorette.”

Riley typed in the Bokor’s daughter’s name. The screen switched to home. “That’s it.” She turned in her chair. “You don’t think the Haitians made a mistake, do you? If they used unnatural means to save Lorette, then they would upset the natural balance. I understand his pain. Losing anyone is traumatic, and a child is as bad as it gets, but destroying the world... every other child in existence is not the answer.”

Colton closed the top filing cabinet drawer and opened the next. “I know, but right now it seems like the lesser of two evils.”

“The Haitians couldn’t have known he would turn on them like this. Hakim is not the first person to seek a means to help a sick family member. They have rules in place for a reason. Even a prior priestess was forced to perish at a young age because she would not break their governing rules about altering the balance of nature.”

Colton pulled another file from the drawer. “I know. They have strong beliefs about the afterlife and don’t fear it like other humans. See if you can find any information on the experiments done here.”

Riley began scrolling through files, then sucked in a breath.

Colton turned from reading the file in his hand. “What is it?”

“These experiments were done prior to the other clinic. There are ninety-four files in here. Hakim was doing experiments years before the demons arrived.”

“Damn. We know he used human blood, but why so many experiments?”

Her fingers flew over the keys. “He tried several mixtures. Some with his blood. Others with Maddock’s blood. Variations of all three.”

“Why were there so many experiments?” he asked.

Riley cleared her throat. “He tried different combinations. Some had higher quantities of my blood. Others had higher quantities of reaper blood. There are also some listed as shadow blood, but I don’t know who the donor is.”

Colton growled. “A shadow helped Hakim?”

“You didn’t know he was a traitor. I doubt the donor has any idea what his blood was used for.”

“Why did they abandon this facility?”

She pulled up the most recent file. “This facility was in use until Hakim’s death. I’m guessing the clinic’s location makes it a more viable source. They were inviting women here, offering free services, but they’ve had far more success with the clinic. I’m guessing that’s why they purchased it.”

Colton shook his head. “Why would any woman agree to come here? The fact that they tricked ninety-four women into

this facility is shocking.”

Riley pulled up the research facility online. “They created a website that lists the services and fake testimonials of this facility. It says it’s world-renowned, but by the looks of things, it’s all fake.”

“Were they using the program to find the women before they invited them here?”

“The list of bloodlines is on this computer. They were looking for descendants of the priestess. Specifically, those that don’t live in the Haitian village. Originally, Hakim was trying to keep a low profile.”

Colton threw the file on the floor, then slammed the door. “That bastard.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said.

The hum of a pathway blared in their eardrums before Ferguson coalesced in the room.

Riley slapped her hand to her chest as she turned in her chair. “Jesus Christ, Ferguson. Give a girl some warning.”

Ferguson arched an eyebrow. “I’m not sure your father would appreciate such language.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m sure you don’t need to tattle on me.”

Ferguson’s lip twitched. “Agreed.” His gaze narrowed on Colton. “What?”

“Stop sneaking up on people.”

“You are an alpha. You should have detected my presence in the pathway,” Ferguson said.

Riley shook her head. “There was no warning. I heard the hum of the pathway a split second before you appeared.”

Ferguson glanced around. “The Bokor had the power to ward his shop. He prevented the shadows from entering. Perhaps he had similar wards here, but they are failing due to his death.”

Riley nodded. “That makes sense. Were you able to track Breck?”

“I trailed him to a location in the hills. I will tell you about that in a minute. What is this place?” he asked.

Riley explained the experiments using her blood. That they were planning on investigating the rest of the facility in a moment. “We had no idea this place existed until we found a reference at the clinic downtown.”

Ferguson nodded. “There is no one alive in this building. I wish to return to the demon’s new hideout. I would like Colton to come with me, so I’m hoping you will stay with your sister while we investigate their new location.”

Riley’s eyes narrowed. “Where is it?”

“An abandoned mine. There are several tunnels and I can’t investigate all of them on my own,” he said.

Colton leaned on the filing cabinet. “Is this a recon mission, or are you looking to engage the enemy?”

“There are too many demons to engage. If we are spotted, we will have to leave immediately,” Ferguson said.

Riley crossed her arms. “Then why can’t I go with you? If we leave the moment we are spotted, Colton can direct me in the pathway. He’s just as fast with me as he is on his own.”

Ferguson’s jaw ticked. “There is no reason to take such a risk with your safety. You will stay with Dannika and Raine while your mate and I investigate the mine.”

Riley stood up, staring up at Ferguson. “I hope you are not trying to order me around. You are not my father. And while I respect you and your skills, I am not going to be protected like a princess in a tower. I’m not that kind of woman.”

His eyes flickered with black smoke. “There is no need for you to risk yourself. We have hundreds of shadows. We have two women. Our lives are not as important as...”

Riley hissed. “Do not finish that sentence. Colton’s life. Your life. All life is important. No person is more valuable than another.”

“I disagree,” Ferguson said.

Riley shrugged. “You are entitled to your opinion, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m going with you.”

Ferguson growled. “No.”

Riley had to admit that the ancient reaper was intimidating with the black smoke and onyx eyes, but she knew there was no circumstance in which he harmed her. He could get mad. Yell. Make the average shadow run for cover, and all he did was make her feel safer. Cared for. Her tone dropped to that of

a whisper. “Why do you care about Dannika and me so much? It isn’t because we are women.”

Ferguson turned to Colton. “Are you going to allow her to come?”

Colton sighed. “When you have a mate, Ferguson, you will understand that as much as you wish to, you can’t lock her away from the world. Since this is a recon mission. We will flee if we are spotted. She will not leave my side.”

Ferguson’s eyes flashed red. “You are worse than Raine. If mating robs you of your common sense, then I will avoid it at all costs.”

Colton huffed. “There is no avoiding fate. Give me the location. She is coming with me.”

Ferguson’s hands moved in the air and a map made of shadow script formed before Colton. “You go here. I will investigate the tunnels on the other side and meet you there in a few minutes.” He dissolved before Colton could respond.

Riley put her hand on Colton’s arm. “Thank you for standing up to him. I know that wasn’t easy.”

Colton’s gaze met hers. “He isn’t wrong, and I will regret this decision when he gets me in the training ring next.”

Riley winked. “I will be there to cheer you on. Maybe I can distract him.”

Colton chuckled. “I bet you could.” He pointed to the disappearing map. “Did you know he could do that?”

Riley frowned. “What?”

“He created a map in shadow script.”

“You can’t do that?” she asked.

“Riley. He saw this location minutes ago and recreated the map. Shadow script is written. I don’t have to memorize a location and recreate it in my mind. That is a skill of a cartographer.”

“He is a cartographer? Like Darren?”

“I’m not sure. His map was far less detailed than Darren’s, but there are no reports of him using this skill. If he was never trained, then I’m guessing he taught himself the only way he could. Using shadow script.”

“There were no reaper cartographers?”

“It is a rare shadow skill. A cartographer is protected and watched. To my knowledge, one never turned reaper. They are held in high esteem within the clan.”

Riley sighed. “The men that turned reaper had average skills. Did they feel like they were less than their brethren?”

“Most had common skills, but Maddock and a few like him had rare skills and were powerful. Humans and shadows are no different in this regard. Some are never happy despite the rewards they are given. They seek more power despite already having the lion’s share.”

“Sad, but true.”

He pulled her against his body. “Are you ready to check out the mine? Ferguson was right. Other than the experiments



going on longer than we expected, there isn't any new information here."

She nodded. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER 13



Riley and Colton coalesced just inside the entrance of the mine. She glanced at the planks that boarded up the entrance, inhaling the smell of rot and stale water. “Are these mines attached to the wolf caves?”

Colton touched the surface of the damp rock. “This mine was built hundred years before the mine was inhabited by the wolves. I believe there was a cave-in, and the tunnels were deemed unsafe. They moved to the opposite side of the mountain and started excavation. That doesn’t alter the fact that this property is owned by Raine. He inherited Maddock’s property, and this location is owned by the parent company of both mines.”

Riley glanced through the rotting planks barring the entrance. “Should we wait for Ferguson?”

Colton focused on the tunnel. “I can’t hear anything, but Ferguson would have ensured we entered away from the demons so they weren’t alerted to our presence when we arrived.”

Riley sucked in a breath as Ferguson coalesced beside her. “Dammit! I swear I’m going to put a bell around his neck.”

“My apologies,” Ferguson said. “There were no demons on the other side of the mountain. There is an inner chamber. Let’s walk toward it and see how close we can get before we encounter the enemy.”

Ferguson went first with Colton and Riley following behind him. Thick wooden beams stained with tar bracketed the inner rock walls, but they were cracked and rotting. Dirt dropped from the ceiling as they walked and roots hung low, causing them to move them with their hands as they passed.

Riley stepped over the broken pick handle and several bits of chain before they skirted around a broken handcart. Dirt had settled over the old rails. Had she not kicked some loose gravel to expose the rail beneath, she would not have realized it was still there.

The ceiling was much lower in this cave than that in the wolves. Both Colton and Ferguson had to stoop down in order to traverse the tunnel. Their boots echoed as they shuffled along, scattering loose earth in their wake. She focused on the muffled staccato until realizing it was a slow drip of water. They neared a section immersed in water and were forced to wade to their knees where the tunnel had eroded before emerging on the other side.

“Why would the demons pick such a precarious location? This place looks like it could collapse at any moment,” Riley asked.

Ferguson glanced back at her. “The mine was closed for that very reason. The inner cavern is stable. I believe the demons are in that location.”

They all stopped when they heard the echo of a scream. Ferguson put his finger to his lips, crouching lower as he moved forward quietly. She and Colton followed his lead.

As they neared the rock wall, she realized the cavern was two levels down. They were on the upper floor, overlooking of rock room full of demons.

Ferguson pointed at the two demons carrying a woman's body from the center of the room. Deruthel had set up another mock throne. This time it was far less elaborate. A single chair with stones in a circle around it.

Deruthel motioned to a female who knelt outside the circle of stones. Other demons ran their hands over her body in obvious appreciation. Despite their lustful growls and wandering hands, her eyes remained on Deruthel.

“Come to me, Sienna,” Deruthel said.

The demon woman scrambled toward him eagerly. She nuzzled his hand eagerly as he petted her.

Deruthel turned when Halak approached him. “She is the only one to last the week. Are you optimistic about her survival?”

Halak put his hand out to Sienna. Riley put her hand over her mouth as she watched the woman lick it. “She has shown no signs of rejection so far. Even if she dies, we are close to a permanent solution.”

“Excellent, I...”

Halak's body contorted and shook before he straightened. His voice boomed with that of a being far more powerful.

“Have your tests born fruit?”

Deruthel stood. “We are close my king.”

The demons in the cavern went to their knees, bowing before the demon possessing Halak’s body.

Deruthel pointed at Sienna. “This one appears stable. We will wait to see if she remains so and then administer the serum to several more females.”

The king flicked his fingers, and Sienna stood before him. He ran his hands over her breasts. “She appears fertile. Breed her immediately.”

Deruthel’s eyes hardened. “I have chosen another to bear my first, Ashkara. Halak is my second; I will have him take her unless you wish to carry out that honor.”

The king’s eyes flared. “You may have any I do not choose and pass the rest onto your men.” He held up his hand and Deruthel dropped to his knees with his hands around his neck. “Do not forget your place. I have allowed you to have far more power than any before you.”

“I live to serve you, mighty Ashkara. All beings in this world are yours by right. I misspoke. I meant to say I have two women chosen and will take that which you do not.”

Halak dropped his hand, and Deruthel took a long breath. “I have chosen. You may have the other.”

Deruthel nodded. “As you wish, my king.”

Ashkara glanced around the Cavern. “This world is unappealing.”

Deruthel shook his head. “We have taken refuge inside a mine. We wish to focus on the breeders so we are ready when you traverse the portal. We almost have stability, but cannot create a breach large enough for your power to pass through. We need...”

“My mate of this world. You know what you must do.”

Deruthel nodded. “We will acquire her soon. We are yet to discern if her blood will be enough. I will kill the priestess if I have to. Her blood should be powerful enough to create a large enough portal for you.”

Ashkara’s eyes flared. “No! Her death could collapse the portal permanently, and I would be trapped in this realm forever.”

Deruthel’s eyes flickered with interest, but he didn’t move. Riley wondered if Ashkara realized his general would betray him, given a chance. “I understand.”

Ashkara tapped his chest. Halak’s chest. “I have implanted the knowledge in Halak’s mind. If you attempt to betray me, I will kill you and promote him to second in command.”

Deruthel’s face paled. “I will not betray you.”

Ashkara laughed. “Yes, you will. It is only a matter of time, but perhaps I will gain another world or two before I am forced to kill you.”

Deruthel nodded. “As you wish. How should I stabilize the portal if you wish to keep the priestess alive?”

Halak’s eyes flared. “It is your job to figure it out, but do not touch the priestess. Resources are difficult to come by, and

hers is rare.”

“I never waste our resources, my king.”

The statement was almost identical to Ashkara’s. It was more than obvious who had trained him. Considering the demon general’s power, she began to fear that of the king. His arrogance and his confidence were far more than that of the general. Ashkara was a new level of evil and though everyone had said it, this time, she believed it. If the king was successful in reaching their realm, there would be no stopping him. He was the source of the demon infection and he overpowered the mind of his subordinate as easily as one would turn on a TV.

The king looked over at his general. “Yes, your military strategy is superior to any before you, but don’t mistake intelligence for power. I can wipe the mind of every demon in here, including yours.”

Deruthel nodded respectfully. “Yes, father.”

## CHAPTER 14



Riley crouched down behind the rock wall sitting on the uneven ground. She kept her tone so low the demons wouldn't hear her. "Deruthel is the king's son?"

Ferguson crouched down, no longer looking at the demons below. "It appears so. That explains why he has more power than the other demons. There are legends about the demon Ashkara in certain ancient civilizations."

Riley glanced at him. "What do they say?"

"One account claims he is a king of the underworld and has untold power. Another account claims he is a world killer. A plague that annihilates all that he comes in contact with."

Riley wiped her eyes. "That second one sounds about right. The first one could be mistaken as king of another world."

"Yes, that is feasible," Ferguson said.

Riley got back to her feet, peeking over the ledge again.

Deruthel had his head down in a subservient position as he spoke to the king who possessed Halak's body. "We are working on other combinations to see if we can speed up the



process.” He pointed at the woman fawning at Halak’s feet. “So far she is the only one who has shown promise.”

The king’s gaze narrowed on Deruthel. “Do not fail me or I will wipe your mind and take your body. If you do not create a stable portal, I will release my consciousness in this realm and take yours.”

Deruthel’s eyes widened. “Your power would be diminished.”

The king stepped toward Deruthel. “Yes. It is an inconvenience, but one I have had to utilize in the past. As my power grows it becomes increasingly harder to create a portal large enough to traverse worlds.”

Deruthel stepped back. “You have taken over a previous vessel?”

The king laughed. “Do you think I allowed you so much power because I care for you? You are a tool. In the event of your failure, I will take over your body permanently. Your mind will die and mine will flourish. I will remain as king and yes, I have the inconvenience of having to rebuild my power, but the body I currently reside in is your older brother. I have done this many times in the past.”

Deruthel turned from the king. His eyes were haunted and unsure. “You allow one son to gain power in the event you need his body. My power will become your power.”

The king nodded. “Now you understand. I prefer not to be diminished. As long as you create a portal large enough for my passage, you will retain your body.”

Deruthel turned back to his father. "I will not fail."

The king nodded. "I want Riley secured immediately."

Deruthel's hands fisted at his sides but he visibly calmed himself. "We have made several attempts to acquire her, but the shadows have proven more resilient than we anticipated. We'll get to her soon. We need her."

"You need both shadow women to create the breeders we need," the king said.

Deruthel glanced at the woman at the king's feet. "There's a problem with Dannika's blood."

The king arched an eyebrow. "You were able to get a sample from the queen?"

Deruthel nodded. "Yes, the traitor was able to procure a sample, but when we tested her blood in the serum, the woman died before transition. Only Riley's blood has had some measure of success."

Ferguson turned to Colton with red eyes. "We have a traitor. If they got a sample of Dannika's blood then it was a member of the wolf clan."

Colton nodded. "We knew that; we just assumed it was a member of the cougar clan. They went to great lengths to set up Riley."

Ferguson growled low in his throat. "They want to discredit her. If the cougar clan ostracized her, it would be easier for them to procure her."

"I agree. Who has access to Dannika's blood?"

Ferguson was quiet. The king continued to threaten his general as the three shadows watched in silence. “The healer has taken her blood recently.”

Colton’s eyes flared. “Karam would never betray the cougar clan. He has saved countless members from every clan, including me.”

“And yet he is in the wolf caves and the only cougar clan member not tested. Other than you, Raine, and myself, he is the only one to take Dannika’s blood.”

Colton rubbed his chin. “That we know of. If our traitor has another hex bag, he could have incapacitated Dannika and even Raine and taken her blood without her knowledge.”

Ferguson focused on the demons. “That is unlikely. He has direct access to every clan member. You said they’re testing variations of shadow blood. What better way than to use the healer? He may not even know that he is being controlled.”

Colton sighed. “You’re right. Test him to be safe. Steele will insist on it, anyway.”

The king growled returning their attention to the conversation. “The queen should have the strongest bloodline. You must have made a mistake.”

Deruthel shook his head. “We tested five women. All failed to transition, and they died badly. Every serum we created with Dannika’s blood, initiated a cellular destabilization. The women dissolved, for lack of a better word. We did the experiments offsite so our troops would not be disheartened by the results.”

The king glanced around. “And yet you discuss it openly now.”

“Because we are close to producing stable breeders. Even if Riley is the only one, we will keep her until we have a stable breeder pool.”

“Have you investigated this anomaly?”

The demon general nodded. “Her blood does not contain the properties needed to induce pregnancy. The serum is designated to create viable breeders; the women died immediately.”

Riley shivered involuntarily. “Something is wrong with Dannika. We need to tell her.”

Ferguson shook his head. “There’s nothing to be concerned about. Her blood is not viable as a breeder for the demons, but that condition is temporary. If they discover the source of that anomaly, they will not hesitate to procure her.”

Riley touched his arm. “You know what’s wrong with her?”

“There is nothing wrong with Dannika. She simply is not a viable breeder for the demons... at least not yet.”

“Why?”

Ferguson’s gaze flicked to hers. “I must return to Dannika and see if anyone else besides Karam had access to her blood. I assume she would tell me, but she is strong-willed to say the least.”

Colton turned to him. “Are you heading back to the wolf caves?”

Ferguson nodded. “Dannika’s in more danger than I realized. I must ensure she takes some precautionary measures. These discussions usually take some time.”

“I bet. Riley and I will watch them for a little longer, then report back to you. Let Dannika know everything we’ve learned.”

Ferguson nodded then crouched down as he exited the cavern and navigated the tunnel toward the exit.

Riley turned to Colton as soon as Ferguson was out of sight. “Dannika hasn’t looked very good the last few times I’ve seen her. I assumed it was the stress of being queen and the impending war with the demons.”

Colton peeked over the ledge. “I noticed as well. She looks pale. I assumed she wasn’t feeding enough, but Raine assured me that isn’t the case.”

“Could it be some kind of disease?” Riley asked.

“We are immune to all human diseases.”

She frowned. “Are there any shadow ones?”

“Only lack of feeding creates fatigue and the symptoms that Dannika appears to have. I am unaware of any such shadow viruses.”

“There must be something and whatever it is, Ferguson is aware of it.” She rubbed her chest, trying not to be affected by Dannika’s lack of trust in her. Dannika had gone her entire life

on her own and had been abandoned by the people that should've taken her in. Riley's parents had left her to her fate. She had to earn Dannika's trust. She couldn't expect it.

"We will figure it out. Give it time," Colton said.

She leaned over the rock wall, attempting to get an accurate count of the demons in the cavern. More had arrived since the king began to speak. "Their numbers have doubled since Ashkara started speaking."

"I noticed."

The king stopped mid-sentence. Halak's body turned, but the eyes were not his as they roamed over the cavern.

Riley and Colton ducked down quickly, avoiding the king's gaze. "Did he see us?" she whispered.

The king's voice echoed in the cavern. "Check your defenses now. You have an intruder."

Deruthel hissed. "Up there. Get them."

Demons growled as Colton and Riley sprinted into the tunnel. They weaved through the hanging roots as a deep growl emanated before them.

Colton barked a command. "Hold on." His shadow enveloped hers, but as they entered the pathway, she knew they were not alone. Emotions were amplified in the pathway and there was no mistaking that of their pursuer. Hatred.

## CHAPTER 15



Riley turned as they coalesced on the veranda of their home. She could feel the anger and hatred of the demon pursuing them, but as their forms solidified, the breeze whipped her hair against her cheek, and the emotion dimmed. “Is it coming here?”

Colton stepped in front of her. “The demon has stopped. I believe it’s deciding whether it wants to pursue us on shadow land. The moment it exits the pathway the entire clan will converge on this location.”

“Can he hear us?”

“Yes,” Colton said.

Despite her ability to regulate her body temperature, goosebumps formed on her skin. She inched closer to Colton’s back, allowing his body heat to warm her. “You may want to remind our pursuer that Ferguson is making a necklace out of demon claws.”

Colton turned and smirked at her. “Our friend has reconsidered his advance. I no longer feel his presence.”

“I get the impression that the demons fear Ferguson as much as the shadows do.”

“He isn’t really making a charm necklace out of demon claws, is he?” Colton asked.

Riley pursed her lips. “Not yet, but I’m going to ask him to start.”

Colton put his arms around her shoulders. “I had no idea you were so devious.”

She chuckled. “I’ll use any means possible to deter the demons, but considering what we witnessed, they are ruled by fear.”

Colton led her into their living room, closing the door behind them. “Ashkara is something else. I expected the king to be powerful, but to be able to control his subjects is a new level. His consciousness is so evolved he can literally shed his body and take over another. I have no concept of how that is possible.”

Riley led Colton to the couch, waiting for him to sit so she could snuggle in his lap. The events at the cave had her seeking reassurance. Everything Colton said was true. Ashkara was far more powerful than any of them realized. “Sounds like he’s had to discard his body a few times. Do you think he has to take over a blood relative? Deruthel is his son, and we have seen no indication he has any other children.”

“If he did, Deruthel would kill them. The general seeks power and I think he had every intention of betraying his



father. I don't think he knew Ashkara could wipe his mind and take his body. That is a whole new level of scary."

Riley laid her head against Colton's neck. "While he has the ability to take over his son's body, that appears to be a last resort. I am curious how that works myself."

Colton was quiet for some time. "Ashkara said he didn't want to be diminished. I am thinking that his current body has grown and evolved. If he takes over Deruthel's, he is able to transfer his consciousness but not his power. He would be limited to Deruthel's current skills."

"I wonder why," she asked.

"I'm not positive, but I'm thinking it's something to do with the container. You can't place two gallons of water into a one-gallon container. The vessel has to grow in relation to the power within it."

Riley sat up. "That's incredibly intuitive, and it makes sense. If we work with that theory, then it's possible the king would have some skills that Deruthel doesn't. Deruthel may not be using his vessel as you call it to its maximum capacity."

"That's highly likely. This only reinforces our goal to keep the king in his current realm. If he traverses the portal with his current body, we have zero chance of fighting him."

"We will have to fight Deruthel and the demons and that could go either way as it is. If Ashkara took over Deruthel's body there's no telling what powers he would be able to bring with him. While he won't have the enormous power he

currently has, he would be far stronger than Deruthel. We need to cut off his access to this world.”

Colton rubbed his chin. “Deruthel was surprised the king had the power to take his body. He wasn’t happy about it. I think he would betray his king given a chance. Maybe there’s an opportunity to help him.”

“Are you suggesting an alliance with the demons?”

“No. But as you say, we’re fighting Deruthel one way or another. I prefer it to be him rather than Ashkara. We should consider a temporary truce until the portal is permanently closed.”

“How do we propose something like that?” she asked.

Colton’s head fell back, resting on the top of the couch. “I have no idea.” He rubbed his temple.

She leaned toward him. “Are you all right?”

He placed his hands over his eyes. “Just a headache.”

“That’s unusual for you.”

His arms circled her waist, pulling her against his body. His fingers bit into her skin, strong enough to leave a mark. “I just need some time with my mate.”

His lips moved to her neck, and while his touch normally created that fiery burn to which there was no escape; it now left her with a shiver. She couldn’t decide if it were the demons, the king, or just the overall uncertainty, but her body was rigid and her hands were pushed against his chest.

“I want to talk to Dannika. Let’s see if she has any idea what we should do next.”

Colton’s lips moved to her collarbone. “Later. Ferguson will have reported what we saw in the demon cave. We have some time.”

She pushed against his chest, but his arms remained fastened around her. “Let me up, please.”

His gaze met hers. His pupils were like black saucers. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you. I want to talk to Dannika.”

His jaw ticked. “We can’t. She’s in discussions with Raine and Ferguson. They will contact us when they are ready for us to join them. I understand she’s your sister, but she is the queen first.” His arms relaxed around her.

“I understand her obligations,” Riley snapped. It wasn’t that he had said anything rude, or that she didn’t know, but there was an edge to his voice that seemed off. Uncaring. She moved away from him.

He pulled her back to him. “Come on, Riley. Don’t be like that.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Like what?”

“Dannika will do anything for you. If you ask her to drop what she is doing, she will. Keep in mind that the reapers still under her banner, are unhappy she will not lead them into battle.”

Was she being selfish? She couldn't deny what he said was true. Dannika would do anything for her, and she had a precarious hold on the reaper clan. "You think they would turn on Ferguson?"

"Their fear of him is the only thing keeping them in line. Ferguson will never allow Dannika to go into battle, and the reapers see that as a sign of weakness."

"Why would they want to risk her?" she asked.

"It's not about risk. It's about leadership. No man respects another that will order them to do something they will not."

Riley shook her head. "Dannika went to battle. She doesn't back down from anything. It's Raine and Ferguson who are prohibiting her." She took a deep breath. "And honestly, I'm thankful for that."

Colton held his hand out to her, waiting for her to take it. "As am I. Dannika has no fear, and she wouldn't think twice about putting herself in danger. She is too valuable to risk in a demon war."

Riley took his hand, and settled in his lap. "I understand what you're saying. She would drop everything for me. I don't want her to appear to favor me in front of the reapers."

Colton kissed her temple. "I'm glad you understand."

She felt the tenderness in his kiss. "Can we check on my father soon? I would like to know if the herbs are helping him."

"I sent a message to Maverick. He checked on him earlier. He is sleeping right now. Why don't we give him an hour and

then go see him?”

She smiled. “Thank you for thinking of him.” Her arms circled his neck.

This time, his kiss ignited the fire in her blood. Soon their tongues dueled with one another, seeking refuge. She clutched him tighter as he carried her to the bedroom and stood her by the bed.

She leaned against him when he removed his shirt, flinging it to the floor. His eyes flickered with arousal as he pulled her shirt over her head. He could shift their clothes to the shadows, but he enjoyed unwrapping her like a present, and she shivered in anticipation. His fingers caressed her sensitized skin as he lay her on the bed and lay beside her.

His eyes twinkled with black fire, reflecting the desire and need that burned for her alone. His low growl as he ripped the bra from her body so he could lavish attention on her nipples produced a ripple of excitement. A rush of liquid burned in her core. Her chest squeezed, making her gasp for breath. She wasn't afraid he would hurt her; she was afraid she wouldn't get enough of him. He was wild, gorgeous, and sexy. She didn't want a tame shadow shifter. She wanted one with an insatiable appetite. One that hungered for her alone.

His smile was slight, a predator that had ensnared its prey as she pushed his jeans from his hips. She wanted that look forever. The devotion. The desire. The need to consume her and bring her countless pleasures over and over. She knew what he wanted. What he needed and she would fulfill every fantasy. Be the mate and lover he deserved. Time was a

commodity they no longer possessed, but she would spend every second with him.

His head bent to her breast. She arched her back as he sucked her erect nipple into his mouth. Her body heated with each powerful pull of his lips. His other hand pinched her other nipple, applying enough pressure to send a rush of liquid between her legs. She moved restlessly, trying to reach for the ultimate sensation. He took her to the brink, but held her on the apex, not allowing her to surrender.

The desire in his eyes connected with the beast within her. Colton caught her with the intensity of his need, as if his eyes alone could ensnare her for all time. At that moment, she believed they could. He was a god and she, his worshipper. Her skin was sensitive as his eyes roamed her body, claiming every inch as his. He put a hand on her stomach as he moved over her body. Her clothes disappeared as his lust obliterated his patience.

Her breath came in ragged bursts that no longer sustained her. Colton held her on the apex of insanity, her body begging for the pleasure his eyes promised. She moaned when he bent down, kissing her inner thigh. His fingers bit into her skin, holding her in place. A prison she had no intention of escaping.

A tentative nip of her skin had her squeezing her knees against his shoulders. The first lick between her slick folds had her arching off the bed, but his strong hands held her in place. She was his personal buffet, and he was prepared to feast. His tongue flicked and stabbed at the sensitive flesh between her

legs, bringing her closer and closer to the erotic sensation she craved. Her head thrashed against the pillow as he consumed her.

He thrust his fingers inside her as he sucked her hard bud into his mouth. She was riding his fingers, pressing against him with all her strength, yet he kept her on the brink, unable to fall. She gasped when he increased his tempo. His hand worked in tandem with his mouth, creating a firestorm of sensation. He was attuned to her body, playing it like a fine instrument. A maestro of erotic madness.

She came hard, clamping down on his fingers, screaming his name to the heavens. He didn't allow the erotic sensations to end. He knelt over her, fisting his cock at her entrance before he thrust into her. His thick shaft parted the sensitized tissue in a rush. A whirlwind of sensation filled her, her body his slave as he pumped inside her, building the pressure once more.

Black mist rose from their bodies, intertwining in the air above them, a dark erotic dance as powerful and seductive as Colton and Riley themselves. Every molecule, every particle of their souls, wound together, tighter and tighter, a spinning web of desire and destiny. Bonding for all time in the darkest seduction. A dark unity that no being could rip asunder.

Colton grabbed her hips. His fingers bit into her skin, ratcheting up the pain and pleasure. She basked in a fiery thrall as he continued to thrust deeper and deeper into her heated flesh. Every nerve ending was on fire, begging for him to ease the burden. The erotic pain of hovering on that ancient

precipice consumed her. She screamed, feeling like she had broken into a million pieces, a puzzle only he could comprehend.

He growled low in her ear when he came, coating her inner walls with his seed. She closed her eyes, praying this perfect moment wasn't a dream. That the beauty of the moment wouldn't end in a nightmare. One where the king annihilated everything and everyone she loved. They lay together for half an hour. She felt his muscles tense before he rose from the bed. He didn't turn around as his clothes reformed on his body. "Get dressed, Riley. I have a surprise for you." He left the room.

A shiver skated over her skin. Was it anticipation? Fear? She couldn't put her finger on the emotion, but she clothed herself and went to the living room.

Colton stood in front of the large picture window as the branches swayed before him. He held a towel in his hand, but it looked like one from the bathroom.

"What is the surprise?"

He turned so quickly she couldn't react. His hand went to her mouth, covering it with the cloth. She inhaled the strange smell before she met his eyes.

Red pupils stared back at her. The room spun as darkness reached for her. She had found the traitor, and it was her mate.



## CHAPTER 16



Riley inhaled musty air before her fingers clutched the damp earth. Had she fallen? She remembered returning to the cougar clan. To their home. They made love, and she thanked God for giving her the gift of her mate. The one that betrayed her. *No!*

The memories of walking to the living room. Colton had his back to her and a towel in his hand. Red eyes and a smug smile greeted her as the chloroform-soaked towel clamped to her mouth. Then there was darkness. She took several shallow breaths, attempting to calm her stomach and her nerves. Her eyelids fluttered open.

She was in a small rock room. Presuming she was in the abandoned mine, the demons now inhabited, she assumed this was a break-off room, the miners used in case of a cave-in. The roots hung from the ceiling giving the impression it hadn't been used in decades. If the demons thought she was asleep, she might be able to shift to a pathway and escape.

She attempted to connect with her shadow, but there was a disconnect. As if her beast was yet to surface from its slumber. She had assumed they had used chloroform, and it had worked

as such, but this was stronger. Laced with something that affected her shadow far more than any human compound would. She hated that the demons were so far advanced. The shadows struggled to keep up as the demons orchestrated their destruction.

They didn't even hide it. Their confidence was absolute. Probably because they had never failed in an acquisition. World after world had fallen at their hands. Who would have thought that humans would be the next species to go extinct?

She put her hand on the rough surface of the wall. The sharp rock bit into her skin as she got to her feet. She dusted the excess debris from her clothes as she staggered toward the door. Her leg dragged in the dirt as if it wasn't receiving the commands from her brain or was on a two-second delay.

She leaned against the wall as the room blurred. Her body was struggling to purge whatever she had been dosed with. The concept was scary considering how impervious the shadow shifters appeared to be. Her mind attempted to focus on a story Dannika had told her. Or was it Colton? Something about a drug the Bokor had used filtered in her brain and was gone again. *Focus Riley!* She turned, leaning her back on the wall as Deruthel entered.

His eyes blazed red as they roamed over her. "I would like to tell you this is a surprise, but we both know I planned every moment, including your capture."

She huffed, recalling her and Colton's last conversation. She no longer knew what to believe, but she decided to test a theory. "Did you plan for Ashkara to take over your body?"

Because you seemed genuinely shocked when he told you he'd wipe your mind like an old VHS tape and invade your body like a virus. I'm no expert, but that sounds like hell to me."

Deruthel's smug smile fell. "I admit I was unaware of my father's ability to overtake my body permanently. He has always had the ability to borrow the mind of any demon. A transference of consciousness is a gift only a demon god possesses. He was smart to hide his ability from the flock."

"Why would he need to hide his abilities? It doesn't appear that any of you could oppose him?"

"Not now. He has grown beyond my imagining. It is only a matter of time before he takes control of my body. His current form is so enormous it will consume this world faster than I imagined. Even if I can stabilize a large enough portal, he will continue to grow. Whether it is this world or the next, eventually his body will not pass."

Her eyes narrowed. "You realize you're talking about your own death. Why allow it?"

Deruthel's head cocked to the side. "I am trying to answer that question myself."

"You already have everything you need here. If you trap Ashkara in his current realm, then you will be the king going forward."

Deruthel's lips curled over his serrated teeth. "Now you understand. That is exactly how Ashkara came into power. He trapped his father and moved on without him."

"Then he is expecting you to do the same."

“Of course,” he said.

“Why would he tell you? Why supply you with that information?”

Deruthel chuckled. “There is a downside to sharing another’s mind. When he overtakes my mind, I can see into his. Admittedly, I was unaware of his ability to transfer consciousness. He was very careful to keep that from me. He knows he is running out of time in his current incarnation. He plans to acquire this body before moving to the next world. I plan to ensure it stays in the one he’s in.”

“How? Is this something to do with the way you’re controlling Colton?” she asked.

“It’s true I was controlling your shadow mate. He took my blood, and while his body continues to purge it from his system, until every last drop is gone, I have a pathway to his mind.”

Riley swallowed hard. “Did he know? This entire time, that was you?”

Deruthel’s smile was grotesque. “He was unaware until now. Once he brought you to me, there was no need to keep these details from him. I was careful to keep my consciousness receded until he passed the test of your priestess. Now that you’re here, there is a need for such subterfuge.”

“You have access to him since you bit him?”

“Yes. I could’ve brought you here sooner, but I was enjoying our game so much I didn’t want it to end. I know it

will be over once my father arrives, but this latest revelation has altered my plans.”

“I promise we will give you one hell of a fight, but we would prefer you to Ashkara.”

He flashed his teeth. “As would I, and without my father, the resources on this planet will last far longer. We can last hundreds of years without his appetite. Either way, humanity will fall under my thumb, and it’s all thanks to you.”

Riley’s heart stuttered. “Pardon me?”

“Only your blood has allowed for a successful breeder. Albeit your blood creates a stable portal, and I need to ensure that my father does not use that to his advantage.”

She calmed her racing heart. “Why can’t he pass? Is his body the size of an elephant or something? You allowed hundreds of demons to flow in. Not sure I understand the differences?”

Deruthel flicked his gaze toward the tunnels. “His power is beyond human comprehension. Reference to a large beast is grossly inadequate. His body is the size of a small city. His consciousness is that of an unending ocean. It’s easier to pass our entire species through the portal than Ashkara himself.”

“That’s unfathomable,” she whispered.

Deruthel nodded. “His life force is unbreakable and unwavering in his appetite. My only chance of survival is closing the portal for this realm. Only then will I be free.”

“I want this clear. I hate you and I will do everything to defeat you once we go to war, but what you are describing is a

supernova, and that's something we can't fight. What can I do to help you close the portal?"

Deruthel stared at her for a long time. "A supernova would destroy the entire planet at once. In this case, that would be a mercy. Ashkara is more like an atomic bomb. He will blast away at this realm one continent at a time. Trust me, the latter is far more painful."

Riley's mind raced. "That's why he sends you first. You thought it was for your military strategy. To bring over all your resources before he follows, but it's a safety net. If you are here, he always has your body to fall back on."

"The same thought has occurred to me. You are quite intelligent, which will benefit our young."

Her cheeks puffed out as she stayed her rolling stomach. "You can't win the war with humanity unless you're actually leading the army. If you don't close the portal, you will be gone."

Deruthel placed his twisted arms behind his back. He looked like a macabre version of Napoleon. "That is true. I've often wondered what would happen if my father died. Would I gain his power? Would it be lost? Now I seek only to survive."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the lesser of two evils. I'll take you over Ashkara."

Deruthel grunted. "You believe you have a chance against me. You don't, but your species would survive for much longer. This world could sustain us for thousands of years if I

found the conditions appealing enough.” His eyes roamed over her lustfully.

“I’m trying not to puke, so tell me about Ashkara. How long does it take him to consume a world once he passes through the portal?” she asked.

Deruthel took a deep breath. His face held a kind of regret. “The king consumes the humanoid species in under fifty years, forcing us to feed on the Vorla. They, in turn, consume the animal species.”

“That wasn’t my question. How long before the king takes control of this world after he arrives?”

Deruthel’s eyes flickered. “If Ashkara’s current incarnation makes it to this realm, he can enslave the minds of all those within it. So, your answer is a matter of seconds.”

## CHAPTER 17



Riley's mind raced as she contemplated the magnitude of Ashkara's power. Deruthel was genuinely afraid of his father. While he spoke of plans to keep his father from entering the human realm, his eyes held uncertainty. While she had no doubt, he wished to lock the demon king in its current world, she wasn't confident he could. He wasn't confident he could.

What would it take to ensure the general betrayed his father at the risk of his death? Perhaps death would be preferable to what Ashkara would do to his son if he attempted to close the portal. "How old is your father?"

Deruthel's eyes narrowed on her. "There is no one alive who can answer that question, and my father would not be forthcoming with the answer."

"Why?"

"Because I would learn how long it takes to obtain his power. He was born a soldier demon, just as I, but he trapped his father and took his power."

She swallowed dry air. "So, it can be done."



The claws of his feet clicked against the loose rock in the dirt, giving the impression of a timer ticking down. In a way, it seemed like humanity was tied to that bomb and it detonated the moment Ashkara arrived. “It’s possible, and if there’s a way I will find it, but you forget that my father can jump into the consciousness of his subjects, including me.”

Riley pushed herself from the wall, testing her equilibrium. “So, he already knows what you’re planning.”

“Of course. I am a demon and his prodigy. It is my nature to seek power and dominion over my brethren.”

She pursed her lips. “Do you know how Ashkara trapped his father?”

“He would never share that information, but my grandfather did not possess the power of consciousness. According to my father, he is the first and only demon to possess the gift.”

She ran her fingers along the rough rock. “Assuming he’s telling you the truth.”

Deruthel’s lip twitched. “You are highly intelligent and will make an excellent breeder. Of course, I have considered my father is lying to me. He would never admit to anything that would give me an advantage. He has killed my predecessors long before they reached my level of power.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Your predecessor?”

“My father has had many children. Once they reach a certain level of power, he murders them and bears another.”

“Why has he allowed you to live?”

Deruthel's eyes flickered with red fire. "He hasn't. I have killed all my siblings prior to maturity. My father's power is too great to utilize the mind of the fledgling. I ensure my siblings meet a gruesome death prior to their thirtieth year."

She touched her hand to her chest. "You kill your brothers and Ashkara won't kill you until he has an heir mature enough to jump into."

"Yes. I fear my father will risk staying in this world long enough to allow my child to mature."

"Your child?" she asked.

"My position was too precarious to allow my first-generation siblings to live. Only the generation prior to the infection can produce young."

"He can't have children?"

"He is the size of a small state. He can overtake the mind of another to mate, but the bloodline is that of the body he inhabits. He must use my body, my bloodline, to ensure a new vessel."

She allowed that realization to hit her. "You can't keep jumping from world to world. You will eventually have to create a stable ecosystem and live within it."

He pointed a crooked claw at her. "Now you understand. My father's ways are unsustainable. It does not have to be your world, but as my power grows, the ability to move between realms is hindered. We must create a stable ecosystem and stay within that world. I have known for some time, but my father does not agree with this view. My body is not a

renewable resource. I cannot create another vessel that will have the ability to breed.”

“You want to stay here?” she whispered.

Deruthel’s eyes roamed over her. “I admit I am becoming partial to this realm. It wasn’t my original plan to choose this as our permanent destination, but I find it growing on me. Ashkara’s threat has shortened my timeline. I believed I had another world or two before I had to restructure and put down permanent roots.”

“If Ashkara takes over your body, he won’t stop here.”

Deruthel growled. “He won’t stop anywhere. He will move from realm to realm until the first generation is gone and he no longer possesses the ability to breed. He is too old to change and too powerful to accept a diminished version of himself. Even if he wipes my mind and takes my body, he will seek to replace what he has lost and this is his last vessel.”

“I’d ask for some way we could coexist, but you can’t survive on anything but human blood and you would never go back to feeding on the vorla.”

“You are correct. I have consumed everything in your world, from chicken blood to deer. Nothing sustains us and the vorla taste like you are consuming dirt.”

“So they pretty much taste like they look,” she said.

Deruthel chuckled. “That is accurate. It’s hard to believe they once ruled the demon species.”

“How was that possible?”

“The vorla you see are all under five years of age. Children by our standards. When they grow to a certain maturity, they have the ability to invade a host body and control it. They controlled a king many eons ago and were never allowed to mature to their full potential again.”

“They can transfer their consciousness? Similar to Ashkara.”

“No. They do not transfer their consciousness. They enter the body and tap into the brainstem, effectively controlling the host from within. The tentacles used to usurp a body do not form until a vorla reaches ten years of age.”

“But they breed like rats?”

“That is their greatest gift. Their reproductive organs mature at two years of age, but their cognitive abilities are far slower and their lifespan is half what yours is.”

“How did the demons overthrow them when they took over?” Part of her was aghast at her interest in the demon’s history, but in a way, it was her history. Her demon soul hungered for the knowledge of its past. She would tell herself that knowledge is power, and she was looking for a means to save humanity, but curiosity was in her nature and she couldn’t leave it all on her demon.

“They didn’t. The elderly vorla died, and the king resumed control of his body. He annihilated the vorla for their insurrection and no vorla has lived past the age of seven since. They are aware of their expiry date and attempt to avoid us once they reach the age of annihilation, but every demon,

whether jackal or soldier, knows their history. And no demon can deny their appetite regardless of species.”

Deruthel moved toward her. It was all she could do not to back away as he ran a claw carefully over her cheek. He was almost reverent in his caress. While the tip scratched her skin, he didn't draw blood. “I could come to enjoy this world with the right queen.”

Her conscience warred with her next words. “That depends on who's in control doesn't it?”

His claws clicked together as he made a fist. “I will be in control. Your shadow mate and his friends do not stand a chance against me.”

“I wasn't talking about the shadow clans. You have admitted that Ashkara is more powerful than you. I admit it's an attractive trait. Obviously, my chosen mate was weak. It appears I will need an upgrade.”

Deruthel growled, but it wasn't in anger. Lust maybe? “Spoken like a true female. Of course, you seek power. As you should. I am the best choice, and we could rule this world together. You can be my first... wife.”

Riley swallowed the bile at the back of her throat. “There's no point in you promising me the world when you can't guarantee you will be here at the end of the day. Ashkara can wipe your mind like a baby's backside. No offense, but that doesn't scream ‘leader’ to me.”

Deruthel hissed. “My father has taken advantage of my military strategy for hundreds of years. He needs my body

because it is the only one powerful enough to hold his consciousness. Even if he diminishes himself. The cat-and-mouse game we have played has come to an end. One way or another, our familiar partnership must stop.”

“I agree, but tell me how you plan to block him from your mind,” she asked.

“No demon can block my father while the portal remains open.”

She shrugged. “Then I guess I’ll be Ashkara’s bride before this is over.”

## CHAPTER 18



Riley backed away from Deruthel as his eyes flashed.  
“You are angry.”

His lips curled. “My father continues to benefit from my expertise. He has lost touch with the strategy involved in successfully seeding a world and orchestrating its demise before stepping foot in that realm. He has lost touch with the realities of our situation. Of the restructuring that is necessary to ensure our species’ survival.”

Riley wet her lips. “I don’t disagree with what you are saying. If you think about the big picture, eventually you will run out of worlds. It makes sense to establish yourself and create a sustainable ecosystem.”

“Yes. While not necessarily in this world, it must be done in the next thousand years. I have enjoyed conquering worlds and hoped to have a few more invasions before I was forced to settle. My father has put an end to that. I must stop him soon.”

“If you can’t control the horde...”

“I can control my subjects as easily as I controlled Breck and Colton. I possess the same power as my father, it’s the reason he kept me alive, but I am limited to a handful of minds

and can only control one at a time. Ashkara can control dozens at one time.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “That’s why Colton seemed to pass the priestess’ test. You weren’t in his mind.”

“I was very careful to limit my interactions with him until he brought you here. I was unsure if my control would be detected by the priestess. I only took control to murder the clan members and retrieve yours and Dannika’s blood.”

“Raine had no idea?”

“No. Colton stole the blood from the healer. The wolf clan is likely accusing Karam of treason. He took your blood himself and told you it was for Karam.”

“Why kill the clan members?” she asked.

“The first was a test. Ashkara wanted to ensure we had complete control but would leave no trace of our presence.”

“You wanted the priestess to test Colton.”

“I did,” he said.

Her heart raced. “Why did you kill Oliver?”

“That cougar was suspicious of Colton. I am not sure why he suspected Colton was being influenced. But he sent a message to meet. I killed him while you slept.”

“When did you kill Aaron? His blood was at the portal...”

“That’s right. Colton killed him while you were with Ferguson and then ran to Dannika. Colton went to sleep in the pathway and awoke in Dannika’s chambers. He had no idea we took a detour.”



“You took over when he wouldn’t notice the time had passed.”

Deruthel’s lip twitched. His excitement flickered in his eyes. “Yes, I was quite careful until your arrival. He now remembers his own reaper blade removing his friend’s head.”

She coughed as bile rose in her throat. Colton would be gutted knowing he killed Oliver. It wasn’t his fault. They knew Deruthel had control of Breck, but that had seemed more like an addiction. “Your control of Breck and Colton seems different.”

His lip curled back. “It’s quite different. Breck is addicted to my blood. It creates a high in those who consume it willingly and boosts their strength. Colton was infected with my venom. Ashkara has control over my mind, which means he has control over Colton’s mind. That control remains unless Ashkara is banished from this world permanently.”

Her eyes widened. “You would lose control of Colton?”

“I don’t need him once the king is banished. All will fall eventually. I will simply kill him to ensure you become my bride.”

She took a deep breath of stale air. “If there is a way to banish Ashkara, I will help you.”

Deruthel motioned to a demon standing outside the entrance of the room. The jackal nodded and scurried away. “I told you the truth about Ashkara as an incentive. You believe you have a chance to save your species if the king is trapped in his current realm. That is not the case, but I will accept your

help. Your mate will be freed, but you should consider the consequences of his actions. He is broken. The man he was lost forever.”

“I don’t believe that, but I will help you to free him and save humanity.”

Deruthel snorted. “Humanity will be enslaved and culled to a manageable capacity. Breeding of both human and demon couples will be regulated.”

“What?”

“A stable ecosystem requires a static number of predators and prey. The vorla will feed on the animal population. The jackals on the vorla and the soldiers will feed on the humans. I will maintain an acceptable balance to ensure our growth doesn’t exceed sustainable limits.”

Riley couldn’t decide which was worse. The emotionless way Deruthel described his grotesque monarchy or the fact that she had to admit it would work. The demon general would turn the human world into a farm. One that was strictly regulated and optimized for maximum output of resources. “That sounds horrible.”

“It will be for you. Of course you will be busy caring for our young.”

She put her hand over her mouth. “I feel nauseous.” While her stomach churned, it was nothing compared to the gut-wrenching pain when two jackals dragged Colton into the room.

His face was barely recognizable. He was beaten so badly that the swelling had one eye completely shut. Bruises marred every inch of exposed skin. His shirt had disintegrated from his body and bruises were nothing compared to the claw marks and deep gouges that marred his flesh. She was pretty sure he was unconscious as his head lolled on his neck and his boots left marks in the dirt as he was pulled between the men.

“What did you do to him?”

“He killed five of my men before he was confined. Ashkara was not available to control him, so I was forced to subdue him.”

“The king is not always here, then?” she asked.

“No, he will be with us soon. I suggest you keep our conversation between us. I will block that section of my memory from him. If you betray me, I will kill Colton while you watch.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want the king here any more than you do. While I understand there will be a war between our species, I will take my chances with you. I don’t know how that mind block thing works, but make sure you don’t screw up.”

Deruthel nodded. “I have been hiding a portion of my mind for centuries. I will not allow my father access now.” He turned as Colton’s head rose. “My father is accessing his mind.”

“How do you know?”

“Colton is unconscious. It makes it easier for my father to control his body.”

The jackals released Colton as he got to his feet. While his eyes glowed a brilliant red, brighter than when he had dosed her with chloroform, it was the aura of power that surrounded him that made her press against the wall.

There was no escape. Ashkara’s power rolled off Colton’s body in rippling waves. All traces of his earlier subterfuge were gone. He stared at her with open lust. A hunger that defied description.

“Riley, I have longed for this moment.” His voice echoed as if he were in a tomb. The tone was similar to Colton’s but with the malevolent undertone of another.

“Can’t say I feel the same. Release Colton. His power is nothing compared to yours.”

Ashkara cracked Colton’s neck to one side. “That is true. It is uncomfortable to confine myself in such a tiny and unevolved vessel, but the shadow has served his purpose.”

“Then leave him alone.”

The king chuckled. At least she assumed that’s what he was doing. The grating sound scorched her ears like nails on a chalkboard. She was pretty sure a few more seconds of Ashkara’s laughter would result in permanent hearing loss. “I have many tasks to complete before my departure. I will release your chosen mate, but only so you can see I have broken him.”

“Why do this to him? We are simply resources to you.”

Colton put his hands behind his back, making him appear like a black and blue prince. “That is true. Most of the individuals in your realm are of little consequence, but you and your sister are the exceptions. I had to break him, so I can break you. I need you and your twin alive.”

“For breeders,” she hissed.

“That and a stable portal. My current incarnation is larger than you are used to, but I will keep this body for breeding purposes.”

Riley had no desire to know what that meant. “Whatever. I would rather die than help you.”

Colton’s eyes flickered with red. “I’m sure that is true. You will not have a choice, however.” He glanced at Deruthel. “Get her ready. I have other matters to attend to.”

Deruthel nodded. “As you wish, my king.”

Colton dropped to the floor as if he had been knocked unconscious. Riley rushed to his side.

“Is he okay?”

Deruthel nodded. “He is still unconscious. Ashkara has returned to his current realm.”

She put her hand over Colton’s bruised chest. “How do you stabilize the portal? More importantly, how do you close it permanently?”

## CHAPTER 19



Riley put her fingers to Colton's neck. She felt the strong beat of his heart, yet his wounds were slow to heal. She glanced up at the demon general when he didn't answer. "You have been forthcoming about your entire operation. Why hold back now?"

Deruthel's eyes roamed over Colton. He looked lost in thought. She realized he wasn't holding back. Deruthel never made a move without a strategy in place, and everything he had told her served a purpose. "There is only one way to create a portal stable enough to ensure Ashkara's transition to this world. His hesitancy to do so is due to you."

"Me? Why?"

"A mate bond is much more powerful than we anticipated. We need both yours and Colton's blood to stabilize the portal. Due to Ashkara's size, it is unclear whether we would need to kill you. Both he and I are hesitant to do this as Dannika's blood has proved unstable thus far and recent tests would not even spark the portal, let alone open it."

She sucked in a breath. "There is something wrong with Dannika. She is sick, isn't she?"

“That has been our assumption as well, but we are unaware of any disease that afflicts the shadows.”

“Colton didn’t know either.”

“I am aware. This uncertainty is the sole reason Ashkara remains in his current realm. Killing you would be disastrous if we can’t create stable breeders first. My father is powerless without his subjects. Without a stable breeding force, our species will follow yours into extinction.”

“You want to save your species. That is understandable, but you were on the road to extinction when your females died. It was only a matter of time before you lacked the ability to convert the female inhabitants.”

Deruthel turned away from her. “I can no longer count the number of times I had this discussion with my father. I wished to set limitations on the three previous worlds. To ensure the resources lasted longer, but he would not listen. He feeds on his soldier demons while they pray for my victory. I will have their confidence when this war is over. If I don’t stop my father. Our species is lost.”

Colton groaned, bringing her attention back to him. His swollen eye was red and bleeding, but she could see evidence it was healing. A few patches of skin had returned to his natural tanned color, though most remained various shades of dark blue.

She pursed her lips. “If mine and Colton’s blood can stabilize the portal, then can we also close it?”

“It isn’t just your blood. To create a portal of that size required a betrayal of blood. The portal was created with dark magic. That same power feeds it. He has always held the power, but none of you saw it.”

“What are you talking about?”

Deruthel pointed to Colton’s body. “It’s him. It’s always been him. He represents everything. Your love. Your mate. Your future. And ultimately, your nemesis.”

“No, he will never be that. Even if Ashkara controls him while he kills me. It will never be Colton.”

“He would have to make the sacrifice willingly,” Deruthel said.

Her skin chilled as if ice ran through her veins. “What sacrifice?”

Deruthel’s lip quivered in anticipation. “He will tell you. He already knows the truth.”

She cradled Colton’s head in her hands as his eyes fluttered open and he groaned. His eyes traced the room, and she could see the confusion. His eyes met hers as the realization hit him. She could almost see the events play back in his mind. The sound that escaped his mouth was that of a wounded animal. He wasn’t mad or angry. He was destroyed.

“I killed Oliver,” he whispered.

“It wasn’t you. It was Ashkara. He was controlling you,” she said.



“I should have been able to stop it. I receded to the background and watched him use my own blade to sever Oliver’s head. You didn’t see his face. The betrayal. The shock. He assumed I had traces of demon venom left in my system, and he wanted to speak privately. He didn’t want to cause me any embarrassment. His loyalty cost him his life.”

She caressed his cheek. “I know, but we have a chance to trap Ashkara in his current realm. Tell me how to close the portal permanently. Deruthel says you know a way,” she said.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I was forced to watch while the king... handled you. He wanted to be in my body when I was with you, but he was forced to leave.”

Deruthel stepped forward. “What called him away?”

Colton shook his head. “He seemed weak. I don’t know why. He returned when I was asleep. I didn’t realize what was happening until after I woke here.”

Deruthel began to pace the small room. “I have often wondered what happens to the king when he is left with only the females and the pawns.”

“Pawns?” Riley asked.

Colton huffed. “The demons created in a new world. The ones that are left behind. Only the first generation is of any use to them.”

“Right. What about closing the portal? How do we do that?” she asked.

Colton took a ragged breath. “Our blood. Our mate bond and my betrayal are what will feed the portal. It’s the only way

to make it big enough for Ashkara to come through,” Colton said.

“I know that. How do we close it?”

Colton touched her cheek. “I am the betrayer. I have to sacrifice myself at the portal to close it permanently.”

“Why you? Why not me?”

Deruthel growled. “No.”

Colton shook his head. “I made a deal with the Bokor. He said there would be a price. He used my blood to start this process. Ashkara had a pact with him.”

Deruthel hissed. “Your blood was used? That can’t be true. It was the queen. She...”

Colton’s eyes flickered with black. “Hakim opened a fissure before Dannika. It was small and only allowed communion with Ashkara. No demons were permitted to enter.”

Deruthel growled. “The Bokor deceived me.”

“At Ashkara’s insistence,” Colton said.

Deruthel’s red eyes zeroed in on Colton. “How did you learn of my father’s treachery?”

Colton shook his head. “I’m not sure. When he was in my mind this last time, he didn’t leave the wards in my mind like he had in the past.”

Deruthel’s claws clicked together in excitement. “That means he is weakening. It is time to end my father’s reign.”

“He knows you are plotting against him,” Colton said.

“Of course, he does. It was inevitable,” Deruthel said.

Riley ran her hand over Colton’s cheek. “I don’t want to lose you. There is no purpose to this life without you.” She knew in her soul that she wouldn’t survive without him. Her heart would beat. Her body would move, but there would be no joy left to appreciate.

Colton’s eyes squeezed shut before he opened them. “You don’t understand what I have done. It wasn’t just Aaron and Oliver. I stole your sash and planted it at the portal site. I set you up and then defended you. I have turned the clan against you, including my father. I left you with nothing.”

She shook her head. “That isn’t true. We can fix it. We can explain what happened.”

Colton’s hand moved over hers. He held her to him as if she were the only sanctuary left to him. “I have to die. Deruthel is a bastard, but he doesn’t possess one-tenth of Ashkara’s power. Humanity has a small chance against Deruthel. They have no chance against Ashkara. There are no words to describe what he has become.”

She glanced at Deruthel. “He can take Deruthel’s body. That’s his contingency plan.”

Colton nodded. “He can’t wipe it. He can swap with Deruthel. But if he does that, then Deruthel gets his power in the current realm and he is stuck with Deruthel’s body and its current restrictions. He would have no more power than Deruthel.”

Deruthel growled. “He failed to mention I would be left to die in a barren world.” His eyes widened. “Ashkara is insatiable. How many soldiers are left in the realm he inhabits?”

Colton shook his head. “I didn’t see him feed or interact with anyone while he was with me. Why would you ask that?”

Deruthel smiled. “There is only one thing that weakens the king. That’s a lack of blood. He has consumed the remaining pawns and females in our previous home world. He will expect a stable portal one way or another soon. We must stop him.”

Riley put a hand to her mouth. “He killed the women, too?”

“Ashkara’s appetite knows no bounds. He will consume everything until the very plant life withers around him. He has evolved beyond your ability to imagine. He is a god by your standards.”

Deruthel knelt down. “It’s time to save your world, shadow. It’s time for you to die.”

## CHAPTER 20



Riley held her hand out, warning Deruthel to stay back. “I won’t let you kill him. There has to be another way.”

Deruthel’s leather-like skin folded above his eyebrows as he arched them. “Ask him how he created a stable portal. There are three bloodlines used. Only sacrificing one of those three will close it permanently. And only if the circle of betrayal is complete.”

She glanced back at Colton. “How did you create the portal?”

He took a ragged breath. “It was a combination of yours, Dannika’s, and my blood. I was the only person that could have gotten all three. Because you and Dannika trusted me.”

She put her hand to his face. “We still trust you. This wasn’t you. This was Ashkara. Don’t attempt to take responsibility for his actions. You will find another way.”

Colton gripped her arm. “I saw inside Ashkara’s mind. You can’t fathom the destruction and hunger that lives within that monster. He’s a vortex of annihilation. There is no fighting that.”

“I’m not suggesting we allow him to come here. We make a temporary truce with Deruthel and close the portal. Deruthel wants a war. He craves it. Since, this is his last one, we should make it worth his while.”

Deruthel chuckled, but the sound was grating. “You believe you have a chance. Your faith is misplaced, but I admit it will make victory that much sweeter. You are however correct in your assessment. Once my father is imprisoned in his current world, I do not wish this one to fall too quickly.”

She narrowed her gaze on the Demon general. “So you agree not to kill Colton?”

“If I kill him, the portal will not close.”

Her heart stuttered. “What are you saying?”

“For the circle to be complete, you must kill the betrayer.”

Riley hissed. “I will never kill Colton.”

Deruthel’s knobby shoulders moved in what she interpreted as a shrug. “Then my father will win.”

Riley glanced between Deruthel and Colton. It was clear they were in agreement on what should happen. “I will find another way.”

Deruthel’s claws clicked together. She thought it strange that she was coming to understand the general’s idiosyncrasies. He was thinking. Using that enormously intelligent multidimensional brain. She had no doubt he was looking for a way that ensured she killed Colton and closed the portal. How was she supposed to outsmart a being with hundreds of years more experience than her?

“I’d like to make an informed decision.”

“I have answered all your questions. I have no intention of being dishonest,” Deruthel said.

“That’s my first question. Why? You have answered every question, but why be honest with me?” she asked.

Deruthel blinked. The black pupils seemed to saucer out as if he were perplexed by her question. “Why would I lie? Do you think I doubt my abilities? I have never failed and I will not now. So the answer to your question is because I don’t have to. I don’t step foot in a new world until my victory is assured.”

“You haven’t won yet, so how can you say victory is assured?”

“Think of it as a recipe. Once all the ingredients are ready, you simply put them together. You follow a series of steps and the outcome is assured.”

Riley had to admire his intelligence. His analogies were always relevant to this world. His arrogance was perhaps his only flaw, though he had earned it. If they were going to have any chance against him, they needed to feed that arrogance. “I’m not gonna lie. I know we have little chance against you now that you have your entire army here. But if blocking Ashkara gives us a snowball’s chance in hell, then I will take it.”

Deruthel’s lip quivered. He wanted that war, and he wanted control. “If there is a way to save your mate and close

the portal, I will take it, provided you help me. There is one stipulation, though.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Provided I do not kill your mate, you need to become my bride when he is dead,” Deruthel said.

Riley swallowed the acid at the back of her throat. She would make this deal knowing that if Colton left this world, she’d be following him. “I agree to your terms, but I will never kill him.”

“You may change your mind when you understand the full extent of Askara’s power. Colton will beg you to kill him when the choice has been ripped from you. His death or the death of every living thing on this planet. That is the choice you will have to make.”

“I agree to help you imprison Ashkara. Then the truce is over,” she said.

“Agreed,” Deruthel said. “How do you propose closing the portal without Colton’s death?”

“You used three blood types. I can get all three again.”

“A death is required to close this portal permanently,” Deruthel said.

Riley’s mind raced over the information she had on the portal. “It’s been opened for years. By Hakim. By Dannika. By my human and shadow blood. Combinations of mine, Dannika’s and Colton’s.”

“That is correct,” Deruthel said.



“Any other bloodlines?”

Deruthel shook his head. “You and Dannika are descendants of the first priestess. The Bokor is a descendant of the one who opened the first portal.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “I didn’t realize that Hakim was a descendent of the first Bokor.”

“The Haitian people have predictable ethics. We knew they would deny his claim to save his daughter. Manipulating sociological infrastructure is my specialty.”

She blinked, trying to grasp his meaning.

Colton growled. “You poisoned Lorette. Did she even have cancer?”

Deruthel grinned. “She did, but Ashkara used his powers centuries before to ensure that the Bokor’s line was riddled with disease. I believe he has discovered our interference in his bloodline, now that he has passed on. He refuses the king’s commands, and it takes some power to deny Ashkara.”

Riley put her hand to her head. “You prepared for everything. Bloodlines. Means to find a traitor. You create every scenario you need.”

Deruthel nodded. “Of course. This has been our way for eons, but we must adapt. Our traversing of worlds must come to an end. Whether we stop here or devastate your realm and try another is up to you.”

Riley huffed. “With you ruling in a dictatorship, I don’t think it really matters.”

Deruthel knelt down. His insect-like legs crouching at an unnatural angle. She had no idea how those spindly legs supported his thick torso. “Because as long as the human species survives, there is always that glimmer of hope. I will never completely squash it because the possibility of insurrection is too appetizing. You will never win but you will continue to try, and that will be... entertaining.”

What he described was a nightmare, but in a way, he was right. As long as people survived, there was always a chance that they could one day rise up. Still, Deruthel had been honest with her. He had said the shadows were an unforeseen anomaly, and although they had dealt with unforeseen events in the past, she had to believe the shadows were stronger than the demons gave them credit for. “You’ve explained that you have similar abilities to the king, but his are far more evolved. Does Ashkara have any weaknesses? Anything we can exploit.”

Deruthel stood. “Normally I would say no. But Colton’s information has been most enlightening. I believe he has consumed the resources in our former world. He weakens.”

“Can it kill him? How long before he dies of starvation?” Riley asked.

“Ashkara is the most powerful demon to exist. He’s evolved beyond that of any before him. I am not sure starvation is possible. If it is, it will take centuries. He can put his mind and body into stasis.”

“Are there other inter-dimensional travelers?” she asked.

“We have not come across any, but it is unrealistic to think we are the only ones. Why do you ask?”

“It’s kind of a scary prospect to just leave him sleeping in your realm. I agree that it’s only a matter of time before someone or something comes across him.”

“It’s likely, but it won’t be something this world has to deal with. If we close the portal permanently, this is the only world he won’t be able to traverse.”

“You didn’t close the portal on previous worlds?”

“We closed them, but not a permanent severing. The last permanent closure was when Ashkara trapped his father. Or so I am told,” Deruthel said.

Her eyes narrowed on the demon. “If you allow yourself to evolve as your father has; eventually, you will suffer the same fate.”

Deruthel put his hands behind his back. “I am aware of the restrictions I must place on myself. But being left alone to starve is an excellent motivator. It is not an existence I wish to explore. I will not allow such an evolution to occur.”

Riley stared at him and though he spoke the truth, she had to wonder if Ashkara had similar reasoning when he was no stronger than Deruthel. Delusions of grandeur were a part of a demon’s DNA. They were leopards that couldn’t change their spots. Despite the general’s claims, he couldn’t alter his own ambitions or his evolution. It would be like telling a human they couldn’t age. Learn. Grow. They had to defeat the demons, or they were dead. There would be no later

insurrection. It was now or death. “I believe you when you say you will attempt to put those restrictions in place.” She didn’t add she thought he wouldn’t be able to stick to his own plan this time.

Colton moved to his hands and knees, pushing himself from the dirt floor. His wounds had closed and some of his skin had returned to its natural color. He was regaining his strength, but he had a long way to go. “Are you feeling better?”

He dusted the rocks from his pants. “I know you think you can trust Deruthel, but you can’t. Even his father is wary of his skill. He has survived because Ashkara hasn’t found a replacement for his mind. Deruthel is the only suitable container.”

Deruthel nodded. “I have killed all my siblings to ensure it stays that way.”

Riley slipped her hand around his waist. “Yeah, he told me. This is one of those the devil you know type of deals. He is the lesser of two evils, but not by much.”

They all turned to Deruthel when the ground shook.

Riley clutched her chest. “Why is a portal opening? Who is doing it?”

Deruthel turned. “There was no ritual performed.”

“Then how is it happening?”

Deruthel’s eyes flickered red. “Ashkara has taken control.”

## CHAPTER 21



Riley and Colton followed Deruthel through the tunnel to the main cavern in the middle. One wall was glowing orange and cracks formed in the rock like orange spiderwebs. Halak stood with the demon caller in his hand and his head turned toward the fissure.

The lone surviving female nuzzled his legs and pawed at his thighs with her claws.

“Halak opened the portal?” Riley asked.

Deruthel’s claws fisted at his sides. “Not Halak. Ashkara is controlling him. Halak would not have orchestrated this stupidity. It is a gross waste of resources.”

Colton and Riley glanced at one another. This was the first sign of derision in the demon clan. She studied Halak and Deruthel, looking for anything that could help her save Colton. Humanity. “I’m not sure what you mean. I thought you had what you needed.”

The demon general pointed to the portal as the rock dropped away and the first demon emerged from the portal. He was smaller. A jackal, but he looked different from those that had traversed before him. His skin was red and his horns were

smaller. He looked somewhat sickly with the clear ooze running from his nostril. “Apparently, my father wants more foot soldiers. These are a waste of resources. They are sterile and lack the strength of the first generation. They will fall like blades of grass before the shadows. Feeding them will corrupt the balance needed to maintain this world.”

Riley stared at Halak. He appeared frozen and oblivious to his surroundings. “Why would he do this?”

“There is only one reason to waste resources. My father is scared.”

“You thought he had consumed the creatures of your realm. You were wrong,” she said.

“He has consumed the soldiers. These jackals are sickly and a later generation of offspring from the females of our previous home world. Had he sent a few females to appease the soldier’s needs, I would have understood his actions. He has sent only that which he can no longer feed on. The females and soldiers are dead. These are weak, sterile children by our standards.”

“How many of these children are there?”

“Hundreds more. We must close this portal before Ashkara corrupts this ecosystem beyond my ability to maintain.”

“I don’t understand why he did this now,” she whispered.

Deruthel turned to her. “That I understand. He is sending additional forces now because the severing is imminent. One way or another, Ashkara knows these worlds will be cut off

from one another. The portal must be closed before a permanent severing.”

“You said you don’t need to do that... unless.”

“My father is planning for my rebellion. With him there and me here, I can control several higher demons, but he can control dozens.”

“But he can control you, can’t he?”

“I would have said yes, but he has sent weak reinforcements, so I think he has weakened beyond his ability to enter my mind.”

“If you lock him out, then he will be trapped where he is.”

“Yes. It seems my father’s reign is about to end. We must close the portal and prepare for a severing,” Deruthel said.

“Can’t we try to sever the realms while closing the portal?” she asked.

“No. The portal must be closed and... cooled. I believe one of the reasons Ashkara opened this portal was to force me to wait. Sacrificing Colton now would not work. We must wait a few hours before we attempt to sever our worlds.”

“Dammit. This wasn’t about reinforcements then. It was buying time, so you couldn’t sever the worlds.”

Deruthel’s glowing eyes narrowed on her. “If that is his sole reason for sending these weaklings, then his position is far more precarious than I thought.”

“Let’s hope. How do we close the portal?” she asked.

Deruthel made a series of chuffing noises. Breck approached them. His eyes were wary as they roamed over Riley and Colton. “Yes, my lord.”

Deruthel pointed to an adjacent tunnel. “It’s time for my father’s reign to end. Retrieve our guest.”

Breck nodded and ran down the tunnel Deruthel had pointed to.

“I hope you’re not planning to sacrifice a...”

The woman at Halak’s feet screamed. She fell to her back, kicking and clawing at the ground as her skin began to dissolve. The screeching sounds turned to gurgling as black blood bubbled from her mouth.

Halak stared on, oblivious to the macabre events befalling the woman at his feet

Deruthel hissed. “She was our only prospect. I don’t understand why the breeders are failing.” He touched his claw to his head and focused on Halak.

Halak grunted and grabbed his head with both hands, staggering away from the portal. “Stop.”

He shook his head and approached Deruthel. “The king is desperate. He is bringing over the sicklings, so you can’t sever the worlds. He fears your power. His body is too large to pass. He has consumed all that can sustain him in the fallen world.”

Deruthel smiled. “He can no longer overtake my body. We must sever the worlds before he brings over more weaklings. He is using them as a stall tactic. His fear is unbecoming a king.”



Halak nodded, but there was real fear in his eyes. “You are unwise to take on the king. You are the most powerful besides Ashkara, but do not underestimate him.”

“I never underestimate my father,” Deruthel said. “Tell me why the breeders are failing. Our species will fall without breeders.”

Halak glanced at Riley. “We have been forced to breed the first generation to the female inhabitants once before.”

Deruthel growled. “Only Dannika and Riley are viable breeders for us.”

Halak nodded. “We have been trying to create demon women. I suggest we create shadow women. If we create twenty to thirty, their female offspring will create a stable breeding pool.”

Colton growled. “That will not happen.”

Deruthel held up one hand. “I have made a temporary truce with Riley. We will focus on my father’s banishment and then we will proceed with our original plan... with some modifications.”

Halak’s eyes narrowed. “We never deviate from our plans.”

“Our ability to infect other realms is coming to an end. We must create a sustainable ecosystem in this or a nearby world.”

Halak nodded. “Ashkara has come to the same conclusion.”

Deruthel growled. “He would never diminish himself willingly.”

“He has no choice. He has outgrown the ability to pass. I believe he arrived at the same conclusion as you, but there is only one vessel strong enough to absorb his mind.”

“I am aware he seeks to overtake my consciousness, but he would lose much of his power.”

Halak nodded. “With you gone, there is no one to oppose him if he restructures this world to a sustainable ecosystem.”

Deruthel glanced around the cavern. “He gained access to the locked section of my mind. He has seen the blueprint I wish to create.”

Halak nodded. “Whatever you plan to do. You are running out of time. I am second to you in power. Claiming my mind to force this portal opening has weakened him temporarily.”

Deruthel nodded approvingly. “You fought him.”

“The sicklings are a waste of resources. We will need to kill them before they feed.”

Deruthel turned toward Breck as he escorted a whimpering teenager from the tunnel. Her hands were bound and her long, dark hair was matted to her forehead. “Please don’t hurt me,” she wailed as her wild eyes darted to Riley and Colton. She pleaded for help from the only two beings in the room who looked human.

Breck stopped and dropped the girl at Deruthel’s feet. “Do you wish me to retrieve the serum?”

Deruthel touched the girl's hair with one claw. "The females of this world are weak, but they hold a certain appeal. This one must be sacrificed to close the portal. I need virgin blood."

The girl wailed and bowed down, covering her head with her hands.

Riley stepped up to Deruthel. "She can't sever the worlds. Why kill her?"

"I require female blood and death to close what Ashkara started."

Riley moved to stand in front of Halak. She put her hand on the demon caller in his arms. "Allow me. I can close the portal provided you sacrifice a sickling. I have female priestess blood."

Halak smiled. "That will suffice to close this portal."

"Halak give her the chalice."

Riley took the demon caller from his hands and followed Deruthel to the side of the portal. "I need a knife."

Deruthel unsheathed one claw and sliced her wrist. She growled, but realized he had allowed no venom to enter the wound. It was shallow, and she bled into the bowl for only a few seconds. "Is that enough of my blood?"

Deruthel nodded, then grabbed a demon, exiting the portal. He beheaded the startled jackal and leaned the severed neck over the bowl. Riley turned her head as it filled. "That is enough. Close the portal using the ritual."

Riley dipped her hand in the bowl and then slapped her hand to the wall. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin. Anum secrata.”

She waited as the ground shook and the exiting demons began to surge and wail.

Deruthel glanced at the wall. Fewer shards of rock fell from the opening until it became static. “Say it again.”

She raised her voice. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin. Anum secrata.” She clutched the chalice as the ground rolled beneath them. “Is it working?”

Deruthel pointed to the opening. A ripple that looked like clear water, rolled over the opening. Shards of rock reformed, piece by piece as the portal churned and fought to restore the doorway created.

The sickly demons swarmed the entrance, but in seconds they could no longer pass. They screeched as the orange glow diminished and their screams were silenced.

Riley’s shoulders sagged in relief. “I told you we didn’t need to sacrifice the girl.”

Deruthel nodded. “It was a hasty decision. We will use her to try to sever the worlds instead.”

She sucked in a breath. “Wait. What?”

“If you won’t sacrifice your mate. You must try to sever the worlds by sacrificing a virgin. It may not work, but as you humans say. It is worth a try.”

## CHAPTER 22



Riley stepped in front of Colton when he growled. “Wait. There has to be another way.”

Halak bent down and grabbed the teenager by the hair and dragged her against him. “One way or another, the portal needs to be severed between worlds.”

Riley met the gaze of the terrified teen. Mascara and tears streaked down her face. “She is human. Would my blood have closed the portal when I was human?”

Halak flicked a glance at the demon general. “I don’t believe the girl’s blood will sever the ties to our former realm. It could be a waste of resources to sacrifice her. She has a tie to the Haitian village.”

Deruthel glanced at the weeping teen. “That’s why I chose her, but her being human raises a concern. The demon breeders are not working out as we planned, but I kept Breck for a reason.”

Halak glanced at the reaper. “Why? What can he do for us?”

Deruthel motioned to the girl. “Breck, why don’t you show Halak, why I saved you.”

Riley and Colton shared an uneasy glance. Neither of them could fathom a reason the general would keep a reaper other than his ownership of Hakim’s properties.

Breck went to the girl. “Shh. What is your name?” he asked in a reassuring tone.

The girl took several ragged breaths. “Tara. Please don’t kill me.”

Breck smiled at her, exposing his fangs. “I’m not going to kill you, Tara. You are very important to us.”

“Why...” she stammered.

“Deruthel needs something from you,” Breck said.

Tara glanced at the general. “I don’t have anything.”

Breck’s eyes flickered with red. “You do... or you will.” He bit into her neck as she screamed.

Colton rushed at Breck, but several demons grabbed him, holding him in place. “Breck, you prick. I will kill you slowly. I swear to God, you will suffer.”

Breck released the girl, dropping her to the ground. “I didn’t kill her. Deruthel needs breeders, and since the demon ones are not panning out, we will create more female shadows.”

Riley turned to Deruthel. “You planned for this. You saved Breck in case you needed a leashed reaper to bite the women.”

Deruthel met her angry gaze. “I had hoped to find a solution to the demon breeders, but you and Dannika proved that the shadows can transition women successfully. You and your sister are breedable for us. The humans are not viable in their current state. With twenty or so shadow females we can establish the next generation. He glanced at the sicklings, huddling in the corner of the room. “Those things are not sustainable. Kill them.”

The soldier demons descended on the sicklings in force as Tara rolled on the ground, screeching from the pain. The cave turned to complete chaos as demon fought demon.

Colton was released as his captors joined the squad, intent on relieving the sicklings of their lives. Several darted down the tunnels with soldier demons chasing after them.

Riley turned to find Breck watching her. “You are going to die horribly. I would kill you myself but I promised you to Ferguson.”

Halak growled when a sickling ran toward him, evading one of the other soldier demons. His claw whipped out, and he effectively removed the small red demon’s head. “It is unseemly for a king to force us to cull our children, regardless of the circumstances.”

Deruthel nodded. “His mind has weakened with his strength. We must find a way to sever the tie to this realm.”

Halak wiped the blood from his claws on the rock. “Ashkara will feel the ties between worlds breaking. If you do not reinforce your mind, he will take your body. You

understand that you will end up trapped in our former world, starving for eternity.”

Deruthel rolled his shoulders. “Ashkara will kill me if he makes it to this world. I will not allow him to crush my mind.”

Halak shook his head. “He won’t crush you. He will transfer you to his current body. That will be a fate worse than death.”

“It is part of our life. That death is the same one we bestow on all our pawns. Our sicklings. It is a risk I must take.”

“So be it. Our species will endure either way,” Halak said.

Deruthel growled. “I am taking the risk, so I will be king by the end of this day.”

Halak’s claws scraped the wall as he retracted his claws. “You have not gained the power to control the vorla. We need them as a food source, but you know how dangerous they can be.”

Deruthel huffed. “They can breed all they want. I have a regime in place. The jackals will feed on them. They will not be allowed to age past seven.”

Halak shook his head. “They overpopulate quickly. Even under Ashkara’s command.”

Deruthel turned to his second. “You are forgetting one very important fact.”

“What?”

“This body will be in command one way or another. Even if Ashkara wiped my mind, he would be stuck with the power



I currently possess.”

Halak glanced at Riley as if he regretted their conversation. Had he shown his hand? What was he concerned about? He was clearly uncomfortable with the direction his and the general’s conversation had taken. “We will see.”

Colton whispered to her. “I thought the vorla were their rats. Why does Halak fear them?”

She wet her lips. “The ones we have seen are adolescents. They breed like rats, but these have the ability to burrow into another demon’s body and infiltrate their mind. They can make puppets out of any demon.”

“What?” Colton asked, astounded.

“Yeah, but it takes at least ten years for them to reach that level of maturity. The soldiers and jackals kill them before they reach their tenth birthday.”

Halak spoke to Riley, but she wasn’t sure it was for Deruthel’s benefit. “That is not their only resource. They can amass and effectively swarm a soldier demon. Feeding off his flesh and rendering him to bone in a matter of minutes.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “How old do they need to be to do that?”

Halak flicked a glance at Deruthel. “When they have a solid leader, they can become part of the swarm at any age.”

“A leader? You mean other than Ashkara?” she asked.

Halak nodded. “They always protect the oldest. The one most likely to mature, but Ashkara can sense developing

telepathic skills. He kills their leader before such a power can mature.”

“That’s how the former vorla king ruled. He controlled the soldier king from within. I don’t understand how the vorla amassed such power. When they live a relatively short life span.”

Halak’s lips thinned. He didn’t seem pleased by her knowledge of the vorla. “Deruthel has been quite forthcoming with you.”

“How did the vorla take the king?” she asked.

“The vorla king ruled no more than five years. Such a short time by our standards, but their power is exponential in those last few years. We would have to live thousands of years to match it. The vorla planned to pass the king onto his progeny but when he disconnected from the former king, he died. Once they fuse with a body, they die without it. His son was not strong enough to hold the soldier king’s mind, and he ripped the vorla from his body and almost wiped them into extinction. We need them, but we must be wary of them.”

She shook her head. “It’s hard to imagine a vorla controlling Ashkara.”

Halak’s eyes widened. “A vorla could never command a soldier who has ascended.”

“Ascended?” she asked.

“Ashkara has grown beyond the confines of his body. This is a blessing and a curse. He hoped to traverse one more portal, but he can no longer move between worlds. Deruthel is

correct. His body will rule us going forward, but it is yet to be determined who will reside within it.”

“I think I would prefer Deruthel over Ashkara,” she said.

“Why?” Halak asked.

“All that power. Are you kidding? At least we know what Deruthel is.”

Halak snorted. “The king will have to fight to make such an exchange. Regardless of who drives the general’s body. His power will be relatively the same.”

“With the exception of the extraordinary psychic ability,” she said.

Halak’s lip twitched. “Except for that.”

The girl screamed as her body rippled with black. Her pupils were black saucers. “She has entered the shadows,” Riley said.

Deruthel turned to Halak. “What if we sacrifice her as a shadow? A virgin with shadow blood could be strong enough to sever the tie.”

Halak’s eyes widened. “That is possible. The king wanted to save Riley, but this one is still a virgin and she possesses the blood of the priestess. She may be a better sacrifice than either Colton or Riley.”

Riley shook her head. “No, I won’t let you.”

Deruthel flicked his hand. Several demons abandoned their hunt of the sickly jackals and took Riley by each arm. Four more did the same to Colton. “You misunderstand, Riley. I

made a promise not to kill your mate. I will keep that promise. I assumed you would have to kill him, but we may have a better solution.” He tapped her cheek. “Don’t worry. If the girl’s blood doesn’t close the portal, then we can still sacrifice Colton.”

She spit in Deruthel’s face. “You pig.”

He wiped the spit from his cheek as he smiled at her. “And we were getting along so well.” He pointed to the wall that had held the portal. The rock was smooth, as if it had been hand-carved. “Use the girl, now.”

## CHAPTER 23



Riley put her hands together as if she were praying. “Please. Why do you need to use her? There has to be another way.”

Deruthel’s eyes fell on her hands. “While I can get used to you praying to me. Worshiping me. We must sanctify the portal with virgin blood.”

“Let me try something else,” Riley begged.

Deruthel growled. “There was another way but you sullied yourself with the shadow. I was never going to kill you, just use your blood, but you have removed that option.”

“If you were going to spare me, please do the same for Tara. I’ll use a combination of her blood. Colton’s blood. Anything you ask if you spare her life.”

Black mist rolled over Tara’s body. She whimpered as her pupils turned black. “I cannot guarantee she will live. If we sacrifice her now, the blood is stronger.”

“But her blood isn’t as strong as mine. Let me try with our blood combined.”

Deruthel walked on his spindly legs, moving toward the squirming teenager. Her body contorted as the cracking sounds echoed in the chamber. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound escaped. Riley remembered those moments when she was between the human and the shadow world, and her organs felt like they were dissolving inside her body. And her veins felt like they were fueled with acid. “Halak, prepare the girl.”

“Don’t kill her,” Riley hissed.

Deruthel turned. “While you will probably be my first bride. Do not assume that will give you any rights. You may speak to me, even offer suggestions if I ask, but you are a resource. A tool that I will use to rule this realm. You will never have the power to issue an order.”

Halak grabbed the demon caller. Tara continued to squirm on the ground as parts of her body phased into the shadows, then reformed. “It may be difficult to get a vein while she is mid transition.”

Deruthel glanced at the mottled body of the teenager. “Cut her and bleed enough blood into the chalice to start the incantation. We will sacrifice her later.”

Halak took out a black blade and sliced open Tara’s wrist. She screamed, but the sound was cut off when her face began to phase into the shadows. Her blood ran from the gouge in her wrist like a crimson river, filling the demon caller with her life force.

Tara’s face reformed to flesh as her whispered words caressed the air in morbid pleading. “Please. Kill me.”

Riley had begged for death during the transformation. She had been able to voice her wishes. She understood Tara's need to end the pain. Right now, it felt like it would never end. The eternity of torment was all the future held. She leaned toward Colton. "Is there anything we can do to help her?"

Colton shook his head. "No, but her chances are better going through the transition with reaper venom than demon."

Riley pursed her lips. "Deruthel, you said there was something wrong with Dannika's blood. Maybe something happens as we age; I don't know. You wanted to use mine and Colton's blood mixed with Dannika's for the portal. Let me try with ours and Tara's. I will perform any ritual you ask."

"Dannika's blood should be strong, but it is not. If she is failing, then you too will meet the same fate."

Riley's eyes widened. "You think Dannika is dying?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Her blood opened a portal before, but when we used it on its own, it was completely ineffective. If I had to guess, I'd say she's sterile."

Riley tried not to let the implications of that affect her. That was a problem for another day. Hopefully, one Anaisa would be able to cure. Hell, maybe they were already working on it and her health was due to treatment. "Tara has given enough blood. Let me take mine and Colton's and add to it. I am a better candidate to sever the portal than Halak."

Halak removed Tara's arm from the bowl, allowing the wound to close over and begin to heal. "She has a point. A

priestess opened the first portal. A priestess should sever it. If she does it by her choice, it holds more power.”

Deruthel clasped his hands behind his back. “That is true.” He looked lost in thought before his eyes glowed amber and he clutched his head. “Stop, Father!” He growled and staggered to the wall, leaning against it as he wailed in pain.

Halak shook his head. “I warned you that the king was more powerful than you. How many of your brethren have attempted to overthrow him. Ashkara will crush your mind and usurp your body.”

Deruthel hissed at Halak. “You betrayed me. You wish to be Ashkara’s plaything when you could have been my second. You will never gain power under my father, as you are not of his blood.”

Halak sighed. “I did not alert Ashkara. I did not need to. I warned you he was aware of your intent to abandon him in his current realm. You seem to have forgotten that I don’t possess the power to contact the king. Only you have that ability.”

Deruthel hissed. “He is attempting to overthrow my mind.”

Halak nodded. “I told you this fight was coming. You either resist him or you die. The demon army belongs to the victor. No matter who that will be.”

Deruthel turned to Riley. “Start the ritual. Use yours and Colton’s blood along with the girl’s. Sever the portal and I will give your people a two-week amnesty before the war.”

Riley dashed to Halak and grabbed the demon caller. She went to Colton and took his wrist. She cut his arm and



squeezed several ounces of blood into the bowl before having him hold the chalice.

She cut her own wrist, allowing the chalice to fill with her own. Once her wound had closed over, she placed her hand into the mixture of blood and mixed it. She turned when Deruthel screamed and fell to the ground.

His claws punctured the flesh at his temple. Black blood ran from the wounds, making it look like his skull was releasing rivers of oil. “Father. No!”

## CHAPTER 24



Riley surveyed the cavern. Halak and the other demons in the room, glanced around as if waiting for something to happen. She took a step toward the smooth rock wall, intending to start the ritual when Colton cried out. She turned as he dropped to the floor clutching his head.

She held the demon caller against her chest in a death grip. “Colton what is going on?”

Halak glanced between Deruthel and Colton. “Ashkara is taking over his mind. He should not fight a battle on two fronts while he is weakened.”

“No!” she yelled.

Colton stood slowly. When his eyes met hers, they were amber fires of hell. His voice rang out with the undertone of something beyond imagining. An echo of darkness and power. “The end of your world is at hand. I have come to offer you a choice. Accept me. Be my bride.”

She backed away as he approached. “Leave Colton alone.”

Ashkara ran his hands over Colton’s chest. “This body is strong, but it is not an acceptable vessel. My son has long

since sought to rule the demon horde, but his power is a fraction of mine. I have come to remind him who holds the true power of our race.” His eyes roamed over Riley’s body. “Perhaps it is time to seek a replacement.”

Riley’s lip quivered as she asked the question she didn’t want to. “What does that mean?”

Ashkara moved Colton’s fingers in the air in front of his face. “I have enjoyed my time in this body and it is one you can accept. It would make our joining much easier.” He turned back to Riley as every demon in the cavern bowed down, kneeling before Colton. It was obvious they were used to their king utilizing other bodies. “If you agree to bear my next son, I will end Deruthel now.”

She glanced at the demon general. He was still clutching his head, rolling on the cavern floor. The gouges in his flesh were deeper and his black blood stained the dirt beneath his body. She assumed the king was trying to overtake his mind, but now she wondered if he was torturing his son. A slow, painful death as his blood drained from his body. Could demons die by bleeding out? Normally she would say no, but with Ashkara’s power, who knew? She was still watching Deruthel squirm when she spoke.

“I admit I am less than fond of your son. I appreciate your offer, but I foresee a few issues.” She attempted to keep her voice calm, as if she were considering his offer. If her conversations with Deruthel had taught her anything, it was that demons didn’t consider them a threat. A female had no worth and would jump at the chance for power within their

hierarchy. They understood military strategy, and they were understandably confident in their skills.

Colton's fiery eyes held hers. It was difficult to look at the man she loved and see another, feeling the malevolence and depravity of the king. "What issues do you foresee?"

She swallowed hard. "I understand your point of view, but it takes years to have a baby and raise it. Who would strategize and maintain the demons in the meantime? Your power is too great to maneuver in this world, easily."

Ashkara nodded. "It is true the ascended have limitations. I can possess many of my followers, but I can no longer be contained within a single organism. I must have multiple vessels to contain my power."

She arched an eyebrow. "You must be very disappointed in your son."

Ashkara glanced at Deruthel's bloody form. He continued to squirm, but his screams had weakened with his body. "I have had many children and they always seek to overthrow me, eventually. It is inevitable, but this time I am left with the choice I had hoped would never come."

"Can you release Colton and take Deruthel instead?" she asked.

Ashkara nodded. "His mind is stronger than I anticipated. I am weakening his body in order to take control. If you cannot open a large enough portal, I must release my ascended powers and restart with my son's. It's not a process I wish to repeat."

“Then you would need him alive. If your current body is able to traverse the portal, then you can easily control him. If that isn’t possible, then you need his body to stay alive.” Her stomach turned as she genuinely sounded like she was helping the demon king.

While he didn’t smile or nod his head, she felt his pleasure. He believed she was on his side. “If you agree to be my bride, then you may have Deruthel’s life as a mating present. He will answer to you and be your personal slave. A demon who does a female’s bidding is the lowest of us. Usually bestowed on the sicklings with no status. It is a fitting end for my highborn son.”

Riley swallowed the bile in her throat. “That’s fine, but I think you will enjoy his punishment more than I will. I want something more concrete. Personal.”

Colton’s eyes flickered with amber fire. “It has been many years since I negotiated with a female. You should consider it an honor I am allowing such a boon. It takes hundreds of years to consume a world as rich in resources as yours... provided I control my appetite. I will allow your father and human friends to live a natural life. I will not disrupt the current ecosystem while they live. This is an offer I have never made in the past. I suggest you take it.”

Riley shivered, and it wasn’t from the cold. Ashkara’s power transcended evil or good. He was something unimaginable. A power that was pre-programmed to succeed in its hunger. Its consumption of everything around him. There was no feeling. No regret. And no fear. Deruthel had been

honest with her. The king couldn't be stopped. He was a world killer, and nothing would stop him from accomplishing that goal.

With no idea what to do, or how to manipulate the king, she prayed for a miracle and decided to stall for time. Hopefully, someone from the other clans was watching the demons or noticed she and Colton had been abducted. While she believed Ashkara meant what he said. He had the intention to honor the deal he offered. She didn't think it was possible if he was successful in bringing over his ascended body.

She had the blood. The demon caller sat ready in her hands for a ritual. Whether she opened the portal or severed it, was as simple as one word. But the portal wasn't like the internet. It wasn't instantaneous in its compliance. As soon as she spoke the closing ritual, Ashkara would know. The question was how he would react and if she could get him to trust her in the first place.

She wet her lips, preparing for the lies to come. "You will make Deruthel my slave and agree to let my father live out his days."

Ashkara walked up to her. His arm slipped around her waist. "Yes. Accept me and I will use this body only when we are together. You are accustomed to him, and it will make it easier for you to breed this way."

She put her hand on Colton's cheek. "I accept you." She hoped Colton knew that was meant for him and not the king, but she heard the growl of excitement, and it wasn't from her mate.

The demons began growling as Ashkara turned.

Ferguson strode from the tunnel with his alpha growling.  
“Let her go.”

Riley glanced down at the demon caller in her hands. Signaling with her eyes and hoping Ferguson understood. “I need to perform the ritual before any more shadows arrive.”

The king pointed to the smooth wall. “Let my bride through.”

Riley walked toward the stone as growls echoed around her. “Come with me. I need you beside the portal.”

The king followed her as the wolf clan and reapers arrived. It was time for the ritual, surrounded by chaos.

## CHAPTER 25



Riley focused on the smooth wall, blocking out the growls and fighting surrounding her. There would be only one chance and the king would likely kill her. She was glad Colton was next to her. Even if he was locked in his mind, watching as Ashkara controlled him. She hated that her mate would blame himself for what was about to happen, but it couldn't be helped. If she was successful, she hoped to have a few seconds to tell him.

She stopped beside the wall that would soon contain the portal and glanced back at the demons fighting the wolf clan. Her eyes found Ferguson. His alpha ripped through a demon, severing its head before he understood the intent in her eyes.

“Riley, no!” Ferguson screamed.

Ashkara's face twitched, almost in a smile. He assumed Ferguson was telling her not to open the portal. “Start the ritual, while the shadows are engaged with my army.”

Riley coated her hands in the blood. She focused inward, garnering all her power. Then took in everything at once as her shadow emerged. The smell of thick iron. The dank, musty smell of the cave. Death screams of reaper and demon alike.



She slapped her hand to the wall, channeling the power and the blood coating it. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin. Anum secrata.” She turned as the king growled.

“What have you done?” his voice roared through the cavern.

“Ensured your body is trapped in your current realm. You are a monster, and I would rather take my chances against Deruthel.”

The king punched the portal as cracks appeared in the stone. The portal didn’t open. It pulsed.

Unsure if the words would be enough she repeated them. “Anum caru. Anum candrae. Belifrite toleran solorin. Anum secrata.” The cracks continued to pulse, and the intensity increased.

The king smacked the chalice from her hands. It bounced along the ground as black blood splattered the wall. “Speak the words to open the portal.”

Riley shook her head. Words filtered through her head, but she was unsure where she had learned them. “Thread of the universe, hear my plea. Sever the ties that bind this world, so we may be free.”

The king slapped his hands to the rock as it crumbled. “No!”

Riley slit her wrist and put it to Colton’s mouth. She wasn’t sure if her blood was strong enough to break the

connection, but she had to try. He pushed her away, and she fell to the ground, looking up at him.

The fire in Colton's eyes dimmed, and his natural color returned. He held out his hand to her. "You took an enormous risk."

She let him help her up. "We don't have much time. Ashkara is back in his realm, but the demons think you are him."

Colton touched her face. "He will retake my body as soon as he has the chance. The severing takes time."

Riley glanced at the glow emanating from the crumbling rock. "It's over when the light goes out."

Colton handed her his reaper blade. "I can't do it myself. My alpha will not allow it. You must take my head before the king comes back. I won't be his vessel."

She stepped back. "No! The portal is closing permanently. You are not a viable vessel for him. Only Deruthel is." She glanced at the demon general. He rose from the floor, but his eyes were his own. "Ashkara is planning something. He will try to take Deruthel, not you."

Colton shook his head. "You can't know that for sure."

Riley met her mate's sad eyes. "You're right, but know this. I am not living in this world without you. Choose life or death, but do it for both of us."

Colton swayed on his feet. "My mind feels like it was put in a blender."

She wanted to go to him, but every demon would know the king would not hold her. He was incapable of gentleness. He would breed her and discard her as he had so many in the past. “I can imagine. Ashkara wasn’t a demon. He was a god. I’m surprised Deruthel was able to hold him back.”

Colton touched his temple. “I think that was because he was fighting two fronts. As the ties to this world are severed, he loses his connection. He was already weakening when you gave me blood.”

She looked for Ferguson in the clusters of demons fighting the shadows. “Order the demons to chase Ferguson. He will know it’s you.”

Colton frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Not even Deruthel would chase Ferguson in a pathway. The general is wary of him. That reaper is far more powerful than any of us realize.”

Colton yelled over the horde. “Chase the reaper named Ferguson. I want him brought to me.”

The demons converged on Ferguson, who raised an eyebrow then disappeared into the pathway. Two-thirds of the demons disappeared before Deruthel yelled. “Stop! The rest must protect the king.”

The wolf clan regrouped and moved to one side of the cavern, and the demons regrouped on the other. Deruthel moved to the front of the demon horde, while Colton and Riley stood between them at the portal wall.

Deruthel approached warily. “This shadow is not a viable vessel. What are you planning?”

Colton smiled. “You will see soon enough. The ties to this world will take time to sever. I will take my woman in this body, but don’t worry, my son. I will be back for you soon.”

Deruthel’s face paled. He looked uncertain for the first time since Riley had met him. His father was the only thing he feared. The fact that he feared him in Colton’s body was concerning. “I will be ready.”

Colton grabbed Riley’s arm roughly. “Come with me.” They began to walk toward a tunnel. She winked at a wolf clan member who held his arm out to his fellow shadows, ensuring they didn’t interfere.

They had almost made it to the tunnel when the light from the portal flickered and went out. She turned as Deruthel growled. “That is not the king. He is an imposter!”

The demons attacked as the wolf clan rushed to meet the Horde. Colton pushed Riley behind him, grabbing his blade as a demon swiped at him with a clawed hand. His alpha emerged with his reaper blade in hand and he beheaded the startled jackal before turning to his next attacker.

Riley noticed how easily Colton killed the demon before surveying the remaining horde. They were composed of jackals and a few sicklings that had survived Deruthel’s purge. Had the king ordered the first generation to flee? Were they all chasing Ferguson? Something was off, but she couldn’t figure out what it was.

She noticed Deruthel, backing away. The demon general loved to fight. There was no shadow that could take him in combat, yet he looked panicked. He dissolved and entered a pathway before the remaining demons dissolved one by one and the shadows were left in the cavern alone with their fallen comrades.

Her shoulders sagged. She had done what she set out to do. The portal had closed permanently, but the realization of her actions hit her. “Dear god.”

Colton’s arms slipped around her waist. “What is it? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “I severed the portal ties. The demons are stuck here. I think there was more to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ashkara was shocked. I said some words that I have never heard before. They popped into my mind as I closed the portal. I think I severed our world from all the realms.”

Colton touched her face. “That’s a good thing. We aren’t meant to travel to other worlds.”

She licked her lips. “I agree, but the demons are trapped here. They can’t move on even if they wanted to.”

“We knew this was a war.”

She clutched his arm. “It’s more than that now. Deruthel has plans to restructure this ecosystem to support both species. We will be food for the soldiers. The jackals will feed on the vorla and the vorla on our animal species. He plans to enslave us and breed us. We will be paired based on strengths and

sustainable traits. It will be a dictatorship, unlike anything we could imagine.”

Colton rubbed his chin. “We have to annihilate the demons. This war will go on until their entire species is wiped from the earth.”

“It has to be soon. As soon as Deruthel can create sustainable breeders, it’s over for us. That is our only advantage right now. He can’t replenish his forces.”

He held her face in his hands. “You did the right thing. We have a chance against Deruthel. We didn’t against Ashkara.”

She swallowed hard, wanting to believe him. “Time will tell.”

## CHAPTER 26



She stood in front of the bay window as the branches creaked in the wind. She found comfort in the bristling leaves as they moved in the wind. The airy tree house was more than a home. It had become a sanctuary she could return to when the chaos of her life was too much.

She still warred with her actions, though Dannika and the clan leaders had reassured her she had done what was needed to give them a chance. Ferguson was searching for the demons, but they had disappeared in the hours since the portal was severed.

Colton's arms circled her waist. He had showered, and he smelled amazing. She turned so she could lay her head on his chest. He hadn't bothered to dress and his hair still dripped water onto his shoulders. He tipped her chin up as his mouth descended on hers.

Her temperature soared within seconds as his mouth moved to hers. His magical tongue slipped between her lips, exploring, conquering her on a primal level. The memories of her actions faded away with the sensations his tongue created. They dueled with one another until he shifted her clothes to

the shadows. The need to be skin on skin, an instinct neither could ignore. She didn't protest as he moved her to the couch, and lay her down. His eyes were afire with hunger and primal desire.

His hands roamed her body, creating a firestorm. One that could consume her soul. Her flesh heated, yearning for more of his magical touch. She groaned as his fingers slipped between her sensitive folds, pressing into her velvet channel as his lips moved to her breast. His hunger was insatiable, and she was an unending banquet.

Riley 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 and hell. She never wanted it to stop. She sent a silent prayer that this was her destiny.

Colton's eyes lit with an intense 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, reveling in the sensation he created. Moving within her as she struggled for breath.

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 passion, fueled by lust and unending need. A tsunami of dark power that cascaded over her skin and had her screaming for more.



She clutched his shoulders as if they were the only haven in the tornado of emotion assaulting her body. Attempting to anchor herself in the waterfall of erotic sensation. It washed over her in a relentless wave.

“Please, don’t stop.” She was no longer embarrassed to ask for what she wanted. She was a shadow, and this was her mate. His desire was hers.

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, marking him. Telling him without words he belonged to her alone. That whatever fight lay before them would be fought together. One soul. One world.

Rippling waves of pleasure washed over her skin. She gripped 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 lay beneath him, floating in a sea of bliss, content to stay there forever. She felt a moment of regret when Colton moved from the couch and pulled her with him.

Colton shifted her clothes from the shadows then his own. “I didn’t mean to rush you, but your sister is on her way.”

Riley blinked. “I never noticed the script.”

Colton kissed her cheek. “Then I was doing my job. Raine sent a quick message. I didn’t respond, so I assume he is en route.”

Riley laughed. “If you did any better at that, we would never get out of bed.”

Colton wiggled his eyebrows. “That has a certain appeal.”

She slapped his chest playfully. "I'm sure it does."

They both turned as Raine and Dannika solidified inside the living room. The wolf clan leader immediately took his mate to the chair and settled her before sitting on the edge.

Riley and Colton sat on the couch, but not before she shot Colton a concerned glance. Dannika was pale and had dark circles under her eyes. "Dannika are you okay?" Riley asked.

Dannika waved her hand absently, but the look on Raine's face was one of concern. "Anaisa is going to do a physical on me tomorrow. I am tired all the time and I am having trouble in the pathway. I can only travel if Raine is in control."

Riley swallowed dry air. They were about to go to war. A sick queen was the last thing they needed for morale, but Riley's concern was for her sister. "Does Anaisa have any idea what is causing it?"

Dannika nodded. "She has some theories, but as I am the first female shadow, we don't know what my evolution is like. The tiredness could simply be the shadow female version of PMS."

Riley chuckled. "I thought that was supposed to be the bonus of being a shadow. No more cramps."

Dannika laughed. "I told Raine the same thing."

Colton looked to Raine. "Have you heard from Ferguson? Does he have any idea where the demons went?"

Dannika sighed. "They stopped chasing him when the portal severed completely. He searched for them, but they haven't left a trail of any kind."

Raine rubbed his mate's back. "Unfortunately, they will need to feed, so it's only a matter of time before they kill again."

Dannika sighed. "I know. We are stuck until they hunt. Ferguson is monitoring the pathways. We have restricted travel so he can look for demon activity."

Riley leaned forward. "Why did you travel here? We could have come to you."

Dannika's smile was sad. "Daniel invited me to visit. He wishes to get to know me. You are very fortunate to have him. Traveling doesn't hurt me as long as Raine is in control. Your father is yet to travel a pathway."

"I'm glad you two are getting to know one another. I doubt he will ever be strong enough to travel on his own."

"He doesn't have to. He is safe where he is and the clans are happy to visit him at the cabin."

She stood with Raine, holding her arm. Riley wasn't sure if it was because she needed it or if he was being overcautious. Maybe both.

Dannika winked at Riley before Raine's shadow enveloped hers and they disappeared.

Riley's gaze lingered on where the couple had stood. "I'm really worried about Dannika. She looks so weak."

Colton nodded. "As am I. If she isn't better soon, we will talk to Anaisa and see if there is anything we can do. As she said, this could be part of female shadow evolution. Let's wait and see what happens."

She snuggled against him as the branches swayed outside the window. “What do we do next?”

Colton’s voice held the anger of his alpha. “We find Deruthel and kill him.”

## EPILOGUE



The general returned to the cavern with Halak. The wolf clan was gone and his army had moved to a new location. He always had his backup plans in place. The shadows had proven far more adaptable than any species before them and Riley had severed their connection to all worlds.

He had considered staying in the human realm. He had even planned for it but he hadn't decided if this was to be his last conquest. The crafty female had taken away his options and he would ensure she paid for her actions.

Halak kicked one of the dead jackals. "It was fortunate that Ashkara sent that last contingent of sicklings. We lost a few of the first generation in the battle. We can't afford to lose anymore."

Deruthel surveyed the dead. "I redirected them to our new home. I need time to assess the damage and put my plans in place for a sustainable ecosystem.

Halak growled. "It's over then. We are stuck here for all time?"

Deruthel nodded. "Yes."

Halak turned as the portal glowed with a small orange light. It was the size of a dime. “What is that?”

Deruthel sighed. “That is the final severing. Riley cut the thread between worlds, but severing is like an elastic band. The thread is pulled tighter until it snaps. The recoil sends the thread back to the world where the severing occurred. That is the thread returning to this world. When the light dies, it is gone forever.”

“I cannot believe a female has trapped us here,” Halak said.

“The king should have known she would never accept him. I knew not to trust her, but he has lost touch with the duplicitous nature of otherworld females...” he grabbed his head and focused on the small orange light. “No!”

Deruthel dropped to the ground, thrashing around before his chest arced in the air and he went slack.

Halak rushed to his side. “Deruthel!”

Deruthel’s eyes opened. They blazed with amber fire. “You will no longer refer to me with my traitorous son’s name.”

Halak backed away. “Ashkara.”

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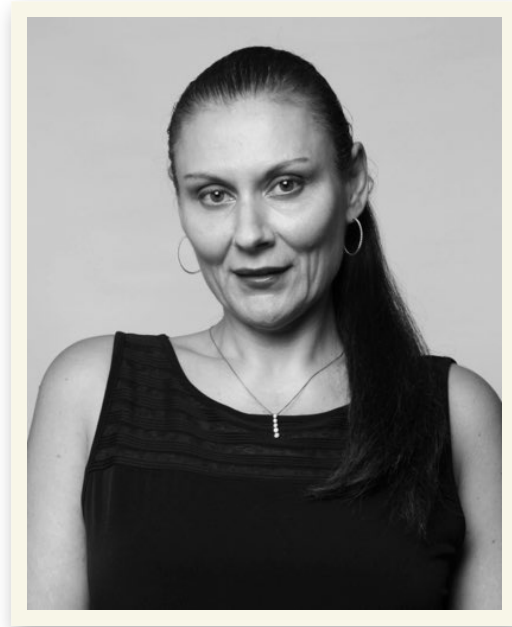
**SUPERNATURAL BOUNTY HUNTER SERIES**

It Takes a Demon to Know One

The Demon is in the Details

A Demon is as a Demon Does

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tia Didmon is a USA Today bestselling author of provocative paranormal romance and paranormal women's fiction. When Tia isn't busy writing about sexy shifters and dreamy demons, she spends her time binge watching The Order and reruns of The Vampire Diaries, cooking with her daughter, and serving her cat. Her love of writing stems from a self-diagnosed book addiction.

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Facebook.

Website - <https://tiadidmon.com>

Email – [books@tiadidmon.com](mailto:books@tiadidmon.com)

Booksprout - <https://booksprout.co/author/4408/tia-didmon>

